

CHOSEN

A woman with short brown hair and striking purple eyes is the central figure. She is wearing a black, asymmetrical halter-neck crop top and black athletic pants. She holds a sword with a wooden hilt and a long, thin blade that glows with a pinkish-purple light. The background is a complex, futuristic environment with teal and blue tones, featuring circular patterns and a grid-like structure. The overall aesthetic is sci-fi and action-oriented.

K . F . B R E E N E

CHOSEN

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Chapter 1

The night pressed against the windows of the small house, so dense it felt solid. The five-year-old girl opened her eyes slowly, allowing sleep to recede. She registered a foreign push against her skull; an overwhelming tension battering at her mental shields. Confused, she opened herself up, trying to figure out what was happening. As if pushed out into a storm, her mind was flooded with emotions—determination, fatigue, sorrow, anxiety, rage—she was nearly dragged under with the explosion of turmoil around her. She stumbled out of bed, calling for her mother.

“Go back to bed, young Shanti. Your mother has gone to see about something.”

Putting her hand out, trying to physically block the mental bombardment, Shanti squinted into the darkness, making out her grandmother sitting by the window in the front room.

“What is going on, Gamma? Why are you afraid?”

Her grandmother waved her away urgently. “I just had a bad dream, darling. Go back to bed.”

“But—“

“GO! Shanti GO!” her grandmother screamed as she bolted upright, grabbing a throwing knife from her belt.

Startled, Shanti watched as the door burst open, hinges creaking like a ruler bent too far. A large man filled the room, looking around for an attack. Only seeing an aged woman and a little girl, his gaze scanned the room for a threat, stopping on the suit of arms above the fireplace. After a beat, his focus went straight to Shanti.

Her grandmother sprang to life. One knife was quickly dispatched to the middle of his neck. The man pawed at it feebly, his strength sapping with each spurt of blood. He tripped on nothing, his legs losing purchase. His weight crashed into the wall, falling a moment later as a wet gurgle bubbled out of his mouth.

Another man pushed into the room behind the first. His gaze snagged on his fallen comrade, limp on the floor. Crouching, he readied for an attack. Seeing the grandmother, knife in hand, ready to throw, he lunged. A thick arm knocked her to the side as her knife found his belly. Her frail body hit the wall and tumbled to the ground.

Shanti watched as the man staggered, clutching at his stomach. Another knife blossomed in the back of his neck, as Shanti's grandmother prepared to throw yet another from a crumpled heap on the floor beneath the mantle. The man turned and stabbed downward with his sword, ripping a scream from Shanti's throat as she watched the blade pierce her grandmother's chest. He staggered again, not knowing he was dead until he finally slumped against the table. Man and wood went crashing to the ground.

Blood oozed from her grandmother's lifeless body, reaching across the ground as if pleading. Pain beat on Shanti's chest. A whimper turned into a cry. Fear turned her numb. Screams tore at the night around her.

The overwhelming sensations continued to batter at Shanti's mind, now mixing with her own tumult. Agony bubbled up, overriding thought. Bright flashes burst behind her eyes, stealing her breath. Then came the rage, tingling her muscles and squeezing out courage. With it came something else. Something harvested from pain, growing and building. A deep well of churning, tortured power.

Dazed, she walked out of the house brimming with something newly awakened. She sucked in every detail of her surroundings; the flames, the screaming.

Shanti walked next door on wooden legs to check on Chase and his mother. Chase was the same age, but without the budding gifts. He liked to work with his hands. A builder. His profession was already chosen by his parents. He would be great someday.

Chase's door gaped; it had been kicked in. Horrible screaming scratched at Shanti's ears. The never ending beat of emotions in a fever pitch pounded at her mind, making her stagger into the house clutching her head, calling for Chase. Then she saw him, lying on the ground in a puddle of blood, his sightless eyes staring up at her, accusing.

Further inside the room, two strangers filled the space with their dirty lust. One was trying to lift the limp form of Chase's mother from the ground. Another man waited, undoing his pants. His gaze swung Shanti's way.

"Look, Rune, another one. She's young, but I'll take her." The man started toward Shanti, exposing Chase's mom's face, slackened. Dying.

A white hot light started in Shanti's gut and grew, rising, filling her with heat. It rose through her body, lighting her blood on fire. It grew within her skull, latched on to the agony, and turned it into rage so hot, so primal, it

could only be called the budding of Wrath.

Power ripped from her body, blinding her momentarily. She clutched the two disgusting minds as her teachers had taught her, holding them within her newly awakened grip. With a shot of power beyond anything the town had seen so far, she stabbed into their minds. The men screamed. Fingers white as they clutched their heads, they sank to the ground in agony.

Panting, half-delirious, the girl turned. Headed out into the night. This had to be stopped. These men had to be dealt with. Her town must be protected.

Everywhere her gaze touched was ruin. Blazing houses, bloodied people—her friends, her neighbors. Keshla lay across the lane, face in the dirt, blood matting her hair. Someone else lay in a boneless heap beyond that.

Pain such that Shanti had never experienced brewed, pumping out more power, unlocking hidden depths, power bubbling up, replacing the horror, giving purpose to her tears. She walked along the lane and threw her mind wide, touching everything in range. She clutched foreign minds in a death grip before blasting them with a shot of power. New screams wrenched the night. All male. Beastly, horrific, terrible screams that were filled with pain so acute that death was welcomed.

She kept walking, killing some quickly, slowly killing others. She reached the square, death in her wake. A man sat atop a horse, a smug grin plastered to his disgusting face. He watched the destruction around him with confident pride; carrying out his job with pleasure. He was the leader, and therefore, deserved a special death.

She killed everyone else off quickly, then, every mind Shanti could identify receiving a killing blast. Except for this man. She looked straight at this man, ignoring the screaming, ignoring the cries and the raging fires destroying homes. She cradled his mind like a baby dove. Then she thought of fire. A blue flame, tickling his skin with the kiss of heat. Increasing the pressure, the soft caress became a bite of razor blades. In her mind's eye it licked between his toes before climbing up his legs and wrapping around his shins. It scraped against the back of his knees before reaching higher, brushing his fingers in a searing embrace.

His cruel smile winked out as confusion stole his countenance. He patted at his body, trying to smother the invisible flame. Not understanding the pain he couldn't see.

She pumped more power into it.

Pain bit into him, a thousand points of contact. His patting became more pronounced. Harder. Hands slapping at his legs and chest, rubbing at his face. Terrified screams erupted from his throat before he flung himself off his frightened horse. He hit the dirt with a thud and began to roll, feeling the fire though still not able to see it.

Shanti hit him with more flame. Hotter. Licking his face. Burning his eyes. Closing his throat. Excruciating pain so intense he screamed himself hoarse. Writhing now, and free to do so. Feeling death eat away at his consciousness one pain-filled moment after the next. Dying slowly, like Chase's mother.

Pain stabbing her heart, sorrow eating away at her heart, Shanti lost consciousness and fell.

Shanti awoke, letting the familiar nightmare evaporate like mist. She sat on the hard, brittle ground, sweeping the area with a tired gaze. As before, all she saw was dead, decaying trees dotting the landscape.

She dug in her bag one last time, looking for nourishment—a scrap, a morsel, *anything*. But she'd finished her water a day ago. Her food the day before that. Her empty stomach sucked the ribs into the middle of her body, trying to fill that void. Her brain thumped against the inside of her skull with dehydration.

She didn't have long. She had to find something to eat and drink or her journey would end right here, in this crypt that used to hold a forest.

Heaving herself to her feet, she squinted into the bright sunshine. What frustrated her—when she had the ability to feel anything besides defeat—was that she had planned this route *specifically* for the forest that should've been here. For a forest that should've resembled the one in which she'd grown up. There should have been animals and water and *life*, blast it! She should have been resting and rejuvenating, using the life force of untouched lands to renew her *Gift*.

She was in the last leg of her journey, nearing the Great Sea, and instead of fulfilling her supposed destiny, she was knocking at death's door.

Fat lot of good it did sending the *Chosen*. Chosen to waste away then fail. Chosen to carefully select a route based on outdated information and

have no alternative. Chosen to let her people die slowly from starvation or quickly from defiance. Actually, either of those would have been better than the alternative.

Shanti washed those thoughts from her mind. She was too tired to feel any emotion. What was the point? What was she going to do, get really angry at herself and punch a tree? That wasn't nearly as gratifying as punching the enemy. Plus, these trees had had it hard enough. They shed bits of charred bark like soiled feathers, dead all the way down to the root. She could usually sense life within nature, but there wasn't a single spark of life around here.

Wasn't that just fitting...

Half a day later she was staggering. Delirious, she had started to hallucinate, seeing strange visions flit through the dead trees. Her brain pounded so hard it felt like it was trying to rip out of the casing of her skull. Worse still, she was freezing in the hot afternoon sun. Dehydration and heat exhaustion had set in. Her body was shutting down. It was trying to save whatever it could to prolong the inevitable, but without its vital needs met, it had no choice but to keep sliding. She sunk down next to a tree to use the last of her resources to *search*. If there was someone close, maybe she could hold on.

Her squat turned into a tumble, shivers racking her body as the sun beat down on her bare skin. She didn't even get a chance to open her mind before darkness consumed her.

Her last, snide thought was: Chosen *my ass*.

Chapter 2

“What is it?” Gracas asked. He stared down at an oddly shaped bundle. Despite the rule against it, he stood with his hands in his pockets.

“A girl, I think,” Leilius commented slowly.

Both boys stood frowning down at the twiggy, brown-splotched limbs slumped against the burnt trunk. It almost looked like a skeleton had been held next to the tree on a string, and then released, falling in a cascade of bones to form a pile at the base. The frayed, dirt crusted sheet covering the pile of probably dead human needed to be incinerated to rid it of the obvious bacterial infestation.

“Kick it,” Gracas whispered. A boy just budding into manhood, Gracas was still fascinated by slugs and bugs and, apparently, slightly alien dead things.

“*I’m* not going to kick it! What if it is a girl? The last time I kicked a girl my dad slapped me across the room then made me do hard labor for a week. And she deserved it!” Leilius was only a year older than Gracas, but he was one step higher in the chain of command. It was a small step, but it was large enough for his chest to puff up with importance.

“It could be a Mugdock girl,” Gracas spat. “They’d be the type to just dump one of their women.”

“The skin’s too light to be Mugdock.”

“It looks brown to me.”

“That’s dirt, I think.”

“Kick it,” Gracas prodded again, leaning over to get a proper glance into the bundle of probable human and possible female.

“What if it *smooshes*? Commodore Sanders just had me shine my shoes. *You* kick it.”

Sanders stopped in mid-stride as he noticed the two cadets staring at

the ground a ways away from camp. Biting back a swear, he changed course. “What’s going on?”

The boys jumped and flinched at the same time.

“N-nothing, sir,” Gracas stuttered, peeling away to the side.

Leilius, losing the arch in his back, hurriedly backed up next to Gracas. Apparently not quite sure where to look, but not wanting to meet Sanders’ glare, he turned his face to the sky. “We’ve found an unidentified object, sir.” He followed his words with a vaguely pointed finger.

Sanders glanced at the base of a dead tree, found a pile of clothes not fit for a beggar, and turned back to the two nitwits. It was then the image of a pale leg filtered through his red hazed thoughts.

His gaze snapped back to the tree as his eyebrows drooped. *It was a girl!*

In a rush of movement, he threw out a hand to balance against the destroyed tree. With his other hand he flicked away a piece of fabric, revealing a mat of light hair coated in grime. He felt along a fragile neck until he reached the base. There, weakly pushing at his fingers, was a pulse.

“Gracas, tell Marc to meet us at camp! Make sure he gets his doctoring kit. Leilius, fetch water.”

The boys barely waited for the whip crack of commands to end before scurrying away. Commander Sanders scooped up the girl.

There couldn’t have been a worse scouting party to find her. Except for him, currently doing penance for tardiness, all five boys were in training, and showing no progress. They were the five worst cadets in the entire training camp, and if it weren’t for the Captain’s leniency in punishment, the boys would have been apprenticed out a long time ago. They needed to find something they were good at, because soldiering wasn’t in their future. Or doctoring, as in Marc’s case.

Back at camp, Sanders gently lowered the long waif in front of Marc. The young idiot at least had the sense to lay out a blanket.

Marc kneeled beside the girl slowly, his hands resting on his knees. With wide eyes he asked, “Is she dead?”

“You’re the doctor, *moron!*” Rachie, another trainee, shouted. The rest of the boys smirked, shifting closer to get a look at the girl.

“*Silence!*” Sanders barked. His glare backed the boys away.

It also made Marc flinch back.

Sanders pulled his irritation back in and hatched it down. He didn’t

need anybody pissing themselves, and this girl was in a bad way. He adopted the high, quiet voice he used with his two-year-old niece. “She has a faint pulse. Don’t you remember anything of your training about faint pulses?”

Marc gulped and stared down at the girl. He shook his head.

A vein began to thrum along Sanders’ neck. His manic smile did not hold any humor. What it did hold, however, was the promise of agonizing pain.

The boys all took another step back.

“Think, Marc,” Sanders tried. His voice sounded like a knife sliding across a whetstone. “Check for wounds.”

Marc raised his hand to shade his face from Sanders’ glower. The other hand hovered over the girl’s torso, shaking, afraid to touch her frail skin.

Sanders’ clenched his fists and took a steadying breath. Marc was barely on the man side of puberty, still a virgin, and had never seen anyone hurt with more than a broken arm. A half dead woman was out of his league. The kid tested way above anyone else in his class, and his teachers said he knew all the information backwards and forward. But he refused to apply his knowledge in real life, retreating into his own introverted world.

If ever there was a time to rectify that little problem, it was now.

Sanders smiled again. Marc’s gulp echoed.

Sanders bent, looking over the still body. Her chest barely rose with each breath. She was covered in dirt from head to toe, but he didn’t notice any blood. No obvious injuries, either.

Leilius scuffled up with a bucket of water. Considering his effort, one would think he carried the bottom half of a cow. “I got the water here, Chief.”

“It’s *Commander*,” Sanders enunciated as he took over the bucket with one hand. “Rag?”

Gracas scurried up with a blue cloth. It looked like a piece of someone’s uniform. Judging by his sleeveless arm, it was his.

With quick movements, Sanders started to gently wash the dirt from the frail limbs. As the sludge rolled away, he noticed her skin color, pale where it wasn’t red. A foreigner. A distant foreigner at that. She looked about mid-twenties, if he was any judge.

He continued with his treatment, washing everything in sight, and emptied half the bucket over her filthy head. Other than a few scratches,

however, she was devoid of visible injuries or bruising. And he couldn't help but notice she had more muscle development than was normal for a female.

"Help me remove her clothing," Sanders said as he lifted the bottom of her cover.

Marc's face turned bright red. "Are you sure?"

Through clenched teeth, Sanders answered, "If you don't start following orders, I am going to finish with her, and then beat you senseless. You get me? Now, help-me-remove-her-dress."

Marc reached for the filthy garment with shaking hands, gingerly lifting it past her groin. The girl was bare underneath, and Marc strangled a petrified groan as everyone else gasped.

"Evacuate!" Sanders barked, clearing the space in seconds.

They'd all been on the receiving end of Sanders' displeasure once or twice, and while looking at a naked girl was high on the list of *very important things to see*, he was pretty sure it ranked low on the list of *ways not to get noticed*. As well it should. Sanders would not hesitate to punch out a few more bruises.

As Marc worked off the rest of the fabric, Sanders continued cleaning, not finding anything of note. That was, until they got to the torso. Her skin sunk between each rib. Starved.

"She needs food and water. Nutrients," Sanders whispered, covering her as a list of needs raced through his head. "Get a clean rag and dribble water into her mouth. If she wakes and starts to drink, give her no more than a dribble."

Marc let out a noisy exhale of relief as the nipples disappeared, releasing him from paralysis. And while he nodded, he didn't move.

Fire danced in Sanders' eyes. The smile was back. "Then why aren't you moving, Cadet?"

Marc made a sound like, "Huuuuuhhhhhhhrrrrn," as unshaped words escaped numb, petrified lips. A second later he took off running like his heels were on fire.

In quicker time than ever before, owing to somewhat harsher treatment by Sanders, the boys had the camp packed up and ready to go. They didn't have anything to use as a stretcher since that numbskull Gracas had used it to start a fire their first night, and Sanders didn't want to make a travois and leave heavy tracks, so the largest of the boys and Sanders took turns carrying the girl. They would hike for a day and a half, but while she

was a tall girl, she weighed next to nothing. The hardest part for whichever boy was carrying her was focusing on walking rather than the female in his arms.

Unfortunately, that wasn't so easy for a bunch of budding men holding something with breasts. Distraction was inevitable.

Throughout the day, Marc kept dribbling water into her mouth. He made sure to wet her head and neck, keep the sun off her face, and continue with the water, slowly, methodically. Sanders, eyes always moving, constantly surveying their surroundings, made sure to never keep his gaze on the doctor-in-training long. If the kid thought no one was looking, he seemed to settle into his ministrations. He displayed empathy for the unconscious girl instead of the need to seek approval. He made his own decisions regarding what nurtures were needed when, and how much liquid she could take at any given time. And he was doing it with confidence.

The one time Sanders commented on a job well done, the whole thing went to shit. The kid went back to useless immediately; stumbling, apologizing, and whining; seeking approval for everything; not making a decision on his own. It took three hours of being ignored for him to settle back into his rhythm. Sanders took the hint.

By dinnertime the band of boys were sullen and quiet, constantly shooting glances Sanders' way. This was Rachie's fault.

Under Marc's diligent care, the girl had taken three gulps of water just before they stopped and then let out a long, pain induced moan. Rachie, who was carrying her at the time, had shouted, "Oh shit, she's alive!"

The idiot had thrown his hands out to the sides as if she was a poisonous spider. Her body spilled across the ground, bringing forth another moan from her and a string of curses from Marc.

Rachie had been the first to learn that Commander Sanders, though one of the shortest men in the Soldier Force, was strong enough to get him airborne. Rachie also learned that being hurled head first into a dead tree hurt quite a lot. At least, that's what Sanders' took from the groan.

After the setback, Marc was able to get her to take a few more successful gulps. Then, after a lot of moaning and eye fluttering, he began giving her broth. He had turned more nursemaid than doctor, but he was obtaining results, so Sanders said nothing. After a few pointed glares, each with a hovering threat of violence, no one else did, either.

Later that night Sanders sat in the camp, looking out at the night. A sliver moon glowed high overhead, faintly illuminating the burnt and twisted land. A couple hours ago Rachie had woken him for his shift, complaining that something felt weird. When asked to elaborate, the youth couldn't do it, just shrugged and scratched his shoulder, looking out at the night.

At the time, Sanders hadn't thought any more about it. These boys wouldn't know danger if it popped up in front of them wearing a sign. But as he sat, taking the deepest part of the night for guard-duty, the heavy feeling of dread had slowly settled on his shoulders. It pressed down, squeezing his chest and making his small hairs stand up.

Something was out there. Something was wrong.

One by one the boys started to toss and turn in their sleep. Even the girl, sleeping soundly for most of their journey, was writhing, moaning and whimpering in her sleep.

Yes, something was there. Danger lurked.

Sanders turned his knife over in his fingers. His sword lay in front of him on his sleeping bag, the hilt within easy grasp. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be alive for long.

"NO!" Xavier, the oldest boy in the troop, bolted up out of his sleeping sack and into a fighting crouch. He looked around wildly.

Once upon a time everyone, including the Captain, thought Xavier had real potential. He was massive for his age, strong, and growing into a powerful man. He just couldn't fight for shit. He didn't like hurting people and nearly fainted at the sight of blood. But now, when no enemy was in sight, he executed the fighting stance perfectly. Ready for combat.

Sanders was too unnerved to notice for long. His eyes continued scanning, looking out into the dark pools of shadow. Wondering what hid just out of sight. Wondering what looked back.

"Commander, something is out there," Xavier hummed from his ready crouch. With nearly silent steps, he crossed the short distance to sit next to Sanders.

The velvety black lay thick over the barren land. Holding its breath.

"Do you think it's the Mugdock?" the young man persisted.

Sanders glanced at Marc, hovering worriedly over his charge, then back at the night. "I don't know. Mugdock don't usually come this far. Doesn't mean they won't."

Xavier let that settle in for a moment. He asked, "Do you think it's

something to do with the girl?”

Sanders let the question dissolve into the air. He didn't know. She was an enigma. Where had she come from and why was she allowed to travel alone in distant places? Did her companions all perish, leaving her to continue on her own? Even if that was the case, she wasn't from anywhere close. Sanders had seen travelers over the years, he'd met people from distant places, he'd even bedded a few, but no one had ever been as light of feature as the waif. Her breasts and chest were so pale they showed faint blue veins. Her hair was the color of burnished wheat even with all the dirt, and fine. Almost like soiled feathers, which meant it was probably fluffy when cleaned. She was lanky and slim, which wasn't all that rare, but covered in a functional, lean muscle. Her finger tips were calloused, which might have been from playing an instrument, but her hands were muscled as well, as though she was used to working with something heavy. The pads of her feet were tough, especially the balls and toes. Each of those things weren't strange in its own right, except the coloring, which could be explained away by a childhood disease, but as a whole it was unnerving. If he didn't know better, he'd say she'd done some fighting. A lot of fighting, if truth be told.

Maybe where she was from women fought as a sport, or for an audience. Or maybe they fought for survival or as penance for a crime. Which was sickeningly similar to the Mugdock.

Leilius gave a loud scream and rolled around, thrashing. Xavier moved to him quickly, shaking the boy awake, trying to keep him quiet. The other boy screamed again, grabbing for Xavier's head, attempting to execute a lock that would snap Xavier's neck. Xavier shirked him off easily, batting his hands away and shaking harder. Two others sat up at the commotion.

A wave of fear rumbled over Sanders. His skin tingled. His balls tightened.

Shit was about to blow up.

He gripped his knife and rose to a crouch, ready for an attack.

“Are we under attack?” Gracas asked in a harried whisper. “I don't see anyone.”

Neither did Sanders. No movement. No sound. Dead trees and barren land stretched out away from them, sprinkled in silver moonlight. If something moved closer, it would have to show itself between pools of shadow. It would present itself, if only for a moment.

A moment was all Sanders needed.

So where was the enemy? Why was every alarm in Sanders' head going off when emptiness stared back at him?

The girl moved slightly, moaning. Marc was stroking her face, quietly whispering soothing words.

"Commander?" Xavier stared at him, hand on Leilius' shoulder, waiting for orders. He had apparently stepped up in rank and placed himself in the Second position. It was a good sign for his future. If he had one.

"We hold. It's too dark to continue en route. Anything could be waiting out there. We need silence. Wake everyone up—no one is getting much sleep anyway. Pack up. We'll leave at first light if we're able."

Sanders lowered again, watching. Logic said nothing waited out there, but his gut said soon they'd face an army. All he could do was wait and see.

It was a long night. The creeping dread never subsided. The bitch of it was Sanders couldn't see anything the matter. Nor hear anything. His gut said *move* but his brain said there was no hurry. If it wasn't for how on edge the boys were, he would think it was time to retire.

"How's the girl?" Sanders asked Marc as they moved out quietly. It was nearly dawn, but no one wanted to wait any longer.

Marc had deep blue circles under his eyes. "She seems more lucid. She's taking more liquid and her fever is down. She's still in danger, but she's fighting."

"When did he become an expert?" Rachie mumbled.

Sanders glared at the loudmouthed kid until he shuffled his feet in the other direction. Sanders was not above tossing the kid into another tree.

They set a fast pace, cutting through the land on the fastest route home. They would arrive around noon, a full five days before they were due. If constant fear wasn't continuously clawing at Sanders's gut, he would be thrilled to be rid of the young idiots. He didn't do daycare duty well.

The girl mewed like a lost kitten, thrashing in Xavier's thick arms. The large boy flexed, keeping her pinned, not daring to drop her like Rachie had yesterday. He didn't want a bruise on his chest the same size and shape as Sanders' fist.

Chapter 3

Shanti's consciousness emerged through a deep haze. Pain seared her body, almost as if someone had reached in through her stomach and pulled everything inside out. She forced her eyes open, trying to scrabble her way out of the darkness that trapped her. What she saw next terrified her.

A man held her, and judging by the bulging biceps and length of the arms, a large man. He had her pinned against his body in an unbreakable squeeze, rocking and swaying. Her legs were closed at the moment, which was a good sign, but for how long? He was taking her somewhere, and he was crushing her painfully as he did.

The scent of boot polish tickled her nose. Peeking out from behind his mangy, curled hair were the fletching of arrows and the tip of a bow. On the other side of his massive shoulders a shiny, metallic hilt peeked out.

Closing her eyes again, she listened, immediately hearing a chorus of breath and heavy footfalls. More large men, then. And in her experience, it was often that a group of soldiers would make a prize of a lost and alone girl.

Fear coursed through her, then determination. She had no more than a trickle of energy, but she would bloody well fight. The only consolation was that he was touching her skin. The more skin contact meant the less energy required to attack his mind. Still, she didn't have much to throw.

Building the dismal amount of power she had at her disposal, she lashed out. His burly arms constricted, crushing her into his chest as a scream of pure agony strangled his throat. His resistance was strong or she was weak, probably both, but in the end it worked. With a long wail, he let go, clutching at his head and dropping to the ground.

As Shanti's body fell, she tried to unfurl. She tried to prepare to roll away upon impact. She tried to do something besides thump to the ground like a log and immediately pass out.

Tried, and failed. She'd be worse off than before, completely left to their devices.

Fabulous decision-making, as always.

Chapter 4

“GET DOWN!” Sanders screamed.

In two strides he was standing over the woman, sword in hand, sweeping the landscape with an experienced gaze. He glanced at Xavier, didn't see the fletching of an arrow or the hilt of the knife, so looked back up. “Where did the attack come from? What caused this?”

Xavier rolled around, kicking up puffs of dirt.

Marc stood next to them, frozen. His mouth hung open and he stared down at the lifeless girl.

“Cadet! Get *down!*” Sanders grabbed Marc's shirt and yanked him to the ground. “Attack? Where from?”

The boy stared.

Seeing no movement, Sanders bent to Xavier. They needed to get this parade marching. Carrying wounded with no cover, they might as well just roll over and expose their bellies. That's how easy it would be to pick them off.

Except...the enemy didn't have any cover, either... It would be another hour of hiking before the lush forest of their land spread out in welcome. The Mugdock had only burned land Sanders and his men didn't regularly patrol.

Still no movement.

Sanders swatted Xavier's hands away, looking for wounds. All he found was a face pinched in pain and bloodshot eyes. “What hurts?”

“The girl's eyes,” Marc mumbled, still staring. “They glowed. Purple.”

Perfect. They were being attacked, in the middle of nowhere, with nowhere to take cover, and the one guy that was supposed to patch them up was losing his mind. Sanders was living his worst case scenario.

“Marc, grab the woman. Rachie, Garcas, grab Xavier. Head north. Find cover. The rest of us will flank.”

“It was her,” Marc gurgled softly, waving a flaccid pointer finger.

Sanders reached out with a quick hand and yanked Rachie to him. He

thrust the kid at the woman like a rag doll. “Rachie, grab her. Marc, get moving. You’re no good to me.”

Both boys stared, hunched over and blinking.

“*MOVE!*”

Sanders hopped to Xavier, swiping the young man’s hands off his head again. “Let’s go, son. Gotta move.”

“Huh?” Xavier stared up with blank brown eyes.

“Can you walk, man?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“Good. Rachie, would-you-grab-the-woman?! Shoulder hold will do. Let’s *move!*”

The whole band was up and moving at record pace. It wasn’t until halfway through the flight home, when no other attacks came, that Sanders realized his internal battle alarm was silent. The pressure of impending doom was gone. It felt like the danger had passed.

They didn’t slow. Sanders had an excuse to head home, and he wanted to get there and get these numb-nuts dispersed to some other babysitter.

The ground started to change slowly as they neared home. Hard, cracked dirt turned into fertile land, rich in nutrients and life. The burnt, cracked trees gradually morphed into huge, lush green monsters. The air sweetened, the shade deepened.

Three leagues from the gate and the sentries started, sparse at first, with their sound devices and their lights, able to signal others should unwanted persons wander too far into their land. As the band continued, more sentries dotted the trees overhead, watching them pass. The Captain had an efficient and organized system that had never let them down. Which was why a runner met them not long after they crossed into the lands.

“Commander Sanders.” The runner, a lithe lad, was hardly out of breath. “I was sent to see if you needed aid. You’re moving quickly and five days early.”

The mention of the time constraint meant the Captain knew Sanders was back and wanted a damn good reason for it. Fine. Sanders would have to have an audience with him, anyway. He just wished he could’ve rested for a second or two before he walked into the next battle zone.

Chapter 5

The haze was returning, which meant consciousness was close. A cool liquid trickled past her lips. It tasted fresh and delicious, though it had no taste at all. Water. That was okay. Deft, soft fingers placed a cool rag on her forehead, dabbing twice before moving away.

Forcing calm, relaxed limbs, Shanti kept her breathing steady and rhythmic. She wasn't ready for a confrontation. Not without knowledge of this room or that beyond. She waited patiently, eyes lidded, for the woman to adjust the sheets and then move away.

Mentally peeling a thick film from her *Gift*, she groggily opened her mind. Needing to know what lay in wait, she let her feelers trickle into the room, and then reach beyond. Without warning, shooting pain stabbed through her temples and down through her gums. Flashes of discomfort pulsed behind her eyes. Hastily, not able to help a sharp intake of breath, she reeled her power back in.

Ouch.

Okay, that wasn't going to work. She'd severely strained her *Gift* along the way. She'd have to settle for getting to know one person at a time. It was more personal, anyway.

She focused in on the hazy mind-path of the woman in the far corner. On a normal day the person, so close, would be a crystalized bunch of motives and feelings, intents coloring her mind-path as loudly as speaking across the room. While she couldn't read thoughts, per se, she could read the motivations behind them. The average person she'd experienced in her travels, however, not raised with knowledge of mental power and all its branches and nuances, would usually advertise their intentions so grossly that it might as well have been reading thoughts. It was great for her cause, but very noisy if she didn't actively work to tune it out.

Sweet and fairly dense, the woman continued about her day in dull monotony; she had no real expectations, and no real desires. She had no drive to do anything but her simple occupation, which was folding sheets.

Well, that was good.

Shanti allowed her eyes to open slowly, the gloom of soft light coming from a drawn shade in a window to her right. The window was big enough to slip through. No bars covered the outside. She wasn't a prisoner. Not yet, anyway.

Her body lay immobile in a small bed with crisp white sheets, the frame not much wider than her body. Two landscape paintings hung on the wall she faced. The artistry was second rate but the frame gleamed, made from a well-crafted, polished wood.

Ugly art housed in exquisite word-working. Strange. Shanti wondered if a family member had done the paintings, and this woman was too kind to say the painter should take up another hobby...

The sting of cleaning detergent assaulted her senses, and there was no sound outside of the room. No coughs of the sick or the murmur of voices from jailers. The furniture and dressings, though slightly worn, were clean and well taken care of; everything here was loved. If she didn't know better, she'd say she was in a room in a home.

Shanti let her head fall slowly so she could see the woman on the other side of the room. She had a pleasant disposition and unruly brown hair. Her shoes were worn, like the furniture, but of similar quality. This woman had wealth; too much food eaten often, expensive wood purchased to house lack-luster art, leather shoes? Wealth didn't fit with her current occupation, though.

As though realizing she was the subject of scrutiny, the woman glanced at the bed while folding a white sheet. "Oh!" she gasped with a delighted smile, dropping her chore and taking a few steps closer.

Suddenly apprehensive, Shanti hastily clutched the stranger's mind, sweat blossoming on her brow with the effort. Trying to work through the sludge of her consciousness, Shanti fed a pure shot of terror into the woman's emotions, and she hesitated immediately in her advance.

"Where am I?" Shanti asked with a thin voice that was supposed to be intimidating.

The woman stared at her, uncomprehending.

How about use the correct language, you idiot!

She wracked her fraying brain, trying to remember which land she was in and what they might speak. She had ten languages in her arsenal. It would be a rare thing if she couldn't find one they both shared.

If only her mind wasn't so slippery.

She switched to the Forest Region's formal dialect. "*Where am I?*"

The woman shook her head again, forehead lined, trying to understand by sheer will alone.

She'd wandered off path, somewhat. That wasn't good. Mountain region? "Where am I?"

The woman's dark hazel eyes sparkled even as she wrung her hands. "In my home, my lady. We need to get you stronger. You nearly starved to death!"

Shanti dropped her mental stimulation. This woman was not capable of harm, thank the Elders.

"Am I the only one here? How were you—"

The woman nearly bounded to the bed, stopping Shanti mid-word. "How do you feel? You gave us all quite a scare! How did you come to be in the middle of nowhere by yourself? You must have traveled a long way..."

Barely resisting the sudden urge to feign a light coma, Shanti took a deep breath and let a brief smile grace her face. She needed information about this land. She needed a reference point from which to plan the next leg of her journey. She also needed to know what they planned to do with her. If the Graygeul had their hands in this society, she and all her people were as good as dead. This woman was obviously a great resource.

A great, chatty resource. Who would probably want to talk all day. Nothing was ever easy.

"I was just passing through," Shanti answered vaguely. "I did not realize the forest was charred. Where—"

"Oh, yes!" the woman cut in, moving back across the small room to fold her clothes. "That's because of that filthy Mugdock! They're jealous of our lands and our ability to trade. They're a poor nation. Of course, that's their fault, the lazy swine! A few years ago they got the bright idea to burn as much of our land as possible. I don't know why—"

"Molly?" A male's voice spoke from beyond the room.

Shanti's attention snapped toward the door, pushing her mental net out as far as possible. Pricks of pain stabbing behind her eyes, she could barely feel a man's presence just beyond the wood. A sharp mind, if she had to guess, probably honest. Curious and wary at the same time.

Now why would that be...

"Oh!" The matronly nursemaid bustled into the other room, closing the door with a soft click. Through the thin wood paneling Shanti heard the

woman continue with, “Hello! Come to look after your charge?”

“Uhhh, n—yes. The Captain wanted me to check in and see how she was? But I don’t need to see her, you can—“

“Nonsense!”

Molly opened the door a second later, dragging in a boy who couldn’t be older than sixteen. Steering him with hands on his thin shoulders, she deposited him in the center of the room, facing Shanti.

Immediately, as if a bright spotlight had focused on him, his head dropped toward the floor and his shoulders hunched. His thick mop of curly brown hair fell over his eyes. Obviously shy, yes, but Shanti could sense fear, also. It rolled off him in waves, drenching the room in anxiety and uncertainty.

“This is Marc,” Molly announced proudly, patting the youth on the back. “He was the one who got you started toward health! He’s training to be a doctor!”

Shanti didn’t know what the term *doctor* meant, but judging by the woman’s sparkling eyes, and the context, it meant healer. And was exciting in some way.

Marc’s bronzed face turned scarlet as he stared at the floor.

“Well, I’ll just let him ask his questions, then,” Molly continued, giving Marc an encouraging pat on the arm. “No doubt the Captain will want a full report. Just don’t tire her out, mind—but then you know that!” The door clicked shut once more, cutting off Molly’s merry laughter.

An uncomfortable hush rolled through the room. Marc stood, motionless, looking to solve mysteries in the floorboards. How a guy could remain so still, while under scrutiny, was a testimony to steady hands. A good thing in a healer. Not great as the initiator of conversation.

As if he heard the thought, he slowly brought his hands up to his stomach level, and began picking his nail. It seemed like, to him, movement was noise. Interesting.

After another stagnant pause, the youth cleared his throat. His gaze drifted up until he glanced at her from under his eyelashes. Here came the burst of action—his mind was ablaze with it.

“Are you feeling better?” he managed.

Shanti barely suppressed her laugh. She wasn’t sure he had it in him. “I am, yes. Thank you for your concern.”

The boy nodded, his dark eyes darting around the room. “You nearly

starved.”

“Yes, I am aware. What part did you play in my recovery?”

He shrugged, dropping his head again. “I just tried to get you to drink water is all. And some broth...”

“Were you the one who found me?”

“Um—I’m not supposed to...I mean, I just came to check... your eyes, uh... I just...” His words fizzled out as he scrubbed at his nail nervously.

She’d never met anyone so shy in all her life. It was fascinating. His sharp intellect dulled by the fear of expectation. The fear of being noticed. His mind was blazing one second, calculating and deducing, and the next he was pulling all his feelers in, tucking them away like a turtle.

She’d love to work with him. To coax that sharp intellect out and see what he could do with it. But she didn’t have the time. That wasn’t her job anymore.

Pushing past the pain, Shanti envisioned wrapping him in a warm blanket of security and seclusion. Her power played and tinkered with his mind, turning her illusion into his reality. He wouldn’t see a blanket, but he’d feel the comfort of being wrapped in one. The mind was a strong persuader.

As his face relaxed, she said, “I just hoped to know the situation surrounding my...rescue, and what will now become of me.” She brushed his mind with comfort, like his mother’s arms wrapping him in her bosom. “You do not have to fear, I will not betray your trust.”

The boy glanced up, dark eyes in a plain face. “Gracas found you by a tree. Commander Sanders and I cleaned you off.” He swished his hips to the side, boy code for extreme embarrassment of a sexual nature. His face blushed a deep crimson to match the movement.

Inexperienced and insecure. No guilt. No remorse.

Shanti let a shallow breath roll passed her lips. He’d probably just seen her body, and nothing worse. It bespoke this culture’s modesty, which was a good thing. For her, anyway. She didn’t care about nudity—she was glad he did. It was a small step in the direction of safety.

“Thank you.”

His nail must’ve had a high polish with all the attention he was giving it.

Shanti increased the amount of comfort, imagining him in front of a crackling fire, completely alone in a familiar room. “Then what happened?”

That extra dose was all it took. In a torrent of words, she got the full story: His desire to cure her in an attempt to rid him of the pain of losing his mother to disease. The fear of Commander Sanders' attention. How he didn't fit in with the other Cadets, but focusing on her made him at least feel needed. Liking some girl called Canella but too shy to talk to her.

Shanti held up a hand to stop the verbal flood when he started talking about his first kiss.

His face dropped immediately, allowing her a few minutes to pick through the tumult of strange words—slang, most likely. If only she wasn't so tired, or using precious resources to mentally manipulate these people. She wasn't up for any of this.

"When you first came in the room," Shanti said softly, trying to get back on track, "you seemed afraid of me. Why?"

He gave another blush. "Well, I thought you hurt Xavier somehow... He screamed, then dropped you. Your eyes were open. And...and glowing..."

Frost crept up Shanti's spine as those words sank in. Her muscles tensed. Did he know what it meant? Who she was?

As she attempted to summon strength she didn't have, her hold on his mind wavering, he laughed to himself. "But that sounds silly, of course. I mean, eyes don't glow, right?" He scrubbed at his nail and lowered his eyes, shrugging. "Commander Sanders blames it on my love of stories."

Sweat beaded her brow. "Did anyone else see my eyes glow?"

"Oh no. No one believed me. And now, after having met you, I can see I don't know nothing—"

Shanti shook her head and cut him off. "Don't know what?"

"I mean, I can see that I was wrong," he clarified. "That Commander Sanders was right. I just wanted to be sure, though. I thought I'd check, you know?"

The small muscles in her back started to relax. The ice in her shoulders thawed. Air worked into her lungs. She backed off her mental touch.

"But you do have weird eyes," Marc blurted.

"Yes. Compared to you, I do have weird eyes."

"Are you *albino*?"

Shanti shook her head again, not understanding the term.

"Do you have skin and eye...you know, problems?" Marc tried. "No

color in them? Is it a genetic thing, I mean?”

Shanti nodded slowly. It would lead to uncomfortable questions if she told him that a huge release of power at five years old permanently burned her retinas. Incriminating questions. With the Graygual marching east, conquering, pillaging, and destroying along their way, all they needed was a whisper, a rumor, and the Being Supreme’s dogs would be on her trail. They’d already gotten closer than she wanted to admit, and that was when she’d been in perfect health. At this stage in the game, she was ripe for the plucking, vulnerable and defenseless in some strange land.

No, the less this kid knew, the better. It had been a long, lonely road so far, but she was almost there. She could confide in someone when the journey was done.

“Oh, so that’s it.” Marc gave a relieved smile, completely missing her inner contemplation. “Genetic problems. Well, that makes sense. Anyway, I should probably go. I have to get back to training. I’m failing, but they keep trying.” His chest heaved in a sigh. “I’ll probably end up cleaning toilets or something. Goes to show intelligence test scores aren’t always accurate.”

“Do you know what happened to my things?”

Marc’s head tilted. “That nasty dress you were wearing?”

“My baggage. My knives and weapons. My personal affects. My ring...”

Mark scrunched up his face and shook his head. “We only found you. I don’t remember a ring... You had that sheet, and some holey leather shoes—not well made, either. The leather was ruff—“

Startled, Shanti sat up. “You did not find my bag?”

The bed dressings fell to her waist. Marc’s eyes fastened on bare skin immediately, having a stare-off with her nipples. His face turned a furious shade of cherry. He gulped and stammered, unable to look away.

“Look at me,” Shanti commanded as she clutched his mind, feeding him a blast of urgency. Marc’s eyes slowly found hers, the blood in his penis fighting logic. Fighting any sensation she could supplant.

Wanting his undivided attention, and realizing the impossibility of that within this setting, Shanti intertwined lust with her urgency cocktail. It was a terrible time for that “can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” philosophy, given his age, but she didn’t have much choice.

It did the trick. Marc’s eyes were burning, slightly embarrassed, but staring at Shanti with fervor. She hiked up the sheet and said, “I need that

bag, Marc. I need you to take me to it, okay? Please?”

“Yes.” It was more a sigh than a word. “I will. I will take you to it. Right now?”

Dangle sex in front of a guy and he was like the walking dead. Typical. But effective.

In this situation, also gross.

Shanti’s mind raced. She was naked, she was starved, and her head was swimming from sitting upright. She wasn’t going anywhere. But she needed that bag. Badly. It was everything. Being without it meant failure.

Why were there so many ways to fail?

“Two days. Come back here at dawn. Don’t tell anyone and don’t let anyone figure it out. Do well in your classes, focus on what you’re doing, and don’t let them see your distraction. When you come, in two days, at dawn, bring enough provisions for a week and a map. Will you remember?”

Marc nodded again, glued to her hypnotic, slightly glowing eyes.

“Okay. Now get out,” Shanti said with a tight voice. She replaced lust with shame, as if a parent had given him a punishment after catching him masturbating. With any luck the next time he looked at her he would be mortified. Not the nicest of things to do, but definitely necessary.

She lay back down and pulled fistfuls of the sheet to her chin. Her people had never worried about nudity. The baths were public, in deep wells of a natural hot spring. One would have to go without bathing to avoid being seen naked. And when washing was as much a relaxing treat as necessary for hygiene, her people got callous to nudity quickly. She’d often walked through the village air drying, carrying on a conversation with someone completely clothed.

She wasn’t at home anymore, though. Home was destroyed. It was time she finally caught on.

Chapter 6

The next two days whisked by in a blur of Molly's idle chit-chat while Shanti dodged her questions. Molly would do things like talk about her niece's new baby, then ask if Shanti had a niece. Or a baby. Or a husband waiting for her somewhere. She would tell Shanti of places she had traveled, which weren't many, and then ask if Shanti had traveled. How far. With whom. Every long-winded story had a question periodically popped in. Shanti, half asleep most of the time, had to keep herself from answering by sheer will, hypnotized as she was by the verbal linguistics of an accomplished gossip.

Then there was the dry, lackluster healer. He had her dressed in a long slip-type thing, which he called a *nightgown*. Apparently people in that town, or village, or city—Shanti had no idea how big the place was—liked to wear long drapes beneath their covers. They wanted a loose, flowing garment to trap their legs and get tangled as they slept. This made sense to them, somehow.

Once she was covered, the older healer listened to her heart, felt her bones through her limbs, and said things like, “You have quite a lot of muscle tone. How does a woman come by so much?”

Shanti used the same dry tone as she answered: “I'm not sure if you are aware, doctor, but the muscle in a woman's body, like a man's, can be developed.”

“Your eyes are a strange shade of blue. More violet, actually. Is that normal amongst your people?”

“I don't imagine anyone would have the audacity to remark that I am normal, doctor. Slightly unhinged, certainly.”

“Your skin is too light.”

“Racism does not become you.”

“Why is your hair so pale?”

“Genetics, doctor. Same as why yours is so dark. Just what do they teach in medical school here? Or does school for that discipline not exist? Are you a witchdoctor, sir?”

Finally the doctor got so irritated he informed her that if she didn't supply answers to his questions, he wouldn't be able to help her. To which she sighed gratefully, stepped out of the sack of fabric, and slipped back into bed. She was starved, not hurt. With food and rest, she would be fine.

He was not thrilled with her assessment.

The rest of the time was spent eating as much as possible, as often as possible. Molly brought food whenever Shanti asked and watched over her while she ate, for which she was thankful.

Marc came each day, more nervous than anything, but also desperate to tell her how well he was doing in class. He was focusing, just like she said. He already knew everything they were teaching, but now he was proving it, trying not to care what they thought. Trying to make sure he focused, just like she said, right? That he should focus?

He groveled for her praise and blushed when he got it. He never mentioned the little...episode from the first meeting, and he was careful to always direct his eyes at his feet or her head. The small dose of shame was apparently working, and to make sure it stayed effective, Shanti stayed well away from his mind. And thoroughly covered.

Two hours before dawn the day they planned to leave saw Shanti on her feet in the small room. The air was changing, taking on the sweet, fresh smell of early morning. She was up, moving about the room, testing her legs, getting her heart rate up. Her muscles were hard and brittle, but they were mending. A few more days at an easy walking pace, with food and water, and she'd be fine. She had to be.

An hour before dawn Shanti paced as the birds started their morning chatter. They weren't the only ones. There were signs of life within the house; Molly moved around much too early.

Dread tickled Shanti's stomach. She hadn't wanted to alert anyone she was leaving. She wanted to be a wisp of vapor, there and gone and out of people's minds the second they turned around.

Half an hour to go. Hopefully Marc would show up early. Hopefully

Shanti's pacing was interrupted by a soft knock on the door. She froze in the murky brown of pre-dawn. Shadows stretched across the floor and hovered over the door. The knock sounded again, hesitant. The door opened

slowly on well-greased hinges. Molly poked her head into the room. Shadows veiled her eyes, but her plain oval face pointed at Shanti, motionless for a moment of analysis.

“You’re up,” Molly accused.

“Yes. I am leaving today.”

“The Captain is always right.” She said it as though she thought he was magic. The door swung wide, admitting the dressed woman. “Well, you aren’t a hostage, make no mistake, but the Captain wants to talk to you before you go.”

“I am afraid that won’t be possible. I am leaving within the hour.”

Molly smoothed her apron, something she did when uncomfortable. In an apologetic voice, she said, “Young Master Nickles won’t be escorting you. You have no provisions and no idea where you’re headed. Also, your bag of...articles has been recovered. The Captain wishes to speak with you about it this morning.”

Hope deflated. Shanti physically felt better, her body having always healed quickly, but she’d been on the brink of starvation. Another day would’ve been death. She was no miracle case; her muscles were stringy and depleted, her *Gift* not even at a quarter of its potency, and any real movement had her breathing heavy. If it came to a fight, she’d be taken down.

So what then were her options?

Shanti paced toward the window and looked out at the darkened street. Early morning dew sparkled, the street looking sleek and wet. Her only other choice was to flee. If she could exist in the wild long enough to rejuvenate, she could sneak back in and steal her bag.

She turned back to the bed, her gaze scanning the light sheets and woven blanket, then flitting to the nightgown neatly folded on the bed stand. Then she shook her head. How would she get out of the city, hardly able to walk, let alone run, with a nightgown and a blanket? Not to mention she had no food, and no weapons to procure any food.

Resigned, she turned back to the window. “What sort of person is this Captain?”

Sensing compliance, Molly sprung to life, her sizable breasts swinging wildly. “Oh, he’s just great, he is! Strong in mind and body and absolutely *loved* by everyone. Especially the women.” She threw Shanti a glinted eye, an undercurrent of meaning Shanti didn’t catch, before bustling out of the room, returning a moment later with a folded heap of fabric. “He

inherited the post, of course, because that's how we do things here. The firstborn son takes the mantle. But the late Captain, God rest his soul, passed away before his time. Here, dear, put this on."

Molly handed Shanti a soft white slip with tiny straps, intended to cover her torso. Molly unfolded short pants a moment later and passed those over as she continued, "He didn't have any brothers or sisters, of course, so he had to learn the post by himself at a young age. Oh, he's got the council to help him with big decisions, but the weight rests on his shoulders. And there isn't anyone better to take the burden!"

Molly picked up a shimmer of green fabric by the top corners and gently lifted. It unfurled into the biggest, thickest, fluffiest dress Shanti had ever seen.

Shanti wondered why a dress had been brought out when she had already stepped into a top and pants, but she had more important things to ponder. "He has the city and fighting camp both at his disposal? He has the power to control both?"

"Oh yes. But he's borne it marvelously, like I said. Fair and just, that's our Captain. If you do wrong, watch out, but he weighs all the elements and makes his decision. It's always the right one, mark my words. He always knows."

"That's a lot of power for one man. Power generally spawns corruption."

Molly waved that thought away and scoffed. "Maybe with bigger cities, but not our Captain. He is as solid as an oak, he is."

Molly carefully laid down the heap of green dress and picked up a rectangular swatch of fabric with thick ribs sewn into it. From one edge dangled laces, along the other edge were holes.

"What is that for?" Shanti asked with skepticism.

Molly held the fabric between two hands and pushed it at Shanti's midsection, securing it around her torso, then working around and attempting to tie her in.

"No!" Shanti exclaimed, struggling out. "I will not be tied and delivered like a package!"

Molly's face contorted into an expression of half confusion, and half frustration. "My lady, you have to put on the proper attire to meet the Captain!"

Shanti pointed at the material. "That is something women wear?"

Why?”

“It supports the breasts, cinches the waist, and makes the figure just exquisite, dear, you’ll see.” Molly stepped forward again, fabric stretched out in front of her like a fireproof blanket and Shanti the flame.

Shanti danced to the side, clumsily banging her hip on the corner of the bed in her attempt to evade Molly. She rethought fleeing. “No, thank you. No way. Are women here insane? Are their lives so easy that they have to invent challenges in their dress? That device cuts off breath. I am weak enough as it is.”

“This is fashionable, my lady!” Molly shook the fabric at her.

“Fashion, ah yes. A fool’s game, if I am not mistaken. No, I am good as I am. Give me a wrap or cover for the morning and I should be fine.”

The fabric dropped slowly as Shanti’s words sank in. Molly’s gaze drifted down Shanti’s body. An eyebrow quirked. “As you are?”

“Yes, some pants would do me fine. Possibly some that covered my entire leg, but I will take whatever you have. This region is hot, so I need not be completely covered.”

“Pants? You can’t wear *pants!* Like a man? Oh no, dear. No, no. You can’t appear in front of the Captain without appropriate clothing. I will bend on the corset, which is... well, you are not from here, so okay. But *pants?* I couldn’t. How would that reflect on me?”

Shanti looked down at her starved body, moderately covered by white garments. “I don’t understand. Why I am wearing this if not to...wear it?”

Molly shook her head in exasperation and tossed the corset on the bed in a temper. She carefully snatched up the green dress. “You will be presented in a dress, and that is final. I will not look the fool in front of the Captain, no matter your plans.”

Anger was so uncustomary of the homely woman that Shanti was struck speechless. Before she could protest further, enough fabric to double as a sail cascaded over her head.

“At least you’re skinny *and* shapely so the dress still looks decent,” Molly was saying as she worked the dress tightly around Shanti’s middle. “I don’t know what we’ll do about the breasts. You’re young, and they’re perky, but they’re nowhere as high as they should be.”

A metal contraption made a *zzzzziiiiieeee* as it worked up her back, securing Shanti into the “fashionable” death trap.

“Now.” Molly stepped in front of her to survey her work. Her eyes

lingered on Shanti's chest, her eyebrows falling. Shaking her head, she moved forward, one hand grabbing the top of the fabric over her breasts, the other reaching in to grab boob.

"What are you doing?" Shanti exclaimed as she struggled back, trying to get the woman's hand out of her top.

"You need to move them to the *top* of the dress! You can't have them squished down the middle into your waist!"

"I'm fine as I am. I don't want young people getting the wrong idea, seeing my breasts."

"You just *can't*—"

Shanti slipped steel into her voice. "No. This will do. I am not here as an ambassador, so I will not strive to adhere to customs. I am a traveler who wants to be on her way."

Molly's eyes burned, but, thankfully, she backed off.

It gave Shanti another dose of humility. If she could barely fight off a middle aged, pudgy nursemaid, how would she defend herself against fighting men?

Deep in thought, she didn't realize Molly was leading her further into the modest house, which she had learned was a residence that occasionally gave aid to those in need or recovering from a malady. Suddenly she was standing in front of a full length mirror and Shanti got her first look at the fashion.

She looked like a shimmery green monster.

The tight bodice hugged her skin, leading down into a skirt shaped like a bell that reached entirely to the ground. It was adorned with layers and ruffles. Then there were the sleeves. Huge bunches of fabric puffed up, nearly to her ear. The only skin exposed was her arms and chest, where her breasts were apparently supposed to pop out like a child's toy.

"Why such heavy garments in a hot climate?" Shanti wondered aloud. "And why the peep show but fear of nudity?"

"Well...this is the fashion."

"Fashion excuses common sense?"

Molly shook her head in frustration again, not daring to travel along the logic road when it pertained to looking the part.

Shanti could always strip if it came to fighting, not that it would help much in her current state. Still, slipping out of the dress would at least mean she'd be able to breathe when they took her down. "Fine. Can we go?"

“Just a minute, dear, almost time. We won’t have time for breakfast—I didn’t anticipate dressing taking so long.” Shanti earned a scowl.

“Why are you not wearing a similar monster costume?”

Molly scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Molly left Shanti standing in utter confusion as she hurried to the kitchen. Shrugging, Shanti had her first look around. Then she gawked. The first thing she noticed was all the leather and wood. It was everywhere. She was familiar with the wooden items—her people had excellent woodworking techniques and trees in plenty--but the leather was something with which she had little experience. Her people weren’t farmers. Their leather items came from wolves and smaller animals, or were traded for extravagant sums. Yet Molly, who didn’t have much, or so she said, had a full set of leather furniture. Not to mention many artifacts that were metal. By Shanti’s standards, this room was cloaked in wealth.

Shanti sauntered over to the couch, the gobs of fabric adorning her person so loud she’d have to ask her enemies to plug their ears so she could sneak by. What a ridiculous fashion these people employed. Like most ceremonial dress, it was completely without purpose. It was also extremely uncomfortable. It was work just to wear the stuff.

Shaking her head, she felt the leather. Soft as an infant’s backside. And squishy. It was more inviting than a feast.

As she was about to sink into the welcoming leather, Molly screeched. “You’ll be all creases!”

“Do you stop sitting after you get dressed up?” Shanti asked in confusion, butt halfway to the cushion.

“You have to know *how* to sit, or else you’ll look like a day old kitten!”

“Your people trap themselves in garments that don’t allow them to breathe, let alone move naturally, showing parts of skin that make young boys crazy, then forbid sitting unless a new approach is learned? Are you playing a *roark* on me? A...what’s the word...joke?”

Molly was shaking her head again, dragging Shanti to the door while shoving a biscuit into her mouth. “The Captain expects it.”

“Ah, so the Captain is responsible for these torture devices. And no one has rebelled? Called down his service?”

“He’s not—just—it’s *fashion!*”

They stepped outside onto a clean cobblestone street, where every so

often a large metal pole reached into the sky with thick candles nestled into a decorative steel cage at the top. Shanti noticed a man walking through the street with a long metal rod, reaching up into the metal cage to extinguish the small flame. The street held many small abodes like Molly's, most with activity now that the sun rose, but a few without.

"Is this a main path?" Shanti asked curiously, taking in the stonework that overlaid the ground.

"Street, you mean? This is one of four main streets, yes. The smaller streets aren't lined with candles—just the main ones. That's why I live here—just in case someone from out of town needs a place—"

Shanti deafened her ears, a skill she'd learned within the first half day in that small room with the chatty woman. She turned her thoughts, instead, to her surroundings. One main path of four. Rather wide, too—big enough for two teams of horses pulling a cart each. It was a city, but not an incredibly large city. Harder to blend in with the difference in coloring and feature, but not impossible.

"Miss Molly." It was a youth's deep voice not yet filled out into the drum of manhood.

Shanti spun quickly. Her mind blossomed open, the net of her consciousness spreading out around her in a ten span radius—shockingly small for two days of rest. She should've done it earlier, though. She needed to stop being a tourist.

A large, young man strode toward them, arms swinging with lanky abandon. Wide shoulders nearly taking up the whole of the footpath, his muscles were already defined though he was probably only Marc's age. Shanti had no doubt he would only get bigger. He had the potential for great strength and prowess, but now he walked more like a floppy puppy that still needed to grow into its feet.

"Xavier!" Molly said in a gush. "Who would've thought I would get all the promising new boys stopping by!"

Xavier. Shanti had heard that name before—the man she had taken down. His mind shed pleasant expectation, happy to meet a stranger and enjoy the morning walk. He harvested not one ounce of fear. He not only did not know her capabilities in mind or body, but he thought her harmless. And if she were wearing that corset, not able to breathe, sit, or bend at the waist, he surely would've been correct.

She retracted her *Gift*, backing away from mind contact. She needed

the strength. Plus, moving like a stick man held together with yarn, two strikes would be enough to take him to the ground. Even in this horrible green dress.

“I’m supposed to escort you. Sorry I’m late—“ His gaze hit Shanti and he staggered forward, hands half reaching either to fall or grab.

Shanti kicked her shoes off—horrible stilt type things that increased her height but decreased her ability to walk--and her fingers tugged down the metal at her back, ready to tear the thing off and engage.

Then he smiled. “Sorry, ma’am. Last time I saw you, you were a pile of dirt. You clean up well.”

Shanti hesitated, and then got her fingers slapped away by Molly. Shifting and reclaiming the tiny square of metal, she said, “Do your people have problems with washing? I found the soap acceptable.”

“He’s saying you look pretty, dear,” Molly explained, swiping Shanti’s fingers away again before re-securing the dress.

“Pretty.” She couldn’t help the monotone in her voice. At one time in her life, she’d cared about such things—about men and mates and what it meant to be desired. She was only twenty-four, but even still, those days were gone, along with her people. Now, she’d rather be invisible.

“Say ‘thank you’,” Molly muttered disapprovingly, noticing Shanti’s shoes scattered across the cobblestones. Her answering scowl was fantastic.

“Thank you,” Shanti said without emotion. It would behoove her to stick within custom—to stay within the good graces of these people—until she could move on and regain that invisibility. Still, she didn’t like the reminder of days lost. Or being noticed sexually. Not anymore.

After a tsk, and some shoe orchestration, Molly said, “Let’s move. The Captain hates tardiness. And *rudeness...*”

A short walk later, they approached a large square building with very few ornaments. In fact, besides a plain, burnished metal door knocker and weathered door knob, it was completely nondescript. And because it was so plain, standing next to domestic dwellings with scrolls and embellishments, it stuck out like a barge amid sailboats. Someone wasn’t very clever at disguises with this office.

Xavier hurried forward, and Shanti danced off to the side to keep outside of arm’s reach. He opened the door with a flourish, waving them through.

Shanti stopped altogether, beckoning him in before her, spreading out

her mind again. Her awareness crawled across the space within, mostly empty of any heat signatures or brain patterns, until the far right. It was like the sea washing up a beach, the foam of her mind lapping at the awaiting consciousness.

She strained, trying to reach farther. The effect had her limbs shaking and forehead beading in sweat. Hot pricks dug in her temples. She should've waited longer than two days to attempt this meeting. Not that she'd planned to meet at all...

Xavier, unaware of her mental employment, tried to dislodge his smile and failed. "Ladies first."

"Yes, I saw to that," Shanti replied distractedly, wondering how many awaited her. "Molly has entered. Please—" Shanti gestured again for Xavier to go first.

"Ladies first," Xavier repeated.

His smile was starting to get irritating.

Shanti looked at him sternly, deciding. He wasn't planning to budge, but she wasn't planning on traipsing in front of him in stilts and green puffy wrapping. She might as well just offer herself for his amusement.

She settled for removing her shoes, handing them to the youth, and using his confusion to slip inside, dress binding halfway down her back in case she met trouble.

As she crossed the threshold a splash of deep crimson reached toward her feet. Fearing blood, wondering if Xavier was currently closing the door to her tomb, Shanti hopped over the offending color with nimble grace, landing on weak, half-numb legs. She staggered, crashing into a plant in a pot, her *Gift* sputtering with lack of concentration and insufficient energy.

A quick glance told her that what she'd thought was a dead body spilling its life blood, was actually a large flower at the corner of an extravagantly ugly rug. Also extravagantly large. It reached from the door to the men, housing two glorious leather couches, quality beyond what Shanti had ever seen and certainly ever experienced, and two chairs to match. An expertly crafted table squatted among that cluster of relaxation. Along the sides of the room, lining the walls, were more tables, a few plants, and large tapestries she wouldn't waste her time burning. Riches and wealth beyond what many could boast clustered in this room. Also a distracting lack of quality art. The skills of this People were somewhat skewed.

Righting herself and brushing the billowing fabric straight, then trying

not to squirm with the dress grabbing at her legs, Shanti raised her eyes to her waiting audience. It was better than she'd expected. The long rectangular room held an array of fighting men at its head, all flocking around the focal point, a large wooden desk where a dark haired man sat. To the left stood three men of a battle hardened caliber. Straight and hard, they wore their weapons like their shirts, analyzing her with hard eyes. Their line was arrow straight, jutting out from the focal point, ready to meet her head-on.

The first man in the line was a block of muscle with a face like a bull. Next in line stood a striking man with a crisp blue uniform, crease-free and pristine—probably a very organized man. Last was a middle-aged man with gray temples, regal and self-important—lots of experience.

To the right wobbled a bunch of kids learning to stand still, that weasel Marc among them. If they'd ever been in a fight she would've been surprised. Wide eyes adorned fresh faces, gazes darting from her to their shoes, in equal parts fear of their fighting counterparts and fascination with her, the foreign woman.

Molly had scampered off to Shanti's left, halfway down the richly furnished room. Xavier joined her momentarily, his smile finally and completely wiped off his face. At least she had that going for her.

Walking calmly on the smooth finish of an expertly sanded floor, Shanti let the feelers of her mind reach forward ahead of her, finding the men nearly in range. Her focus shifted to the focal point, a man slightly her senior leaning back comfortably in a massive leather chair that would make cows proud to give their lives. His intelligent eyes were a beautiful pale blue, matching the sky in color and clarity, but much deeper, their rim a dusty blue. Wavy dark brown hair brushed the tops of muscular shoulders. His eye-opening attractiveness was somewhat diminished by the tight, severe set of his jaw and corresponding intense gaze. He had an agenda. His *life* was probably an agenda. He might be loved, but Shanti bet it wasn't for a sense of humor. As a leader, he was much too serious by half, a trait she'd seen diminish even the best leaders' abilities.

Shanti stopped moving forward at about fifteen paces from the desk, which was still embarrassingly shy of her mental ability to glean any real awareness of the Captain. Wisps of vague intent washed into her consciousness, but the feelings were pale representations of their origin. When at full strength she could reach a kilometer or more, but now that it so ardently mattered, she was as good as useless.

“Welcome to my city,” he began gently, his voice deep and graveled. “It seems you’ve avoided all personal questions while in the city thus far.”

She tilted her head in greeting with a marginally bent spinal column, denoting acquiescence, or possibly weakness. She hadn’t recognized the name of the city when she’d asked Molly, which meant she was unfortunately ignorant to their customs. She did know the generalities of the Mountain Region from her studies, however, and knew that they adhered to respect, but nothing so severe as groveling. Hopefully polite conversation, the reedy weakness of a female, and her foreignness would have her spit out of this place with a label of “not important.”

“Unfortunately, yes,” she responded in a soft tone. “My business is mine alone on this journey. I hope you understand.”

Pulses of irritation slapped her from the man to her left. The first in line, shorter than the men behind him, shifted in irritation.

Shanti’s focus flicked back to the Captain when he said, “We’ve performed a service for you. Two, actually. In repayment, you’ve landed young Marc in some serious trouble. I don’t think a little history, given in good faith, would go amiss.”

Shanti kept her tone level, deflecting his curiosity as subtly as possible. “I thank you for your help, but it’s probably best for all involved if I carry on. Business, such that it is, isn’t something to chat about idly. I’m sure you can agree, no doubt being in possession of your own trade secrets.”

A small flame kindled in crystalized blue eyes. “Trade. I see.”

She batted her eyelashes. Couldn’t hurt. She was in the ridiculous green frock no intelligent woman would agree to—possibly stupidity is what they expected in their women.

“What’s your name?” the Captain asked next.

“You can call me whatever you wish, though something long and hard to pronounce would match my personality.” She smiled, communicating the joke.

His stern expression didn’t soften. “Where are you from?”

She thought of her homeland along the beautiful western coast of the land. Surrounding forests, not unlike those around this city, enabled her people to live off the land for most of their needs. She missed it keenly. Missed the sea breeze from the ocean not far away, and the lazy evenings when all the work and training was done when her people could all share meals and laughter. She found the ache of home a constant companion.

But she couldn't tell him any of that. She couldn't let him pinpoint her on a map, or the pieces would start falling into place for anyone that paid attention. Keeping her business to herself was not only safest for her, it was safest for this city, too. They didn't need the Graygual's interest. No one did, if they could help it.

To that end, she said, "A distant place, but I'm afraid I'd just as soon keep it at that. In fact, I would love to be on my way if at all possible..."

He leaned forward on the desk, his large arms bracing, revealing defined biceps to match those muscular shoulders. A tinge of uncertainty pinched her heart as a strange flutter sparked in her stomach. She would've much preferred a fat and lazy Captain who would grow tired of exerting energy over foreign things. Or movement.

Instead she faced a man, probably in his early thirties, with an intelligent and intense sparkle to his eyes, and an upper body to make the Elders take notice. Should things go sour, this did not bode well for her survival. All she could hope was that his size meant he was slow.

"You speak our language well," he continued, "though it's not your native tongue. Your accent is... hard to place..."

"Hard to place, yes. I've traveled far, but I have a ways to go. I must have a collection of sounds in my speech by now. But please, I would just as soon cause you no more trouble and be on my way."

In a quick movement, almost faster than her eye, and certainly unexpected, the Captain snatched something off the floor and put it on the desk to his right. Two things went through her head: One, her bag was now fifteen steps away. Two, the Captain was lightning fast. For an arm so big attached to a torso of his size, it was...unnerving.

"We'll cut to the chase, shall we?" The Captain's voice got a shade deeper. All the young men squirmed where they stood, traces of fear floating at the edges of her awareness. The older men didn't move, but wariness poured off them.

The Captain's large hands snapped the bag open. Without preamble, he hauled out her sword, ripping off the scabbard with a practiced hand and laying it at the top of the surface in front of him. Almost like he dared her to reach for it. Next came her throwing knives, followed by their leg harness. A belt, a bow, a quiver long emptied of arrows—she was an excellent shot, but with more enemies than arrows, retrieving them from dead bodies was impossible. The last of the larger objects was a neatly folded stack of clothing

she recognized as her undergarments for colder climates, soiled and holey from travel.

The Captain paused for a second, his eyes meeting hers. “This is quite an arsenal. Care to explain how you came to possess it?”

The way he asked almost made her wonder at his ignorance of women fighting. It sounded like he was accusing her of stealing. Which was fantastic, because that meant he’d not heard of her, her abilities, the Shamas—her people—or her plight. It also meant he hadn’t talked to the Graygual.

The answer was, therefore, easy. “It was a fantastic find.”

He picked up the sword by the hilt, holding it in front of his eyes and analyzing the blade. “They are well taken care of. Expertly crafted, oiled, polished—someone put great care into this weapon, both to make it, and to keep it.”

She allowed a smile she didn’t feel. “Yes. I am an expert scavenger, it seems.”

His blue gaze back on hers, he put the sword down gently, handling it like he’d owned it all his life. “The knives are of excellent quality, also. Balanced. They were made with care by an expert at his craft. And used—there’s a speck of blood near the hilt only a month or two old, if I had to guess.”

Good guess. And a detailed observation. He knew his weapons and their uses. It wasn’t theoretical, either. He was a fighter, and judging by the muscle tone, the width of those massive shoulders, and his surety of even the smallest movement, a good one. The rumors on that score seemed true.

Blast the Elders their jokes! Filthy beggars! she swore to herself.

She adopted a smile she didn’t feel. “I am a woman with some world knowledge—however little. My kind tend to have an eye for shiny things...”

“Do you also have an eye for craftsmanship? Because those weapons look like they were made by a similar artist.”

She did have an eye for craftsmanship. And now she knew he did, too. He wasn’t making this easy. “I got lucky—they were together, so it stands to reason that they’d be similar.”

“I see.” It was clear he didn’t.

Adrenaline started to fill her body slowly, knowing this was all starting to unravel. He reached into a small pocket on his breast and extracted her gold amulet. “There is scripted language on here that we don’t recognize. It’s made of gold. It would fetch a nice price. Your weapons would fetch

remarkably more, but instead of trading the items for food or transportation, you carried them nearly to your death. Why?”

“You’re really concerned about this money issue. If I did have money, to whom would I give it to for food or shelter? Were there fairies in the dead trees that I missed as I walked through?” she said with a flash of anger.

Surprise lit his face before fire crackled in those cold blue eyes. The fighting men, already still, went rigid. More than one boy squeezed his thighs together, trying not to piss himself, probably. She was nearing the Captain’s patience threshold but there wasn’t a bloody thing she could do about it.

The Captain stared at her with an uncanny intensity. The strange flutter tickled her stomach again, only this time, it carried a tingle of fear. After a lengthy pause, he slowly lifted his right hand to his breast and extracted her father’s ring. He held it by the chain it was attached to, and lifted it so it was level with his eyes. He looked at it for a moment, making a show of analyzing it, and then flicked his eyes to hers. “A man’s ring?”

A pulse of adrenaline rocked her body. Sweat started to dribble down the crease of her back. She yearned to rush forward and yank the precious heirloom out of his hand. Instead, she stilled the tremors and focused on the present. She didn’t have any weapons, nor any strength. Unlike the last person who had handled that ring and questioned her, this large man wouldn’t get a fork in the eye. Not yet. Not until Shanti had a weapon. Or a fork.

“I’m not sure what there is to explain,” she said in an even tone, easily hiding the lie. “One of the men I traveled with was lost. I kept his ring for the sake of memory...”

A moment rumbled by in the silent room. Another. The boys began to fidget, uncomfortable and not experienced enough to hide it. The army men held firm, but uncertainty rolled off them.

The Captain continued to analyze her as she pretended to stand strong. Her legs were quivering ever so slightly, however, exhausted from the stress and strain. She thought about inching closer, trying to get a reading on this stoic man. That she hadn’t already was beyond her—everyone else seemed in range, why not him?

The Captain finally said, “Tell me about these weapons.”

“What can I tell you?” She spread out her hands in a plea. “I found them along the way, I picked them up—“

A monsoon of power blasted out from the Captain, rocking her back a step and causing her to throw up her shields in panic. Raw, brute strength

scrubbed at her barriers like sand paper. Her teeth clenched like her fists, fighting the assault. Her startled gaze retrained on the Captain. He sat as faux calmly as ever, eyes on fire, no intent to further use what could only be his own *Gift*.

A lifetime of training pushed past her soggy head and tired body. Survival mode regained control. She stood still and assessed. This was impossible. Wasn't it? The bloodlines in this part of the world were all wrong for the *Gift*.

Confused, at a loss, she opened her shields a fraction, letting in the tiniest sliver of power. Assessing. And then her fingers started to tingle with implications.

He was untrained. His power, nearly enough to rival her own, had no direction. No intent. It pushed against her skull like a gale-force wind, but had no fingers with which to pry open her defenses, or slip past her barriers. He was simply in a temper and blasting outward with a fifth sense so powerful it had the ability to kill... if he knew how. Instead, he used it like a child just learning.

What's more, his people had no idea why they were unsettled. They knew their Captain was lost in anger, close to rage, but no one questioned *how* they knew. It spoke of complete, utter ignorance on what the *Gift* even was.

Her mouth dropped open. She couldn't help it.

She had been told she was the only one with this much power. Had been for a hundred years. But here she stood, shaking with the effort to combat the force from another talent out of the legends. Words could not describe how utterly floored she was.

Her inactivity and silence must have signaled some quiet victory for him, because he leaned back in his chair, the force of his power abating. He'd gotten his way, and now he could relax.

If she had any sort of strength, she'd show him what that power could do with a little experience.

The next horrible thought that forced its way into her churning mind was: The Graygual would be tickled that there was another—that she wasn't the only one. Another killing monster for their war vessel. Another breeder for the race of super fighter. And maybe he was worse. He could easily impregnate a horde of women. If even one of those offspring had the *Gift*, the Graygual would have more weapons in their arsenal to blow through the land,

conquering as they went.

The large, muscular man, with lightning speed, and the power of a city and army both, had to be killed.

What a bloody irritating discovery.

Chapter 7

“I will ask you again: where did you get these weapons?” the Captain said, his irritation coloring the tone in the room.

Changing her story now would be suicide. Instead, Shanti changed tactics and met that powerful blue gaze with a violet one of her own. She would not yield to his bullying, and it was important he knew that. She was vulnerable at the moment, yes, but she did have her own power. A good leader would respect that. Hopefully.

“Can you use these weapons?” the Captain continued, only a slight edge in his voice. It was commendable, because his irritation was thrashing at her mind. She didn’t need to step closer to feel it anymore; he was broadcasting.

“As much as the normal woman, I’d wager,” she said in a light tone.

The Captain stood up. Up and up until Shanti was sure his head would glance off the ceiling. He was huge. Taller than Xavier, and broader. Well over six feet tall, his shoulders strained against his shirt, causing small holes along the seams. His torso was all bump and valley. His back probably was, too. Power and brawn and extremely fast, not to mention poised and balanced, graceful and agile. If that bastard were mentally trained, things would be extremely dicey. Good thing he wasn’t.

“I bet this city goes poor trying to feed you,” she let slip.

“Molly, you are excused,” the Captain pronounced, sparing the woman a glance. “Thank you for your help. I’ve already arranged payment.”

Shanti kept herself from begging the woman to stay. Less violence usually happened in front of homely nursemaids. Or so she’d heard.

“Oh. Yes, of course. Yes, thank you, my Lord. Thank you, yes.” Molly bustled out, followed by a shaky Xavier, who closed and guarded the door behind her, his knees bent. She hadn’t noticed him climbing off the floor.

Shanti backed up two steps so she could see the whole room now that Xavier had switched positions. Her feet stepped on the rug, dragging her focus down to the floor. The thing was incredibly ugly, but so *soft*. It was

luxurious. Her feet sang as they sank in, and then tried to go to sleep. Her lids got heavy in commiseration.

“Is there a reason you retain her shoes, Cadet?” the Captain asked Xavier, interrupting her rug analysis.

“She handed them to me, sir. She didn’t like their height.”

“I see. Cadet Rachie, take the shoes away and come back with some slippers.”

“Yes, sir.” Rachie, a kid near the front, nearly fell over himself leaving.

The Captain moved around the desk with an easy glide, that fighting balance evident. He paused in front of the desk, three feet from Shanti. With such a long reach, she should’ve stepped back immediately, given herself room. But something else had caught her attention. His brain pattern was unlike anything she’d ever experienced.

Everyone had a certain essence, or energy, about them. That energy usually had a mood, which some people referred to as an aura. Often the aura would convey itself to the human brain via a hazy color, or sometimes with movement—bursting and lively on some, smooth and tranquil on others. That energy was usually a consistent hue, however, lightening and darkening with mood.

The Captain housed a vivid rainbow. A surging, swirling, spinning rainbow. Colors mixed and merged, dancing and playing, pounding from his body like its own life force. She’d never seen something so unique. Or beautiful.

Her eyes refocused. Reality seeped back in.

Without thought, she quickly yanked the metal contraption on her dress down the rest of the way and stepped out of her green death trap. If he planned to rush her, she could at least *try* to kill him before she passed out.

All the boys gasped.

“May I ask why you are shedding your clothes?” the Captain asked lightly, humor coloring his voice.

“You dress your women like cake with frosting. I didn’t want you to think I was offering myself for dessert.”

“You’re half starved. We’d go hungry. Not my type of fulfillment.”

“Offering me as a reward for good conduct is not farfetched.”

Colors stilled and darkened, eyebrows dipped low. “My men have an aversion to violence against women. Most of my people do, in fact. Violence

against the weaker sex is not tolerated. Punishment is fast and harsh.”

The weaker sex? Interesting philosophy.

“That’s a luxury you may not always have,” Shanti stated in an indifferent tone, though she silently threw out a giant *thank you* to the Elders for their care.

“How do you mean?” The Captain didn’t move, but suddenly he seemed to lounge where he stood. It irked her for some reason she couldn’t explain.

“War is not only fought by men.”

“My people limit the casualties of war to those on the battle field.”

“Spoken like a man who has only fought battles, instead of an actual war.”

Confusion replaced the scowl. “I see. And you know something of war?”

“I do.”

“You’ve seen it, perhaps? Are those weapons a husband’s? Or a brother’s?”

“No. And while we are on that fascinating subject, might I have them back?”

“And that ring? A lover?” he pushed.

“Let us cut a chase, as you said. I need that bag, and I would like to leave. A map and some provisions would be ideal, but I can do without.”

His eyes sparkled, as if she’d said something humorous. He didn’t address it, though, instead saying, “Is that right? And how will you survive in underwear with no food or water?”

“Do you call what I am wearing underwear? Absurd. It covers me more thoroughly than that green sack. Regardless, I smell wooded lands. Those are enough for me. Blindfold me to the exit, if that is your wish, then turn me loose. I have seen nothing of your city, nor do I care to. I thank you for what you have done for me, but would appreciate it if this is the end.”

The Captain’s eyes smiled even though his face remained passive. He crossed in front of her, just barely out of arm’s reach. He was trying to intimidate her. Annoyingly, it was working.

He walked straight toward the couch and sat down, making himself comfortable. The material looked soft and supple as it molded to his shapely backside. She longed to sit on it.

“We’re constantly at war with the Mugdock,” the Captain was saying.

“They’re picking fights more often lately. The way you were headed leads right into their many camps. They’re trying to block out the trade routes to the sea. The difference between them and us is that they won’t house you until you regain your strength. They’ll rape you until they grow tired of you, then they’ll kill you. Possibly with much pain.”

“Please don’t hold back for my sake,” Shanti said in dry tones.

“You’re not strong enough to go far. You’ll fall right into their hands, then I’ll have Sanders and a few of these boys trying to play hero. I can’t turn you loose, at least not if you’re going that way.”

“Ah yes, a mother. I had one of those, once. She was prettier, though. I don’t need another. Give me my things and let me go. Please. I can get through your enemies just fine.”

“So you are going that way, then. Toward the sea, hum?”

Shanti stared, ignoring his smug tone. She was getting tired and sloppy. She also wasn’t getting any closer to her things.

Actually...

She slid her foot across the floor toward the desk. No one moved to stop her. One more step. The boys, looking more like a flock of geese than fighters in a line, started to fidget, sensing a trap. So did she.

One more step. The Captain looked at her pleasantly, a small smile playing around his lips, dimples making tiny indentations in his cheeks. The Commanders made no movement at all. The boys leaned back, as if she was about to grab a snake.

She reached in.

It was like a handshake that got cut off midway. The two taller commanders stepped at her with swords drawn, lightning speed. The shorter commander fingered a knife, not bothering to crowd her. He was probably waiting to see if she got through the others, then he’d tackle her. The Captain was up with throwing knife in hand, poised to throw.

Great technique.

Her own reactions were slow and clumsy, her muscles confounded and screaming in protest. She clutched the hilt, she hefted it, couldn’t hold on, then threw it across the room with an uncoordinated jerk. It skidded against the baseboards near the feet of the boys. The young men scattered, throwing themselves out of the way, or diving behind the desk like idiots.

Two sword blades glinted at her throat, the hands holding them steady and confident. Their feet were shoulder width, ready to move and perfectly

balanced. The Captain, seeing she wasn't planning to rush to her death, sat down confidently and tucked his knife into his belt.

Two heads poked up from the side of the desk and Shanti resisted an urge to blind them with an ink bottle.

"I guess that answers the question of whether it's your sword," the Captain said in amusement.

Shanti ground her teeth in annoyance. Playing along would behoove her, but she hated his smug surety that women could not wield weapons.

She took a slow step toward him, feeling out the men holding the swords. The more organized commander relented slightly, pulling his sword away to match her advance. The other, the oldest of the army men, did not. Her skin kissed the metal. The metal bit back. A small pearl of blood welled up on the blade.

The boys hissed.

"Well, then. Point proven, it seems." Shanti stepped back. "If you ever go up against the Mardis, which are all women by the way, this man is the one for the front line." She jerked a thumb at the gray-templed commander.

And then something else surprised her. The other commander, the one who had pulled away, swung his sword forward again, his mind oozing mistrust and anger.

Another interesting reaction.

"Mardis? Is that your people?" the Captain asked lightly. A hard edge had infiltrated his eyes.

So they'd had a run-in with the Mardis. Not good.

"No. Sex slaves are not my thing. I prefer my men willing. Now, since I am obviously in over my head, I think I might just try out the couch?"

"Please." The Captain stood gracefully and gestured for her to sit opposite on the couch facing him.

Shanti crossed the room gratefully, swords falling away as the men stepped back. She surveyed her sword as she passed, making sure it didn't have any damage. Continuing on, she reached the couch and sank in, sighing gratefully as her body sank into the plush leather.

"Oh Elders, I thank you for this treat. What workmanship!" Shanti closed her eyes.

"You aren't worried about the blade?" the Captain lowered back down.

“It jumped boat. It can lie on the ground for a while. It needs to go over its life choices.”

“Jumped ship, yes, I see. Speaking of choices, we need to decide what to do with you. You’ll not be allowed weapons, nor to leave. Not until I have more information. These are difficult times. There are rumors of war and famine coming our way. I want to know what your involvement in that is.”

She had plenty of involvement in that. Thwarting the Being Supreme, running from him, planning to overthrow his tyranny with the help of a distant relation—yes, she had plenty. The Captain was right be worried about what was coming, but if he knew that the girl he was helping would bring the Graygual to his doorstep immediately, bringing the war with them, he’d probably kill her immediately. She couldn’t say she would blame him, either, were she in his place.

She said, “I am but a trader who lost her comrades, now just trying to make my way to distant relations.”

Suspicious blue eyes delved into her with a corresponding brush against her mind. He might not be trained, but he’d learned enough to be of value. What a sneaky bastard. One day soon she hoped to give him a rude awaking. In the meantime, she let him read emotions that gave her credibility. He snatched what she purposely offered, intensity stealing his features as he analyzed information not even remotely true.

“I see,” he said softly, probing her more readily. Getting greedy.

She closed up shop, blocking him with a well-constructed shield. “I can’t do much like I am, so I have no choice but to play nice until I’m strong enough to be outside of your control.”

“I’ll be keeping an eye on you. You best stay out of trouble. You’ll also be expected to earn your keep. What are you good at?”

Killing people. “Hunting.”

“Hunting?” The Captain looked at her quizzically. “I don’t want you outside the city walls. It isn’t safe. What else?”

Training. Leading a nation. Fighting. “Uh…”

“Do you bake?”

Shanti started laughing.

“Can you wash clothes?”

“Not if you want them clean.”

“Needle point?”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s making designs in fabric.” The Captain glanced around for a display.

“With needles?”

“Yes, needles. And colored thread.”

“That sounds like a huge waste of time. How about skin animals?”

Shanti tried. “Although you might have a different way since my people cannot make leather such as this. I would love to learn, of course.”

“Making leather like that is a well-kept secret. We will try needlepoint. Keep you out of trouble.” With finality the Captain stood up.

“To insure my cooperation, I ask that you take care of my weapons,” she said softly.

He didn’t even balk. “Of course.”

“And that you return my ring. It was my father’s. It’s important to me.”

The Captain’s eyes lost their accusation. “Are the weapons his as well?”

“No. Just the ring.” She might be genuine, but she still wasn’t about to reveal her journey.

After a moment of delimitation, he nodded. “To insure your cooperation.”

It was then that Rachie came running in, panting. He held up a pair of slippers. They weren’t much more than a couple scraps of fabric. Shiny, pink fabric at that. Were earth colors so out of the norm in his city?

“Chaylene had a pair that should fit her,” he blurted. “Unless her feet are boats.”

The Captain nodded and left out the back way, Commander Sanders and the older fellow following him.

The remaining Commander studied her with a blank, flat stare. “Please dress and follow me.”

Shanti glanced at the catastrophe of fashion. “Is that mandatory?”

Silence. Apparently it was.

She shrugged into the uncomfortable material and had Marc zip the back. She then followed the Commander toward the door. Once there, he stopped and faced her. “Xavier, she is your ward now until she leaves this city. Captain’s orders. Keep tabs on her from here on out. You can take her to Commander Sanders in the small practice yard; he will be putting her up. The rest of you, escort her to the small practice field, where you will then fall in to

your training. Dismissed.”

The Commander strode away, gliding like a swordsman. The rest of the boys stood around on the foot path, gawking. If they’d ever held a sword in their lives, Shanti would’ve been shocked. Xavier stepped up next to her and started walking. She did, too, noticing that Marc was directly behind.

“So you boys found me, is that right?” Shanti asked pleasantly, noticing all the women bustling by in giant, bright, ridiculous dresses. They looked leisurely and plump, not having a care, or apparently a task, to burden them. This must be a rich sector of the city.

“I did,” a drooling boy with staring eyes said.

“And you are?”

“Gracas, sir.”

“She’s a girl!” Rachie muttered.

“Ma’am,” Gracas amended.

“I am not a lady and I am not of your city. I have experience with commands and fighting. Sir is fine.”

“See?” It sounded like Gracas elbowed Rachie.

“I was there, too, Miss!” Someone yelled from the back.

It occurred to her that these boys were following her in a loose horde, Xavier doing nothing to put them in order. Irritated, Shanti stopped. She was already different—if a rag-tag crew followed her around, everyone would notice her every move. That was not acceptable.

She turned to face the boys. Then waited until they all looked at her.

“You are all Cadets, is that right?”

Nods all around.

“You nod to mothers, fathers, sisters, and aunts. You nod to neighbors and friends. You do not nod to a commanding officer, or so I have noticed. If you are asked a question, you answer with a vocal response. Is that clear?”

She got a “Yes, ma-sir”; one “Yes, sir”; one “Yes, com”, which was hopefully slang or the speaker was just plain stupid; and one nod. Marc was the one who nodded. He got punched in the throat. Xavier tried to intercede and got punched in the kidney. Everyone else got one quirked eyebrow. It was a dare. No one rose to the bait.

It was testimony to how naïve these boys were in the ways of fighting that her poor excuse for strikes dropped them to the ground. It was also testimony to how weak they thought women that *these* men were sent to guard her.

“You follow directions or you get people killed,” Shanti continued, noticing the boys gingerly stepping away from Marc moaning and writhing on the ground. “If you are too stupid to follow directions, you will get really, really tough, because I will beat the... I need a slang word for poop.”

“Kaa-kaa,” one of the boys volunteered.

He got elbowed. “What are we, five?” The boy turned to Shanti.

“Shit.”

“Thank you, Rachie. I will beat the shit out of you. Now, Marc, are you recovered?”

She got a nod as he climbed, painfully, to his feet.

“Marc is about to demonstrate how to get tough really quick.” She spun, sweeping the legs out from under him. He fell directly on his butt bone in the middle of the foot path. It looked like it hurt. Her stagger wasn’t much better. “Please note that Xavier is smart. He didn’t try to help that time. Silently give Xavier praise.”

“Good on ya!” Rachie congratulated, stepping forward to pat Xavier on the back.

Shanti stepped forward to meet Rachie and punched him in the solar plexus. She didn’t have much sauce behind the punch, not having much more stamina in her body, but Rachie fell like a lead weight in a barrel of water. It was hilarious, and to celebrate, Shanti held her stomach and started laughing.

“You boys are a bunch of funny men.” Shanti started walking.

Thanks to the Captain, and her state, she had nothing to do but get better. She was bored already. She might just have to make a project of these boys—turn them into something worth talking to before she moved on.

“Clowns. Ah, sir,” Xavier commented, catching up immediately.

“Clowns, fine. Can anyone tell me why Rachie just got punched?”

“He was supposed to be silent.”

“Good, Cadet. What is your name?”

“Leilius? Sire.”

“Are you unsure of your own name, Cadet? And I am not a king.”

Leilius flinched, realized he wasn’t going to get hurt right then, then said, “Leilius. Sir.”

“Good. Come along you lot. And stay in pairs. You look like shit after someone ate beans. I will need more swear words, too; I love the startled faces when I use them.”

Thankfully the walk to meet Commander Sanders was short, allowing

Shanti to appear confident and unaffected the whole way. As they neared the large square of lush, freshly trimmed grass, Commander Sanders cut off his hand-to-hand combat training and approached them like a man would a raging bonfire if he was covered in flammable liquid.

“Boys, get geared up,” Sanders barked in greeting.

Shanti heard a “Yes, sir”, one “Yes, Chief”, and a “M’Kay.” She was able to kick one of the silent boys in the leg, taking him down, but had to settle for a rock for the other. She got him right in the back of the head. She’d always been an excellent shot.

Sanders had her by the upper arm before she could blink. He was fast and in control. The grip was gentle but firm.

The Captain had definitely chosen his Commanders well. Interesting.

“If I were you,” Shanti groused in clipped tones, eyeing each of the young boys, “I would not stare when a commanding officer takes a lesser in hand. I would move about my business, or prepare for another lesson in how to get tough really quick.”

They all gave a quick “Yes, sir” and scurried away. Granted, it looked like ants after a boot, but at least they got the vocalization down.

Sanders’ hand tentatively left her arm.

“I apologize, Commander.” Shanti turned toward him, surprised his height was barely above her own, especially when the rest of the men in this land seemed abnormally large. “They are a lump of coal that needs a flame. I could not have them embarrassing me. This dress is enough.”

Sanders just stared.

“I have been told you have a place for me to go?” she continued. “Hopefully it is not to needlepoint.”

It was to needlepoint.

Chapter 8

“Junice, I am aware the Captain requires me to master this accursed discipline, but I simply do not understand it. I am not an artist. My thread pictures look like rainbow vomit. I’m not useful.”

Shanti put down her needlepoint paraphernalia and leaned against the solid wood chair.

She’d been in Sanders’ house, much to Sanders’ continual frustration, for two weeks. It had been long enough to ascertain that she did not belong in a domestic setting for any longer than a night at a time. And while she had put on substantial weight in the short time, she was grossly lacking in muscle coordination and mental warfare. Worse still, without access to move freely and train unobstructed, she was forced to linger, the world growing older, the Graygual moving closer. The sun was drifting toward the horizon of her duty; she had to move on, but to do that, she had to get well.

“Patience, you’ll get it,” Junice said with a sweet smile.

Junice was Sanders’ adorable young wife, only married a month or so, and in charge of their quaint (by their standards) three bedroom house. The woman had a quick tongue and was completely besotted with Sanders, first name Avery. He was apparently a big teddy bear, which was some kind of stuffed mammal. Others, however, thought he was just the bear part, which was some sort of large, lumbering beast.

“Would you like to help me make bread?” Junice paused as she took a bag of flour from a shelf.

“No. Do you need your knives sharpened again? Or polished?”

Junice just smiled. Shanti had done it three times in two weeks. They were razor sharp and gleaming.

“I do not understand the fascination the Captain has with needlepoint.” Shanti rested her head on her fist and staring out the window at the distant treetops. The forest called to her. Beckoned. She wasn’t strong enough to get away from her honor guard--the group of bumbling boys that followed her around everywhere—in time to climb the twenty-foot wall and jump over. The boys usually caught her halfway up and dragged her back

down. Xavier had a long reach. And an irritating smile.

“I think it isn’t that he wants you to learn it, so much as he wants you better.”

“I do not think he cares of my health. He wants my story. Punishment, then? Is that what he is after?”

Junice *tsk’d* at her. “The Captain isn’t vindictive.”

Junice didn’t know the Captain very well. Neither did Shanti, which she was thankful for. The man was a meddling jerk. She left the house for a walk, and someone showed up to tell her to go home and work on needlepoint. She opened the window for some air and to stare out at the trees, and someone wandered by with the needlepoint message. She even got interrupted while getting Junice water, of all things. She was helping, yet still the fascination with a trivial waste of time and materials.

She’d settled for drawing an explicit gesture on a piece of cloth and sending it to his house via messenger. She received the piece of cloth back with a message to try again, only this time, sew the gesture in needlepoint.

It wasn’t that he had no sense of humor, as she originally thought. He just told rotten jokes.

“What’s really bothering you?” Junice asked as she stirred a mixture of food items in a bowl.

“Besides that frustrating man who gives obtuse orders via messenger?” Junice nodded into her glaring eyes. “I’d like to wander in the wood. It’s been some time since I’ve been able to relax and shut off. It’d greatly help my recovery, but I’m sworn to stay inside city limits. Not that that would normally stop me, but I’m too weak to figure a way out.”

“Is that all?” Junice shook her head and put down her bowl. “You should learn to talk more, rather than just listen. C’mere, let me show you.”

“What?” Shanti blinked as Junice dragged her up by her arm.

“We have a fabulous wooded park here. Since I’m not your jailer, and you won’t be outside of the city, I think we’re within the rules.” Junice’s eyes sparkled. “Anyway, there aren’t any structures for children or meeting places, which means it isn’t used very often, but that might be just what you need!”

Shanti followed Junice with roving eyes, taking in the sights and sounds of the sleepy city. Swept footpaths and gleaming houses spoke of the overall pride these people had in their dwellings. Those passing by had a smile and a nod for Junice, pleasantly trying their best not to gawk at the strange woman beside her. From Shanti’s observation, there were no poor

people. Those ‘less fortunate’, as Junice would say, could claim the comforts Molly displayed —things Shanti would call luxury. This city was extremely rich, and what’s more, not afraid to spread that wealth around.

She could’ve landed in worse places.

They took a path around some of the largest, most ornate houses Shanti had seen thus far. Well-tended vegetation and large yards sprawled around each two-story house. Small wooden fences sectioned off each residence, declaring the land as owned.

“Kind of selfish, not to share the soft grass with your townspeople,” Shanti muttered.

As they toured around the last house in the row, the crisp smell of nature welcomed Shanti in. Lush green took over the landscape; old and thriving trees grew unhindered. Wild and alive, the natural replenishment a forest could offer Shanti’s *Gift* softly caressed her senses, smiling and gesturing her forward.

“How did I not know this was here?” Shanti asked in a breathy whisper, staring into the deep, lush world of green.

“It is behind that square piece of development. City councilors get the perk of looking at trees instead of other houses or the wall. They treat it as their own backyard, but it’s actually available to everyone. It prevents hikers from having to venture outside the walls if they don’t want to. And lately, with all the Mugdock activity, nobody in their right mind wants to.”

Shanti bowed to Junice. “Thank you, this is exactly what I needed.”

Junice patted her on the back. “Just come back when you’re done. I don’t want the Captain angry that you were left unattended...”

“The secret is safe with me,” Shanti said easily.

Junice smiled and wandered away, trusting Shanti to stick to her word.

As Shanti watched the woman leave, a gush of warmth filled her chest. Junice had been nothing but kind and patient, nurturing Shanti back to health while chatting with her like a friend. The woman had opened her home to a complete stranger, proving herself trusting and kind. And she wasn’t the only one who cared.

Molly had popped by a few times as Shanti regained her health, checking up on her, chatting. Even the Captain—whose name Molly had said was Cayan—sent messengers to get updates on her health, and let her know he was available if she needed anything. He hadn’t badgered her about her

origins or her business. He hadn't bullied or pushed. And he hadn't given her a jailer, as Junice had said. This city was filled with good-natured people, and despite Shanti's attempts to the opposite, she couldn't help feeling attached to its charms.

Hating the guilt that settled in her chest because of the danger she was to these people just by being in their city, Shanti meandered between two large trunks, purposely not using the dirt path off to the right. The fresh smell of the forest greeted her, sweet and alive, singing in her blood. Closing her eyes, she kept walking, opening her mind, allowing the life around her to bolster her strength, seep into her *Gift*. This was the wood she'd needed two weeks ago. The surge of life-force that could quickly replenish what she'd diminished along her route. It would speed health, cutting her time of recovery in half.

Wandering in deep, she found a Grandfather tree that had grown large and strong through generations. She laid her palm on the coarse bark in greeting before sinking to its base. Closing her eyes, she let her mind expand and drift. Reaching. Remembering.

"Look at me."

Shanti opened her eyes, feeling the rough bark on her bare back. She felt his hand in hers, and looked into him with eyes and mind. Felt him. Was at one with him. His eyes were the color of the rich, fertile earth. His breath was sweet. He was love in a handsome smile.

"You are beautiful."

The birds sang their joyful song high overhead. She looked into the eyes of the person she trusted more than any other she had ever known.

"Beauty means nothing."

"It does when it is your soul. And you are beautiful. To me."

Shanti felt a smile bud.

"Your grandfather asked that I stay away from you," he continued, his eyes sad.

"He can't control me, so he is trying to control you."

"Yes. I have not given him an answer either way. I thought I would ask you."

"You know my answer."

“Your answer is based on your feelings. For me. Not those of your people. Our people. You need to lead them. I am not even a fighter. I am a caregiver. I can offer you nothing.”

Shanti felt his feathery soft hair. “You can offer me yourself. And that is all I will take. Everything else is provided for me. Someone will need to care for the children.”

“I give you less of a chance to have any.”

Shanti shrugged. “You are the Empath. You care more about that than I do. I want you.”

Shining brown eyes closed just before his lips touched hers. She deepened the contact, and let him in. With his type of Gift he could only sense her, but with how much love she felt, it was more than enough. For the first time, she let him in, mind as well as body. Her Grandfather’s meddling be blasted.

With a tear rolling down her cheek, Shanti felt the mind coming, interrupting a sweet memory of times lost.

Treading on silent footfalls, he worked his way through birds and other small critters without raising any kind of alarm. The ability bespoke an experienced and accomplished tracker, not to mention someone well versed in sneaking up on people. As he was trying to do now, she had a feeling.

That swirling mind path made its way to within ten feet, without sound, and stopped. He hunkered down, intent and focused, watching. As the minutes ticked away, and the soothing forest air brushed Shanti’s face, that swirling rainbow started to calm. Started to decelerate until it wasn’t much more than a floating wave of colors. It seemed his *Gift* worked like hers, sucking in the life-force around them to replenish itself. To strengthen.

He had the Old Blood, obviously. It was getting harder and harder to deny that fact. And yet, she hoped beyond anything that she was wrong. That he was some other anomaly that could remain untouched by the Graygual advancement. She’d seen how smoothly his city ran—even through her jail cell of needlepoint. His people were happy, everyone was fed, and no one wanted for anything necessary to life. Yesterday, when she snuck out to the yard to capture some sun on her face, she noticed him striding down the street away from her location, four advisors keeping pace. He’d noticed a child in a

yard he was passing and stopped almost immediately, turned toward the yard, and helped the child rescue a ball from a roof. It had taken him half an hour. He'd had to scale a tree and leap onto the roof. He'd turned himself from an enemy jailer into a human leader. To someone with the same trials and tribulations she herself had had.

He'd become a life Shanti couldn't, in good conscience, take away.

But if he *was* the same as her, with his *Gift*, it was only a matter of time before the greed and filth that was the Graygual-way corrupted him, either by turning him to their cause, or debasing him and breeding him out. If he *could* further the war effort, he would become enemy number one—with or without the will to do so. And for that reason, he would have to die. It was just one more part of her duty that would scar her for life.

And how many were there besides him? It was too big of a coincidence she would stumble upon the path of the only other. There had to be more. And if so, was the Being Supreme aware?

A shot of adrenaline pierced her. What if the Being Supreme had others? What if those others were being trained? What if the Graygual were making headway on their arsenal of minds?

“Are you okay?”

Shanti was up and moving before the sentence finished, startled into action. She lashed out with a foot, hammering it into his hip joint. She met hard muscle. She rammed her fist into his solar plexus, this time with much more force. His breath gushed out, but a quick step to the side had him ready for the next attack, then defending, as she swiped a foot through the air, aimed at his head. He batted her away, always on the move.

Shanti pummeled her fists into his gut, meeting more hard muscle. Yanking his wrist down with one hand, she jolted his elbow with the other. He flung her off, making her stumble before regaining her balance. She shoved her fingers toward his eyes. Near miss. Her foot at the ready, she swung, and met solid back. A leg sweep, which he jumped over, landing perfectly on the balls of his feet, quick and agile. And much stronger.

She was already panting. Her body was screaming. Her speed was half-mast. Her mind wasn't even that far along.

He wasn't attacking. He was taking the easy hits and dodging the damaging ones. Placating.

Well that was a little embarrassing.

With a grimace of defeat, Shanti halted her advance.

The Captain stood immobile as she wound down, waiting to see if she would throw another hit. She didn't bother. Even with a sword she couldn't defeat him. Not in mind or body. Not yet.

It had been two weeks and she was barely farther along. No more stalling.

She sank to the ground, breathing heavy, the weight that had settled onto her chest making it hard to draw breath. He sat down beside her quietly.

"You can fight." It was that deep gravel that gave her shivers, currently subdued. He let the hush of their surroundings filter into his tone.

"Sorry. You startled me."

"Sanders said you had muscle tone fit for a soldier, and calluses to match."

"He's correct. Although I'm a long way from fit. Too far. I haven't been healing in the right ways—something this wood will hopefully rectify."

"Those weapons are yours."

She nodded her head slightly.

"I figured it when I measured the leg harness—it's too small for a man."

She nodded again.

"Is it blood sport? Is that why you fight? Are you running from the people that make you do it? I can help you. Protect you. We do not tolerate that sort of violence here."

A pang of longing stabbed her. If only he could protect her. If only it was something as small as a domineering mate or an imprisoning culture. She sighed, blinking tears from her eyes. "It is not sport. I train, I fight, I kill if necessary. Like you. I am not running from whatever it is you imagine. I am not preyed upon because of my sex. I was not a slave and I was never mated. Nor raped. I intend to keep it that way."

He nodded quietly, clearly out of his element regarding what sort of women fought when they didn't have to. Letting it go, he murmured, "Fair enough. But you're far from home. Are you home sick? Do you need money to get somewhere? Include me on your plans and I can help."

She laughed sardonically. "Homesick, yes. Every moment of my life, waking or otherwise. Do I need money? No, thank you. There's nothing to go back to."

"So you're running, then?"

"For now, yes. For good, no."

The rainbow looked like it was caught in a whirlpool. “Are you giving me vague answers on purpose?”

“Are you purposely asking questions in my time of vulnerability for a better chance of getting answers?”

“I don’t like to see a woman alone without resources, or vulnerable, if I can help her.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

The Captain paused. Then snorted and looked out at the trees.

“Exactly,” Shanti whispered.

“You’ve picked up our language quickly,” he began again. He bent his knee and looped a large arm over it.

“I already knew it, as you remember.”

“Your accent is much improved, your word choices are intelligent, and your swear words are...colorful.”

It was Shanti’s turn to snort. “Set young boys to match my steps and I get the choicest cuts of colorful language.”

“Sanders said he hasn’t seen you since you went to stay with him.”

Shanti picked up a blade of grass. The filtered sun highlighted it in splotches as she twirled it in her fingers. “You’re trying to punish him for some reason, while getting someone capable to keep an eye on me. He’s trying to live his life. I’m allowing him to do that. He needs to feel free to talk to his mate. He needs license to have loud, obnoxious sex. Why he doesn’t is beyond me, but it is not my fault.”

“Maybe he’s waiting for an invitation for two women at once...”

Shanti smiled, grateful that the Captain was trying to lighten the mood. “Maybe, but I’d rather not get drugged, then murdered in my sleep by Junice.”

The Captain laughed. It was a deep, peaceful sound, light and pleasant. It tickled her stomach pleasantly, reminding her of pleasures lost. Then he sobered, the dimples stored away, too serious too soon. This man didn’t live much. He worked, he bore the responsibility of a large city with a lot of trade and goods, and he let himself be ruled by his job as he ruled those under him. Shanti pitied him slightly. It wasn’t a great way to live a life.

The Captain backed his rump up and settled against the tree at Shanti’s back. “I hear you’re abusing my Cadets.”

“Teaching, not abusing.”

“Kicking them for not vocalizing an affirmation is abusive.”

Shanti snorted. She'd done worse than that on occasion. "And if you truly believed that, you would not hold your position for long. I was treated much worse when I was learning. I had harsher rules. And look, I'm fine. It made me a more disciplined fighter."

"Boys step out of line as a matter of principle. They're wilder than girls. They break the rules to test boundaries. I don't punish as much as you might think."

Shanti threw down the grass. "Boys might be wilder most times, but there are always exceptions. You're speaking to one."

"I see," he said with an amused tone.

"Marc is bright but painfully shy. *Painfully* shy. Getting kicked in the head helps him realize that merely getting *looked at* isn't so scary."

"Xavier is budding. He is starting to lead."

"That wasn't my doing."

"It was, in a round-about sort of way. He's responding, growing into a fighter with your methods. Rachie, Gracas, even Leilius, they are responding."

Shanti shrugged. "They just needed structure and a little attention."

"Sanders nearly choked on your cookies."

Shanti couldn't help but laugh. "Now I understand the swirling mind colors. You have so much going on in your thoughts at any one time, one wonders what will pop out of your mouth." She got a look of charmed confusion. She might as well have been speaking in her own language. "Um...cookies, oh yes. I warned you, as you recall. Fighting, hunting, shooting—they are all I know."

"I see. And have you made any progress with your needlepoint?"

Shanti stood, sensing more male minds coming her way. The Captain followed her lead. If he was surprised she knew they were coming, he didn't show it.

"You've been in here for some time," he said, sobering once more. "We thought you might try to make a run for it. Your honor guard is finally showing up."

Shanti turned to him and looked up. The man was massive, but there wasn't an ounce of fat on him. It was an unpleasant reminder to the challenge he would present to her fitness level. "How did you find me? If they're just now showing up..."

He winked. "That's why I get called Lord. I'm the best."

She sniffed. “How do you carry that ego around? Does it not get tedious?”

The Captain smiled, his dimples making deep divots in his cheeks. With a glance in the direction of the oncoming kids, he nodded once and walked away, the opposite direction as the clambering honor guard.

She shook her head, then donned a wicked smile.

Now to scare the honor guard.

Chapter 9

The end of the next couple weeks saw Shanti back to nearly full health and desperately working on full strength. She went through her fighting styles, one at a time, until she was shaking and sweaty. Then she did the same with her mental conditioning, nearly blacking out twice. She had been taking to the trees, always practicing there at night, giving Sanders and Mrs. Sanders some time to play tootsie.

Shanti's honor guard was now an Honor Guard. It was a real title. And it was real irritating. The Captain in all his misplaced wisdom decided he was tired of punishing the boys for obeying her and not their immediate officers, so he assigned them to her for safe keeping. He also wanted to punish her with a bunch of ridiculous little kids following her around, constantly getting in the way and tripping each other up. Plus, he said, she needed protection.

Shanti had asked Sanders for clarification, making sure "protection" didn't actually mean *surveillance*. She was told that technically, no, but in this case, probably.

Being that she didn't have a real job, and only needed half the day to work on her strength and endurance, especially with no weapons, she decided she might as well make a game of it. She started leading a merry chase around the city, much to the Honor Guard's chagrin, only to pop out from behind a corner when they least expected it. They never thought it was as funny as she did.

This was all exasperating for the *beloved* Captain, of course. He had informed her, through the proper channels, that she was to stay in Sanders' house unless chaperoned. She was to behave like a lady. She was to keep quiet and stop bothering him with her blatant disregard of authority.

Being that excrement flowed downhill, the chain of command was nothing more than a poop-chute; the lowest member having to walk around with shit on his face. She relayed this fact to anyone with the Captain's agenda on his or her lips.

The next message tumbling down the chain of command was simply,

“Be nice.”

It was one blissful afternoon where not being *nice* was the name of the game. Having thrown off her persistent Honor Guard for the moment, Shanti walked into the training grounds, the location of which she was absolutely not supposed to know. It was a large open area nestled in the middle of a copse of trees at the extreme southern end of the city. The outside wall was easily visible, with no cover or branches close enough that a person could climb up and hop over. She never bothered to point out that the wall was made of rough stone with large masonry cracks; climbing wasn't difficult.

She'd already proven that assessment. And gotten her Honor Guard in trouble for not having the man-rocks to climb up after her and pull her back down.

Shanti spotted Sanders immediately. He stood in the middle of a group of men around Shanti's age, showing some sort of knife throw. It was a move only large, strong men could do with other large, strong men, because it was clunky and easy to slip out of if you were in any way nimble.

The far corner had a wall set up with targets. Men of all ages loitered around, throwing knives like they might throw a ball. While most had great aim, they applied terrible technique. Such an easy thing to master, and yet it was an anomaly on these training grounds. Ridiculous.

“Can I help you?”

Shanti turned to a man in his early thirties with a dirty, sweat-stained shirt and loose pants. His honeyed skin provided a natural block against the intense heat. His face was broad but features delicate, barely on the masculine side of pretty. His eyes, though...

Shanti felt a pang of longing as she gazed into those eyes. Warm brown, like the earth, almost exactly the same color and shape as Romie's had been.

Shanti smiled, her stomach fluttering. Remembering. “Oh no, you and yours are providing plenty of distraction, thank you.”

“I don't believe you're supposed to be here.” His beautiful eyes started to twinkle. She wanted to fall in immediately and never come out.

“Actually, Commander Sanders gave me these knives.” Shanti produced the stolen blades from the belt of her stolen pants. “He said I should try to throw them.”

The man laughed, a pleasing sound that tickled her below her stolen

belt line. “I doubt that.”

“Are you calling your commanding officer a liar?” Her voice took on a sharp edge. If he didn’t go for that, she had a strictly feminine purr at the ready. She had about fifteen more minutes before her Honor Guard found her, and less than that before Sanders did. She wanted to throw her knives and make all the boys squeal.

But then, she also had a half a mind to make this boy squeal.
Decisions.

His eyes rounded and he shook his head. “No, ma’am. Let me take you to Commander Sanders.”

“I see him. Why don’t you take me to the Pit instead? He said he’d meet me there...”

Knowing what they called the area to throw knives obviously gave her credibility. As they headed over, thankfully not in clear view of Sanders, Shanti said, “So what is your name?”

“Jerrol, ma’am. And you are the foreign woman.”

“Shanti, yes. Tell me, Jerrol, does your city have a ban on pre-mating intercourse?”

“Mating?”

“Um...you know...” Shanti searched for the word, “what you call wife and husband?”

“Married, you mean. Uh...” With an embarrassed smile he looked around, trying to make sure no one overheard their conversation. Talking about sex was apparently restricted. Pity.

“Lovers are taboo in this culture, then, is that correct?” she pushed.

“Lovers?”

She wasn’t making him squeal so much as squeak.

It was just her luck that she landed, half dead, into a prudish culture where women wore entire rolls of fabric on their person, each gender was afraid of seeing the other naked, sex was quiet of all things, and only the men protected their people. She couldn’t have been more out of place if she’d dreamed up a joke for herself.

“Forget I said anything. Until the ban ceases, of course.”

They arrived at the Pit, Jerrol now walking slightly closer than he had before their conversation. Shanti watched the proceedings for a scant two seconds before a lifetime of duty and leadership had her marching over to a man her senior by probably ten years. His form was decent, but it only

needed a slight tweak to be much more effective.

“What is your rank, soldier?” she asked gruffly, emulating Sanders. It made her feel stupid, not speaking to him like a human being, but it was the way they did things here. These men liked to keep things in routine. Much like toddlers.

The man hesitated. He knew he was talking to a woman, knew he should escort her out of harm’s way, but probably figured he’d get a thump for it. He was right on two counts.

“Staff Officer...” he responded.

“Name?”

“Derek.”

“Staff Officer Derek, you are holding that knife all kinds of wrong. Here let me...”

“*WHAT IS SHE DOING IN THE PIT?*”

Alas, Sanders was more observant than she had given him credit for.

The man in front of her tried not to shrivel out of the way. He was the only one.

Shanti turned to face the oncoming rage of the most vicious man in their military—if the rumors were to be believed. She was rather curious what he would do. Then bored, because instead of kicking her in the head, he immediately reached for her arm to drag her away. She evaded easily.

“Temper, temper,” she taunted with a playful smirk. “Everyone will think you don’t have a sense of humor.”

“What are you doing in my clothes?” Sanders barked. “And where is your protection? *And-why-are-you-in-the-middle-of-fifty-dangerous-men-who-are-half-mad-with-adrenaline?* Do you have a death wish? Or do you want me killed, because if the Captain found out you were here I would be cleaning the *latrines!*”

“Shoot. My Honor Guard arrives.” Xavier was running at her in a full sprint. “I’ll leave you to it. But first...”

She grabbed Derek’s knife by the blade, spun, and threw with barely a glance at the target. It was easy and effortless and her aim was true. There was a resounded *thunk* as the knife hit the middle of the bull’s-eye.

Thank the grace of the Elders! Muscle memory was a wonderful thing. She would have made a real ass of herself if she’d missed.

She walked away to an entire training ground of dead silence. That was, until Rachie showed up.

“Oh thank fuck, we found her! I thought for sure she was hiding in the men’s bathroom again!”

As she let them lead her away, Sanders frothing in her wake, she said, “Fuck? It seems you’ve been tight-lipped about a very important swear word. Explain.”

Chapter 10

Sanders walked into the Captain's office with a brisk pace and lead in his chest. The Captain sat behind his desk, completely composed, but a man just never knew where they stood when called out of the blue. His punishment was nearly up, so that was probably it, but he hadn't kept a very close eye on his charge, so he could be getting reamed out for that.

Or possibly his men were the problem. They wouldn't stop trying to intercept the foreigner and engage her in some way. Half of them already proposed. They loved hearing the ways they were rebuked. A bunch of young, horny fools was what they were.

Then there were her band of boys. They'd do whatever she said over whatever anyone else said, no matter if Sanders slapped them around or not. It was her way or silence. He didn't know how she did it, but it was making a right mess of things in the practice yard.

Especially since they were starting to use a strange fighting style. And winning.

"Captain, you wanted to see me?" Sanders asked, coming to stand in front of the desk.

Eerie blue eyes looked up from crisp white papers. The Captain's shoulder length hair was back, tied at the nape of his neck. It meant he had battle in mind, which had Sanders immediately on point.

"Mugdock are gathering en masse," the Captain started, sticking Sanders with those eyes and drilling him into the floor. "Something is brewing, but right now they have no clear target in mind. At least, they don't seem to. They're huddled outside of our lands, but not heading to our farming areas or mining operations. I'm debating sending a large party to break them up."

Break them up was code for *kill them all*. Only way to do it with the Mugdock. "Is it just that one group?"

"So far, yes. It is probably half of their battalion. I have scouts looking for the other half."

"Do you think they intend to raid?"

The Captain leaned back and closed his eyes. “I don’t know. It is fierce bad timing. I have a delegation coming through day after tomorrow to meet me and the council. They want to open trade lines between here and farther east. In addition, I planned on asking them about our foreigner. I don’t want to advertise our problems with the Mugdock.”

“Think they’ll know of one stray female traveler?”

Sanders wasn’t trying to be funny, or even grouchy, so he had no idea why the captain, eyes still closed, had a smile creeping up his face. Possibly laughing at a joke he’d told silently to himself. Possibly the young bugger was going mad. And if he *was* going mad, Sanders wasn’t planning on telling anybody because then it would be his problem. To that end, he stood right where he was, not daring to utter a single sound.

The Captain finally said, “She’s eclectic. I wouldn’t be surprised if they did.”

Eclectic wouldn’t have been Sanders’ word of choice. More along the lines of royal pain in the ass. “Should I send a party to disband the Mugdock?”

The Captain went reflective, then shook his head. “No, not yet. That’ll cause a grotesque scene. Get men ready, though. If anything happens, I want our reaction swift and complete.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I hear the girl made her way to the Pit?”

Sanders’s balls tightened up. He knew that tone. “She escaped her Honor Guard, sir.”

The Captain’s eyes, made of steel, honed in on Sanders. The air pressurized, causing fear to creep through Sanders’ now hollow veins.

The rough voice was quiet as it said, “You will take her in hand, Commander. Put an experienced man on her. If she so much as sneezes, I want to know about it. There is more to that woman than mere traveling. Ordinary people don’t have swords like that. She’s hiding something, and I will not let my people come to harm due to ignorance.”

“Yes, sir.”

“How is it going with you and Junice?”

“Wh—fine, sir. Thank you for your concern.”

“The foreign girl isn’t coming between you? There isn’t jealousy there?”

Sanders’ eyes widened momentarily. “No, sir. Not that I am aware.

The girl—Shanti leaves every evening to the park—followed by members of her Guard. She comes back just after our bedtime. I rarely see her.”

“I see. I’m thinking of moving her location. Junice has developed a sort of loyalty to her. I would rather not have you compromised.”

The Captain was losing faith in Sanders’ ability to follow orders. It stung. Sanders had always been a career man, loyal to a fault. This foreign woman was starting to be a cancer to his life, disruptive in every way. And it was true—Junice was constantly singing her praises, though the foreign woman did nothing to help around the house.

Sanders nodded grudgingly.

“I’ll arrange the move tomorrow at noon,” the Captain said with finality. “Get her that experienced guard, and let him know that if he starts to feel even the smallest bit of loyalty toward her, he will be answering directly to me.”

“How long do you plan to keep her here?”

The Captain glanced up at his timepiece and looked back down at his papers. “Until she tells me who she is, and how I can help or hinder her progress, depending on her story.”

Oh good, the Captain was in a pissing contest with a strange girl from God-knew-where. Madness. Definitely madness setting in.

Sanders turned on his heel and headed out without another word.

Chapter 11

“They are coming.”

Shanti looked around, confused.

Where was she?

In the wood. Not her home wood, though. Not the wood—

“Chosen, they are coming. We must get ready.”

Shanti turned to the man on her left. Tall, strong, and steady, he was safety with a staff. He would protect her at all costs. He had absolutely no equal, save herself. But he had not heard how many came their way. Their best strategic minds, their best planners, and the best ground moving crew they had, would not stop the horde coming. They were but one nation, fighting many. She was on the losing end of a blood bath, and she knew it. All the Head Staff did.

With the confidence born of her role, and the loyalty born of inspiring and leading by example, Shanti followed her Chance to the lookout cusp. She was the Chosen. She needed to survive this day. She needed to distract this horde long enough to get an already selected group of their people to a safe location. There they would remain until Shanti came back with her people’s long separated blood relations. She would reunite the tribes, declaring war on the nation threatening to bend the knee of the entire land.

“They are coming,” he said again.

As they moved into position, it echoed.

They are coming...

In a cold sweat, Shanti sat straight up in bed, her hair plastered to the side of her head. She’d had that nightmare a great many times since it had been a reality, but never had it stopped before blood was spilt. Never had she woken up with that lingering warning.

She registered the still night. The calm of the wood, so close, breathed

fresh air through her cracked window. As the breeze tickled her face, drying her sweat, a force tickled her barriers, asking to be let in.

Memories of her youth assaulted her. Screaming. A child tottering down the lane covered in blood ...

Flashes of imagery wrestled with her self-control. Doused her in fear. Dragged her under the surface of panic.

She scrambled up and raced into Sanders' room, desperately trying to get ahold of herself. Something was coming, and she was as vulnerable as a child without her weapons.

"Sanders!" she bellowed, then braced for defense. You never surprised fighting men out of a dead sleep unless you were prepared, or did not value your life. Thankfully his reaction was to jump onto the bed, and crouch over his wife with short-sword in hand. His teeth were bared, his muscles taxed.

"Something is coming!" Shanti whispered fiercely.

Sanders was down off the bed and in her face surprisingly quickly. "What do you mean? What is? How do you know?"

"Someone... I don't know. I don't know what it is, Sanders, I am a foreigner here. Something bad is focused this way. Someone with malice. Someone filthy—a lot of someone's, actually."

Sanders relaxed slightly. "You had a dream, Shanti. Go to bed."

"What's going on?" Junice said with a thick voice. She sat up slowly, eyes puffy with sleep. "Avery, is that a sword? *What's going on?*"

"Sanders, I need my weapons. *Now*," Shanti exclaimed. "I will not face whatever is coming without my sword."

"Nothing is coming..." Sanders' voice dropped an octave. "Why are you so sure something is coming?"

"I *feel* it, Sanders. Now, as I stand here, I feel it. *FLAK!*" Shanti shook her head impatiently. This was getting her nowhere. Sanders didn't trust her, he couldn't sense what she could, and he was too stubborn to listen to reason. She needed her Honor Guard.

She made it one step before she felt his intention. She whirled to her right, narrowly missing Sanders' grab.

"Don't do this, Sanders. We are not having this fight right here."

He repositioned himself in front of the door. "You are not leaving this house, Shanti. I don't like the way you're talking. The Captain is right; there is something off with you."

“The Captain thinks there is something off with me, does he?” She huffed, glancing at the window. She was faster than him—she didn’t need to go through if she could go around. “Doesn’t like looking in a mirror, perhaps? Doesn’t matter. I am not going to stay in this town and get killed.”

He lunged for her with his empty hand, his sword brought wide and out of the way. Mistrust was one thing, but killing another. Sanders was not about to kill a woman. Great news.

Shanti peeled to the side while grabbing his wrist and tugging, knocking him off balance. She pummeled two punches to his small ribs, gave a chop to his inner leg near his balls, and then stepped back. He gave one hobble before pausing, his brain distracted by that kick near his vulnerable area. She used it to give him a hard kick to his kidney, hoping he’d go down.

He didn’t. He staggered, his eyes flaring with battle rage. It was about to get interesting.

He punched, fast as lightning, ready to tackle her to the ground after the punch landed. It didn’t.

She wiped his hand away, pivoted, and kicked him in the face. Her foot slapped off his chin. His head whipped back, his body staggering with it.

Junice started screaming.

Shanti braced for a follow-up kick to Sanders, trying to finally down the stubborn jackass, when her eyes caught movement to the side. Something was barreling toward her.

Not something, *someone*.

It was a tall man with shoulders getting bigger by the minute. The impact knocked the breath out of her. They tumbled to the ground, rolling to a stop against the bed frame. Junice’s screams intensified.

Shanti used her legs to buck him off, hopping up while he tried to get his limbs organized. She threw another kick at Sanders, to keep him put, before spinning back toward Sanders’ hero. He was up now, too, his reaction time as quick as Sanders’, unfortunately. Barely swiveling, she threw an elbow into his face. He staggered backward, his leg catching on the dresser and sending him to his butt.

The hero was scrambling up yet again, bloody determined. So was Sanders.

These guys were starting to get on her nerves. They took a helluva beating and kept on coming.

Shanti threw a roundhouse kick, knocked Sanders back onto furniture,

and turned to the attacking hero. She met him head on, barreling punches into his chest and stomach, then swiping his eyes and getting him in position for a mighty throw. When he responded, she grabbed, pivoted, turned, and used his momentum to throw his body over her shoulder, straight through the window. Breaking glass competed with Junice's shrieks.

Shanti was out after him the next second, feeling Sanders' fingers slip along her sweaty leg.

She had to get out of town. This little stunt just cemented that fact. Soon this city would be asking questions to the wrong people, and the Graygual would swoop down after her.

Unfortunately, the time had also come to fulfill her duty. She couldn't leave another person with the *Gift* for the Graygual to claim. It was a situation of sacrificing one to save many. It had to be done.

With a heavy heart, she took off at a sprint, heading toward the closest member of the Honor Guard, which was Xavier. The members of her Guard were the only ones in this city who would not only believe her, but help without comment. She ducked through the unlocked door and quietly jogged through the house, having a rough idea of which bedroom was his since he pointed it out every time they passed the house.

Stepping into, what she hoped was, the right room, she heard the loud snoring of what could only be him. He had one sister—younger women just didn't get the same volume as a man in the snoring department. Half falling over the many pieces of debris that littered the floor, she reached his bedside. She gave him a little shove and paused, waiting to see if he would spring. He wasn't battle trained, so he probably didn't have those reactions yet, so she wasn't surprised when he only mildly startled.

"Shanti?" Xavier asked in that supreme confusion one gets when waking up out of a deep sleep.

"Yes. I need to know where my weapons are. I am not asking you to fetch them, but I need to know where they are."

"The Captain has them. Are you naked? Oh—" Xavier was suddenly wide awake.

"Yes, yes, breasts, I know." She had briefs on, but still didn't understand the philosophy of the nightgown. "Anyway, where does the Captain live? Or where does he have them?"

Something new wavered into her awareness. It was violent. The expectation was growing. It was becoming thick now. She could almost see

it, red and orange filaments sifting through the dark room. Those gathered were preparing for battle, working themselves into a fever pitch. She'd felt it before.

A constricting panic started to wrap itself around her midsection. Flashbacks of Chase's mother, of the dark streets flicking in firelight, houses on fire, children screaming, people running naked and bloody through the streets--

"Xavier, get up. *Now!* Get up. Something is coming. Something is happening! Get dressed! Warn people! Where is the most secure location in the city?"

"Wha—"

"Answer me!"

"The town bunker."

"Get your family there. The children. Your friends. Everyone that can't fight. Get them there. *Hurry!*"

"Okay. The Captain is in the heart of the city. Big mansion. You hid in the rafters once then dropped down on Leilius."

"Get them to safety."

"Wait, clothes!"

And shoes. She'd need shoes.

In a moment Shanti had slipped into some garments Xavier wore under his clothes when it got cold. Unlike on him, they were anything but tight. She was given his sister's leather shoes, which were slightly too small, but supple. They would do. She took his throwing knives just in case, since he wasn't excellent with them anyway, and was gone, sprinting across the city, yelling as she went. She wanted to warn as many people as possible—or at least wake them up.

When she reached the Captain's house she shook the door and found it locked. She climbed up a beam and launched herself onto the first floor roof. Like a burglar, she ran across to the first open window she saw and burst through. A large bedroom swept out around her with two candles flickering on a bedside table. Two nude figures writhed on the bed, limbs tangled, skin on skin. A soft, feminine moan drifted toward the window.

Oops.

"I need my weap—"

She barely hit the ground in time. A knife twanged as it lodged in the wall behind her.

“I need my weapons,” she said again, breathless, rising slowly with her hands in the air. The man had good reactions.

The Captain was standing beside the huge bed, a sword in one hand, a knife in the other. If she took one step, he would rush forward to meet her, slicing her neck-to-navel in a matter of seconds. Standing with perfect technique, he was powerful and nude, gleaming with sweat and sex. His muscles were substantial and cut and heavenly and it was definitely not the time to notice any of this.

Her mind shuddered to a start as her groin throbbed. “Something is coming. Open up and *feel* Cayan. Open your mind to it. *Hurry!* I will not be dying tonight. I am not the enemy!”

His confusion at her having said his real name, something very few actually used, turned instantly to rage. “What the fuck are you doing in my house in men’s underwear?”

His power surged, but it was all outbound—he wasn’t being receptive with it. He probably didn’t even know how. Which meant he was basically as blind as Sanders, but a much better, more thorough fighter.

She should just mentally kill him now. She was back to nearly 100% strength--there wasn’t much he’d be able to do to stop her. Then, a quick look through the house, and she’d have what she needed. She could dodge the coming horde and be well on her way by dawn.

She looked at the girl in the bed, a beauty by anyone’s standards, and what Xavier would call a knockout in this land. The woman was halfway between fear and outrage. But she was also vulnerable and innocent. And if Shanti killed the Captain of these people, they’d all be plunged into vulnerable and innocent—he was the glue to this town. He was the rock of leadership that kept them functioning like a machine.

If she killed one, she’d also kill a great many. Just her luck.

“Get to safety,” Shanti snapped at the girl. “Get your family to safety. The bunker.”

“What are you talking about?” the Captain snarled. He stepped to her in a rush of movement and grabbed her arm—the men in this city were very fond of that hold. A surge of pure electricity surged into her body, searing her. No pain rode the current.

Shanti hesitated, ignoring the fizz of her body. She needed him to use his *Gift* so he would believe her. Precious minutes were wasting away—he needed to organize getting people to safety. But teaching even barely enough

to sense the coming horde was that much farther on the “I’m super powerful” wagon. It’d make it that much harder to take him out when she finally did.

But *not* teaching him would get people killed, one of those possibly herself. And all her people with her.

Swearing under her breath, Shanti slapped a palm to his chest, the vibe now pulsing between them. Humming. Not pleasure, not sex (mostly), but something else. Something powerful she’d never experienced. Something to do with her *Gift*.

He flinched, his eyes burning, a wrinkle forming in his brow.

Taking a deep breath, forcing the panic down, Shanti focused on the connection. She had trained many, and worked with even more to a common goal, but she’d never dealt this closely with so much power. He was a thick well of it, swirling and pooling within him, crouching and ready to blast out.

Feeling his slick, defined pec warm under her palm, seeing his pupils dilate as he looked down on her, she was acutely aware that he was naked and she was nearly so. He was still hard, his length extending the distance between them and lightly touching her belly with its girth. Her whole focus trained on him, on his heat, on his unique mind, currently swirling and shifting, reaching out to her mental touch even as his phallus was reaching out to her body.

She delicately touched his mind, aiming for an extremely shallow connection. With any hope she could guide without teaching—she didn’t need to make their future battle any harder. She was a fool.

Having unconsciously figured out a rough control over his power, he felt the connection and yanked on it, sucking her in and clamping down. He probably didn’t even know what he was bloody doing, but his trap was still just as effective.

Weightless, she fell in head first, feeling a rush she’d never experienced. The ground dropped away and her stomach fluttered, the solidity under her palm the only thing she could focus on. It was too much. Too much power swirling around them, making her dizzy. And then he mimicked her, tracing her mental path back to the source and weaving in, much deeper and more consuming than he should’ve been able to.

“Stop—“ she gritted her teeth, trying to block him out.

Feeling followed him in. Pushed at her, bombarded her.

“No—“ She tried to wrench away. Tried to control the connection. Tried to *run* if she could. But his complex feelings were so crystal clear she

could almost read his mind. And she didn't want to!

She didn't want to know that he was concerned she had a troubled past, or his admiration for how she handled herself in spite of it. She didn't care that he approved of her training and thought she was a caring person underneath her rough handling of the boys. And she *certainly* didn't want to know how ardently he missed his mother and father, or the solitary confinement in which he lived his life. She would have to kill him when this was all over, and she would rather see him as the asshole Captain with a misguided agenda than a real person with all the vulnerabilities and genuine distresses of a moral leader with a lot of responsibility.

Why was nothing ever easy?

What she did latch onto was his absolute conviction that in his presence, she would be safe. That his people would be safe. He would lay down his life to ensure his city would live, and he had enough assurance in himself and his abilities to safeguard that it was true. It wasn't, of course—she'd seen enough to know that the Graygual army would steamroll this place, but she approved of his mentality.

As if she needed more complications.

And just as fast, everything leveled out. The rush of the stars and the swoon of power balanced, letting her float. With him. Together they were cocooned in a flux of power so intense, she had no idea what to think about it.

“*Feel it, Cayan,*” she instructed quietly, putting her other hand on his bare chest, trying to find solid ground. He didn't flinch from her this time. “Do you *see*? All the intentions, the brain paths—all that mental energy; it is coming here. Do you feel how filthy it is? It is hell-bent on destruction. It is foreign to me—I have never felt this specific kind of filth before, but it is badness. Can you feel it? Who is it?”

His head dipped to hers, his eyes delving. “What are you?” His voice held awe tinged with fear. Beneath that, though, in the deep timber of his voice, it almost sounded like he'd found an answer to a question that had been bothering him.

“I am your mirror. You have this power in you. Your eyes are glowing, just like mine. But...your wife does not understand.” She removed one of her hands reluctantly, hating to leave this power. The feeling.

The Captain was looking at her with more fear than awe, now. He was reaching on his own. He was laying his own net over hers as it blanketed the

land. He was consciously *searching* for the first time in his life, and it scared him.

She knew how he felt, in theory, but it had been so long she could barely remember. Plus, their situations had been slightly different. Hopefully they would continue to be.

“I need my weapons.” Shanti stepped away. She rubbed her palm on her pants, trying to wipe a weird hum.

“Mugdock,” the Captain said softly, understanding. He was a fast learner, which was usually a good thing. Not great in their future circumstances, however.

“Tania.” He turned to the young woman. “Get to your family—get them to safety. Give the message to everyone you see. The alarm will sound shortly. Shanti,” he rounded on her, eyes alive, still glowing. He looked at her, then *into* her. He was now *seeing* properly for the first time. Brushing her mind with purpose instead of with unconsciously learned habit.

His eyes refocused and he shook his head to clear it. “You won’t leave.” It wasn’t a question. He wanted to ascertain if what he *saw* was correct.

And it was. It was also the third irritating discovery she’d had in this man’s presence, because she couldn’t leave a city to get slaughtered. It wasn’t in her nature.

“No. And right now, you need to protect your people, and I need to know the weakest point of entry.”

“Your weapons are in the throne room on the shelves next to the armor. There are battle garments there as well—“ He broke off, his eyes losing focus.

Sanders had arrived at the front door in much the same mood she left him. The Captain was a *very* fast learner...

“He’s...in a rage, by the way,” Shanti qualified. She had a feeling that, where Sanders was concerned, a head’s-up was always prudent. She didn’t plan to say why. The fun was in the surprise.

The Captain looked down into Shanti’s eyes for a brief moment of stillness, sharing an open moment before she closed up shop. A glimmer taking over his eyes, he was action again, darting away, heading for the stairs.

Shanti rushed after him—apparently she was expected to know which room was the throne room...

Chapter 12

Sanders banged on the door for the second time. He didn't give a damn what he was interrupting, there was a security breach and that woman had to be squared away.

The door sucked in air as it opened, the Captain's eyes were on fire, his hair tied, and his sword at the ready.

"It's the wom—" Sanders started.

"They're here," the Captain cut him off. "Sound the alarm. They will be attacking within the hour. I want to be ready for them."

"How do you—you're not believing *her* are you? How would—"

The Captain took one measured step outward and *leaned*. Sanders couldn't help the uncomfortable tightening in his gut at the size and power pushed up into his space. But he had a reason for being pissed, damn it! A solid reason. That woman had to be taken down a peg.

Sanders let his rage push away his anxiety, desperately trying to ignore the commanding stare shocking into his body. He would have his say!

But as he opened his mouth to speak the air condensed around him. A blast of solid air rammed his chest and chattered his teeth. The dominance in that blue stare had warning tingles running up his spine and turning his stomach to gravy.

Unable to hold it, Sanders had no choice but to drop his gaze. The girl wasn't worth having his skin peeled off.

"Call the Commanders," the Captain said in an authoritative voice. "Meet in my office. Get a guard on Shanti. I don't want her near that fight."

"Not gonna happen," Shanti tittered as she flitted out of the house with excited eyes hovering over a smile. "Sorry about your face, Sanders, and you, Sanders' hero."

"Lucius will guard you," the Captain said to the girl, apparently not planning to wait for Sanders to arrange it. "He's fast and able. He'll keep you out of trouble."

Shanti turned to a quiet Lucius and smiled at him pleasantly. She could smile all she liked, if Lucius was anything like Sanders, he wouldn't

fall for it. Because like Sanders, he, too, had just gotten beat up by a girl. It wasn't something a guy forgave all that easily. Or ever.

“Sanders’ hero—Lucius? Hello. So you are my Chance? You will be guarding my back?”

Lucius nodded with one black eye. She nodded once, staring back, before her eyes started to glow faintly. Even as Sanders’ mouth dropped open, Lucius stood up straighter.

How did glowing eyes not freak the guy out?

“That gives them the courage of a lion,” Shanti said to the Captain. “They will not balk, they will not be impeded by fear for themselves or family, and they will prosper because of it. Give that *Gift* to your Commanders if they go into battle...if you can remember how.”

She met the Captain’s gaze for a long moment, her jaw clenched.

“Thank you,” the Captain said. “For the warning. For...” The Captain let the word trail away as he stared at the foreign woman with a lightly puzzled expression.

Sanders barely had time to wonder what was going on before she broke the gaze and took off down the street. Lucius sprinted after her a moment later.

“What the fuck just happened, Sir?” Sanders couldn’t help but blurt. “Glowing eyes, stare-offs. She’s a menace, and something is definitely off—“

The Captain shot Sanders a hard look. A *shut up or I’ll make you shut up* kind of look. He turned back into the house. “Get ready. They are coming. And it’s going to be a bloody battle.”

A shock of apprehension coursed through Sanders. He had to make sure Junice got to safety! They were coming!

Chapter 13

Her Guard was huddled at a familiar copse of trees when Shanti tracked them down. They waited impatiently, mostly afraid and all apprehensive. Shanti approached at a fast walk, the thrill of the coming battle simmering her blood. “Are all your families to safety?”

“Yes, sir,” they responded.

“Good.” She looked them over, most with bent backs and large eyes, their limbs shaking and their faces pale. They wanted to help, felt it was their duty, and knew, one and all, that she would find them. And they were right. She’d trained them enough to give Shanti confidence that they could each help in their own way. It was not only necessary for the city, but vital for their experience levels.

“Leilius, where are your knives?” she asked. Lucius stopped directly behind her.

“Right here, sir.” Leilius patted his belt as he gulped.

“The rest of you, where are your swords?”

All the men patted their weapon, eyes pleaded for courage.

Shanti didn’t ever remember being this young. This green.

But then, she hadn’t had that luxury.

Shanti felt the trees around them, felt the life calling through the forest. She looked at the boys, so ill prepared, about to get their first lesson in warfare. “That is your weapon. You are the only one to wield it. In your hand, that weapon will protect your family. It will protect your brothers and sisters. It will protect your men at arms. It will protect your way of life. It will find you glory, it will mean your survival.”

She filtered the life-force through herself, merged it with the hope of eternal salvation, mixed in confidence and power, and layered it over their minds. Their brains hummed with an elixir of eternal life. Their backs straightened, their eyes brightened, and the crippling fear each and every one of them felt burned away like kerosene.

Shanti nodded. “I will be protecting the most vital point. Is there a main gangway to this city that is often in danger of being overrun?”

“The Western Gate,” Lucius replied. “It’s the smallest, but the most vulnerable. It’ll let people through if any of them will.”

“That is where we will be,” she said to Lucius. He nodded.

She turned to the boys, just about to become men. “You will be playing your game hide-and-seek with the enemy. You will ferret around the city, silently, hiding in shadows. Finding stragglers that have made it in. You will kill them quickly and silently. You will not worry about blood, Gracas. You will not worry if you miss, Leilius. You will not worry about pain, Rachie, or letting your family down, Marc. You are faster, Xavier. You will stick something sharp in them, nod to a countryman that you just saved, and move on. If they have presented their backs to you, you stick them in that back. And you nod to your mother, who you just saved. We are not seeking the thrill of the hunt, men. Not the flash. We are getting quick and dirty and saving our family by the quickest means possible. There is no shame in killing. Yes?”

“Yes,” they said in union.

“Protect your family. Happy hunting.” Shanti turned and ran, Lucius by her side.

It wouldn’t be long now. Death was sprinting toward their doorstep. Shanti intended to be the one who answered the door.

Chapter 14

“Are the men stationed?” the Captain asked, looking at his three Commanders.

Sanders stood with beating heart and pumping blood

“They are ready and able, sir,” Sterling said.

“Is the entire horde accounted for?” the Captain asked, surveying the map of the city.

“Three-fourths are present.” Daniels scratched his graying head. “We have held this many before, under your father’s reign. But we had seen more battle then. We have quite a few green men right now. The Mugdock may get through, especially at the Western Gate. That will be a mess when they bring the gate down. And they will—it’s too weak to last long.”

The Captain gritted his teeth. It was no secret he had nearly fixed that problem, and they were just two weeks shy of switching the old gate for the reinforced new one—it was the final gate to be amended. He’d been held up because some people thought the town shouldn’t waste the expense when they were never attacked. And now look where they were.

“Are the women and children secured?” the Captain asked.

“Seventy percent secure. We are still getting them in,” Sterling answered.

“What of the gates?”

“Closed tight, men at the ready. We are prepared.”

“Our men are scared,” Sanders stated, standing with his hands behind his back. “Being out in the field is one thing, but here many fear for their families. It has been a long time since we’ve had a raid, but everyone hears stories. Or remembers a mother, or grandfather, who was taken or killed. They worry.”

The Captain nodded. “We will have to straighten their backbones by example. If we fight hard and tough, we’ll send the enemy running. The Mugdock have always been cowards first, soldiers second.”

“Yes, sir,” Sanders agreed.

“What of the girl—the foreign woman? I don’t want her taken. She

hasn't reported to the secure hold."

"I think she can take care of herself," Sanders mumbled, barely stopping himself from rubbing his ribs. He'd never seen someone fight like she had. She was small, but she kicked like a mule and punched like a pissed off bull. And she was damned fast. Probably faster than him, though he would never admit it out loud.

Sanders noticed the room condense around him and looked up into those perilous blue eyes. He probably shouldn't have said that.

"I'll look into it, sir," he amended crisply. He failed to add that he probably wouldn't find her even if he tried. Sanders had seen her work through her fighting styles. Then disappear right in front of her Honor Guard's eyes. If that girl wanted to leave, and good riddance if she did, then she'd kick Lucius' ass again and take off in the confusion. Sanders should be so lucky.

"Let's get into position," the Captain pronounced, returning his gaze to the map. "I will be overseeing the main gate on horseback. They put the most pressure on that gate. Sanders, you should traverse between trouble spots, lending help and fortifying weakness. Daniels, monitor within the city. Make sure the innocents are covered and any breaches are closed or I am notified. Sterling, you have the archers and throwers. Get to the wall and get in position. It will start soon."

All men answered in the affirmative and turned to leave.

"Wait."

Sanders turned back, wiping his mind clean and trying not to feel the small knot of worry at the base of his spine. Junice would be okay. Their unborn child would be okay. His family would survive this night, and if not in its entirety, at least she and his child—so new Junice wasn't even showing—would have a future.

The Captain was looking at them, focusing and frowning. His eyes barely glowed an eerie blue. Sanders couldn't help but lean in, half terrified, half in awe. They were like the girl's. His eyes were glowing like hers!

As Sanders stared, the knot of worry wringing his stomach lightened. Loosened. And then dissolved, the worry floating away. Before he could blink in confusion, the rush of determination stole his breath. Strength, power, accuracy—he would win this fight. He was one of the best in this city, and he would show it. He almost smiled, light as air. He felt ten years younger, transported back to the days when he didn't have a worry in the

world!

The Captain blew out a breath, nodded, and turned. He walked out of the room with a brisk pace. Sanders turned to the others.

Daniels had a slightly confused look, his back completely straight, his brown eyes calculating. "I feel..." The words trailed away.

"Like winning. Let's go," Sanders said into the din. The others wasted no time.

It was time to rid the world of some filthy Mugdock!

Chapter 15

Malice slammed against her shield in steady pulses, the effect of a mass of people with the same thoughts and motives. Adrenaline pumped through her body, revving her up. Getting her ready. It was a matter of minutes, now. They were coming. Moving as a huge horde toward this city.

Wasting no time, Shanti marched up to a group of armed and waiting men and took stock of what she was working with. The sturdy twenty-foot-high stone wall ended in a wood gate. The beams and work were well done, sturdy. The problem was the small metal bar that acted as the latch, three inches tall and one inch thick. It stood at her shoulder level and would not stand a chance against a battering ram. What's worse, that ram would burst the gates inward, probably ripping them off their hinges and crushing everyone on the other side.

Who was the fool that designed this gate? He was about as inept as the artists.

“Why hasn't this gate been altered?” Shanti asked Lucius, casting her glance at the men. They stood still, backs straight and ready to fight. But they worried. Apprehension and uncertainty shed from their bodies like sweat. In a normal battle, death was honor. You died to protect those you loved. Here, death might open a doorway to their loved ones. To their city. Their home.

Well now, she couldn't let that happen.

Shanti was marching to the front of the line as Lucius answered, “It's in progress, actually. The Mugdock has gotten more sophisticated lately. They have more than one battering ram. This is the last gate to be replaced. It's just not ready yet.”

Shanti glanced upwards to the archers flanking the top of the gate. The top of the wall was fashioned after a castle, providing cover for archers as they fired on those below. There was enough room for two men to walk abreast, the wall made sturdy and probably able to withstand a heavy attack. Which didn't mean anything at all when the gate was battered down.

Another push of violence slammed against her.

“They're coming. We haven't much time.” Shanti couldn't control the

fear in her voice. Images flashed through. Violence. Death.

The waiting was always the hardest part.

In the distance a hawk screeched, hunting through the night, descending on some unfortunate prey.

Shanti pushed through the last of the crowd toward the gate, noticing they gathered in a semi-circle, the more experienced knowing the gate would never hold. The anticipation of false safety acted like acid dribbling onto their nerves.

With a confident stride, she marched right up to the metal bar and slid it away. Turning back to the men, authority seeping into her bearing from more experience than anyone in this city, the Captain included, she stared down the men in front of her.

“Lucius, open the gate,” she commanded.

“Yes, sir.”

She wondered at him not asking why. Surely he’d think this was madness. He was trained to obey. Stupid. Battle was a place of madness; following without thought made men into animals. The lines of good and bad blurred, and if someone didn’t maintain the reins of logic, humanity wouldn’t find a way to creep back in. The good side would end up just as corrupt as the bad.

A conversation for another time.

As Lucius opened the door, a few male voices asked each other what he was doing. Two asked her right out.

The doors swung open, a gaping black hole at her back. Gazes stared past her, into the void. Wondering when it was coming. Fearing they wouldn’t be enough. That they couldn’t hold it.

“You will hold it,” she barked in a loud voice.

Gazes snapped to her.

Shanti addressed the group in a loud, clear voice. “Give me a nod if you understand why I have opened those gates.”

A couple heads bobbed within the cluster of men. Many more shifted their feet, uncomfortable. A couple voices muttered something about “foreign woman.” A couple others asked about her safety. One asked if the Captain knew she was here.

She wondered about that last question, too. He would shit himself, then probably strangle her, and not because she disobeyed his order to head to safety. If he found out she made a decision regarding the battle strategy

and didn't go through him first, he would flip.

"These gates will not hold. Those standing near the gates will get crushed. Those not crushed would then have to fight over them. It puts you at a disadvantage and only buys you a small amount of time to stand there and stew in your fear. I have removed the problem."

"But they'll have a clear shot of us now!" someone in the back yelled.

"They always had a clear shot of you, they just had to break the gate down to do it. The scant few your archers would have hit while the enemy worked would not be enough to outweigh fighting over obstacles as they rush you with the full advantage. Ask your war veterans."

There were nods and murmurs.

"Who's going to take on the attack, now?" someone shouted.

"Lucius, why are you guarding this bitch? What does she know?" someone else yelled.

They were getting angry. Their fear was boiling into rage and she was the catalyst. Good. Anger fueled courage. The presence was closer now. They were moving forward. Slowly, but it would speed up soon. She had to hurry.

"They are coming!" she yelled. She reached back and drew her sword with a smooth, practiced movement. The metal cleared the scabbard attached to her back, hungry for blood. The sword glinted in the torchlight, a long blade with a graceful arch. Holding it was like shaking the hand of an old friend. Silence descended. The hawk cried again somewhere in the battlefield.

"When they are in range," she continued, looking to the top of the walls, meeting the eyes of archers, "loose the arrows. Everyone else, stay as you are. I will be the knife that parts the fabric. I have the experience you lack. I have been training for this all my life. I have weapons you don't realize. I will act as their block, and you will kill anyone who makes it over. Are we understood?"

A horde of men stood and stared, no one even daring to shift on their feet.

She knew what they saw: she was a woman in pants with a sword. Foreign and small. She did not belong on their battlefield. She did not belong giving orders like she was born to the role. Her perfect stance, as if she were ready to start a ballet made no sense in their fighting history.

But they found themselves nodding anyway. They found themselves stealing their courage and saying, "Yes, sir" into her glowing violet eyes,

shining with the glory of battles won, and the pain and remembrance of battles lost. She knew her eyes were as old as the world, but burned with the fervor of youth. She'd traveled a great deal, and heard sweet words as well as curses. She knew who she was, and she was born for this role.

Light sprinkled through the trees as the sun climbed up past the horizon. A roar of male voices surged toward them. Metal clanged in the distance. Thunder rolled, feet and hooves stomping the dirt.

“It begins. They are dirty, useless filth! We will be victorious! Fill your lungs with this sweet air, men. Soon we will soak it with blood. Victory!”

The men raised their swords in the air, growling, shouting. Ready.

Shanti bowed slowly to what had just become her men. She turned to Lucius, “You can fall back with the others.”

“I am sworn to protect you. Since I have already failed in that, I will fight with you.”

Shanti laughed, a carefree sound filled with adrenaline and excitement. She was about to do what she did best. “Fair enough.”

Chapter 16

Shanti turned, seeing the distant sparkle of steel in the early morning sun. Without needing to look down, she repositioned her throwing knives, making a quick grab easier. She swung her sword in a figure eight, loosening her wrists. She bounced a few times on stiff knees, trying to get her body keyed up. Mentally, she was ready. Her net was out, sensing the minds running at her, bundles of rage and malicious intent. Most had a singular focus: *kill!*

The ground shook. Yelling from the men behind her curled around her ears. Leather creaked. Metal scraped.

Her mental net pulsed, fueled by a rush of adrenaline. She brushed the minds around her, connecting, like holding hands in a pray circle. “Archers, hit the outskirts of the horde!” she commanded. “Make them come at me single file if possible. Slim them down. Aim for the sides! They will not bother with the wall when the gate is open. They will slow themselves down, waiting like a bunch of washerwomen. Stick an arrow in their eye!”

The men at the wall roared.

“Lucius, are you ready?” she asked in a firm voice.

“More than ready, my Lady. Eager.”

“Good.”

The roar of battle rage filled the sky. Horses came first, harnessing a giant wooden rod between them, the ends of the beam covered with a layer of thick metal. Chains attached the pole to a harness draped over the horses’ backs. The metal on the front caught the early light, giving it an unearthly gleam.

It looked like the Mugdock attempt at a battering ram, with men following up behind to pull the large contraption, having to let it go to make it swing. It would take a concentrated effort and a lot of strength, but it would’ve worked. Luckily for Shanti, the strange design and homemade quality meant it would be easy to use against them.

The men behind her started to breathe heavily, adrenaline pumping

into their veins. Some growled. Some urged the enemy on. Others shifted in anxiety.

“Courage!” she shouted. “Hold your ground!”

She touched the dull mind of the horses, imaging the fresh smell of wolves wrapping around their flaring nostrils. As their eyes rolled, she gave them a *twist*. Horses weren't overly intelligent, and these in particular were malnourished and ill-treated, judging by the silver scars flashing in the dawn—a small discomfort would be enough to derail them entirely.

As expected they screamed and bucked, making the ram between them roll and buck. Metal squealed as riders fell, landing under thrashing animals. An unshod hoof came down with force, popping a skull beneath it. Blood splattered to the sides, splashing the legs of men running by.

A metallic pop sounded—the first broken chain. The freed horses reared again, hitting a man running too close. Another pop, then another. The heavy ram burst from its support and slammed to the ground, bouncing and rolling. The crowd pushed behind, trying to get around. The massive rolling log took out a line of bodies before settling into the blood-soaked dirt.

Shanti crouched, feeling the minds around her coil. Feeling the rage charging. Absorbing the violence. Giving her blade a comforting squeeze.

And they were on her, a tide of robust, pungent, screaming men.

A rusty blade wielded by a tree trunk arm swung through the air, slashing toward Shanti's face. She dodged and pivoted, bringing her blade through the middle of his chest. She whirled away, hitting the next with a downward swipe. She fainted to the side, narrowly missing a blade, and came back with her sword's answer, severing his head in a clean strike. On to the next. And the next. Her body was warming up, the familiar dance filling her with joy. Bodies were piling up around her, death hanging in the balance of her strikes and dodges. But they were many and she was one.

She danced closer to Lucius, who was felling as many as she. His style was vastly different, cleaving and hacking, blocking and stabbing, but just as effective. More bodies piled. A sword missed her head; an arm came in to punch.

She sliced the arm at the elbow and kicked out, hitting a mammoth of a man in the stomach. She snatched a knife from her belt, the man too close for a sword strike, and stabbed him in the eye. Blood sprayed across her face as she whirled away, not wanting to get caught in the flailing limbs. Hefting her knife into the air, she grabbed it by the blade, and threw. Blood

blossomed in the neck of a man running by.

All these warriors were head and shoulders taller than she was. They were the Captain's height at least, easily his brawn or bigger. Nowhere near as quick or agile, thank the Elders their sympathy.

An hour in and she was more than warmed up. She was starting to work now. Still smooth, still killing like a knife carving through cream, but hitting her peak. It was too early. She should not be so tired so early. There was still a horde at her gate, with a pile of bodies for them to clamber over, and there would be many more. Many, many more.

Dying in battle was an honorable death.

Chapter 17

BOOM!

The gate knocked inward. Dust sprayed the air. Wood creaked.

“It’s holding!” someone shouted.

And it would hold, Sanders reflected, walking along the trembling wall. A flash of sun on metal pierced his eye. The men held their breath as the giant metal fish came barreling forward.

BOOM!

Archers scattered their arrows into the amassed crowd of Mugdock, trying to throw up their ladders to climb over the wall. Not a chance—Sanders’ men were fast and good, taking down anyone who got close. Arms swung back, grabbed more arrows, and loosed. And again. Again.

BOOM!

“Courage, men! It will hold!” the Captain shouted somewhere among the men.

Ignoring the screaming of the night, Sanders walked away from the main gate, seeing to the men. The archers were going at full speed, shooting, loading, shooting, loading, someone bringing them more arrows. He gritted his teeth at the next crash of ram against the gate.

They had worried—this gate was untried. It was a new design and not up long. But it was holding. The Captain was right—this was an excellent use of resources. The main bulk of enemy worked away, trying to get through what had once been nothing more than a mild deterrent.

Thank God that had changed.

Sanders walked on. To the smallest entrance. The most vulnerable.

Had the enemy figured it out, yet? They were stupid, but even a dumb beast could get lucky.

Barely keeping his hands away from his sword, trying to portray steadfast confidence, Sanders walked on. The men were antsy and skittish, shifting constantly, trying to stay grim but waiting with barely suppressed trembles. They were green. Even the ones who had seen battle out in the

Dead Forest were nervous. They weren't good at playing defense and no amount of training could prepare them for the constant thumping of the giant Metal Fish against their gate. But their enemy wouldn't get through here...

He walked on. The first two, the Eastern Gate and Rear, were holding, but barely. The archers and knife throwers were doing their job, but the men standing by were getting ready to get their hands dirty. The Mugdock were getting just as scared, though. After close to two hours, seeing nothing but your own company's death, and only a few fallen enemy archers, the Mugdock were having second thoughts. The Captain hadn't thought they'd last this long. He had a suspicion something was driving them, but he didn't know what. Sanders did—poverty and desperation. It would bring a man to the brink.

On to the fourth and last gate. He was about to battle—they'd be about ready for reinforcements.

A horse clattered below, causing Sanders to glance down. Daniels raced by, urgency on his face. Sanders pulled his eyes back up. A thrill went through his body. He picked up the pace.

As he approached the corner he heard the roar of men in battle. Metal clanging, shouts. Excitement spiked his chest, tingling down his arms and out through his fingers. One of the boys bringing arrows startled from the gleam in his eye and the crazed grin on his face.

Battle. He was good at battle. Battle and sex, two places where he felt the most alive.

Sanders started to trot, unable to maintain his calm. The men at this gate were all his best. They were veterans, one and all—as much as they could be in a time of prosperity—and they had the best sword work. They would hold this gate. They had to. He had a wife and baby to protect.

Hopefully the Captain was working on getting more men to change out. Give these guys a rest.

As Sanders rounded the corner, sword in hand, he saw the last few lines of men standing, shifting uneasily from side to side, looking on, but not fighting. Waiting.

Sanders stepped around Jaos, unleashing arrows as fast as he could, and stopped dead. The gate was not torn down; it was pulled open. In the middle of the open space stood two figures, fighting for all they were worth, taking the brunt while the men behind them formed a semi-circle and took the rest. Both covered in blood, one with short, matted brown hair, the other with

a long braid down her back, red and white-blond.

Shanti and Lucius.

Sanders couldn't help but stare. He had seen Lucius fight. The man was damned good. Aside from the Captain, Sterling, and himself, Lucius ranked above all others. Sanders had thought it was a waste that he had been assigned to the foreign woman. Now he was more than thankful. Any other man would've been cut down by now, but Lucius was moving through a pile of bodies, creating more every second. He had a large red line down his arm and was limping slightly, but he was not slowing.

For all his excellence, he was outdone. Next to him was the foreign woman. Words could not describe how thoroughly Sanders had underestimated her. How they all had. She moved as if in some elaborate dance. Every nuance of her body was in perfect harmony as she glided through her fighting postures, slicing and cutting, weaving in and out. Even her sword was part of the dance, moving like an extension of her arm. She was breathtaking. And extremely deadly.

Her pile was larger than her male counterpart's. It was neater, too. One cut, maybe two, and they were brought down. Appendages sliced off, heads, limbs, incapacitated, then she moved on. Every so often she would throw a knife, hitting someone in their head, heart, or, most often, their neck.

He had never seen anything like it.

But she was flagging. She was barely staying ahead of her attackers. More were getting past her, quickly dying at the hands of the men fighting right behind her. She wouldn't last much longer, but there was no one who could keep the Mugdock off the gate like she was. There was still a horde trying to get through.

In the next instant Sanders was running, nearly falling down the steps. He barely paused to get a message carried to the Captain by the first man he ran into. Then he was running again, pushing people out of his way, trying to get to Shanti and Lucius.

As he ran through the waiting men, shifting their weight in antsy anticipation, they surged forward, wanting to be in the fight. Wanting to do what they could. Sanders led them like an arrow straight at the surging Mugdock. Without slowing, crazy-eyed with a fanatical smile, he slammed into a wall of them. He stabbed the first man through the stomach and pushed him out of the way, growling. He grabbed another with one hand and yanked him closer, sticking his sword through the swine's chest.

“Get in there and drag out that girl. Get the Lieutenant. Get them out!” Sanders hollered.

He cleared the shocked faces in front of him and launched himself at two more, both topping his size, and bigger around. He didn't care. He stabbed one through the eye. He pulled the other's hair and sliced his neck, hands everywhere. Battle rage taking over. The glory of battle!

He shoved forward, slicing and killing. Bashing and ripping off whatever he could get his hands on. Some rotten pig got too close, trying to grapple. Sword arm hanging uselessly at his side. Sanders threw him a head butt and the pig's nose cracked before Sanders' knife lodged in his face.

“Get in there!” Sanders hollered, trying to push forward. He could barely see Lucius, struggling against the tide. There were just so many. He'd barely be able to make it to Lucius.

“Someone help the girl!” Sanders screamed.

Chapter 18

Leilius waited behind the wall, deep in a pocket of shadow. The echoes of screaming, of men dying, rolled through the alley like tumbleweeds. He could almost see the blood splashing against the ground. His hands trembled as he held his knife, trying to block out the battle and focus on his circle. That's what Miss Shanti always said, right? Focus only on what he was doing. Focus on his circle.

A dribble of sweat quivered down his nose. He wiped it away silently, hearing the sound again.

He squeezed his eyes shut and remembered to breathe. He was always supposed to breathe. That's what Miss Shanti said. Breathe slowly. Deeply. He was doing that.

Why were his hands shaking so hard?

The scrape of a soft sole echoed against the walls, louder than someone screaming right next to his face. Louder than the banging of the battering ram. Louder than the gurgling death at the gates. The enemy was creeping toward the shadow, a quiet step at a time.

He was hiding in the shadow. Waiting. Knowing the enemy would stay to the dark places. That's what he always did when he got in trouble and was trying to hide—he knew where they'd go.

He wiped the sweat out of his eyes. His breath trembled like a leaf as it crept out of his mouth.

Another footfall. *So close.* A shoe scrape against the cobblestone. He wouldn't even hear the footfall if it hadn't been for Shanti. She always snuck around and hid from him—he hated when she scared him. It shocked his system when she jumped out of nowhere.

This was like that. Just like that. Except he had to jump out.

He wasn't afraid. He didn't know why, but he wasn't.

So why was he shaking?

Another step. Two more and Leilius would jump out and stab. He would do it. He had to. Shanti said so. For his family. To protect everyone.

He'd never killed anyone before.

Focus on the circle. Focus on what you can control, Leilius.

His breath thundered in his ears.

He closed his eyes, listening. His hand gripped the knife blade, the sweat from his palm soaking into the leather. A tear of sweat dripped down his face. A line of moisture soaked through the crease between his shoulder blades, down his back. Focus on the circle.

Another footfall.

Leilius burst out from behind the wall. With one hand he gripped a thin, brown shoulder. With the other hand he brought his knife down with all his might. Sharp, hard metal slid into a soft, wet eye socket. A strangled scream cut off at its zenith as the knife pierced the enemy's brain. Lights out.

Leilius stood trembling over the slight body crumpled at his feet. Adrenaline grabbed hold of all his organs and shook. But at least he was still alive. No one would have to know about that.

He stared down at what he'd done. Dazed. Two things flapped at his thoughts. The first was all the blood. There was so much. It was oozing in thick red rivers, leaking over the ruined eye socket and pooling in the cobblestone around the enemy's head. Gross and fascinated, Leilius stared, transfixed, until the second thing shoved in and demanded attention.

It wasn't a Mugdock. Thin, shorter than him, and wiry. The man looked like he had muscle, but it wasn't defined. He had a wicked sword, too. It was curved and very wide toward the end. The hilt had a weird yellow and gold rope hanging off of it. Plus, this man wasn't dirty. His brown jump suit was clean except for the blood and some light scrapes, probably from climbing the wall, and it was a little lighter than the normal Mugdock color.

He was an enemy, though.

Leilius quickly grabbed the hilt of his blade and yanked. He let out a formless "huh" sound at the suction of knife leaving eye socket. He wiped off the blade immediately.

Focus on the circle. Keep your family safe!

He would. He would make Shanti proud. Focus on the circle. Only what he could control.

Limbs quaking, stomach queasy, he drifted back into the shadows to wait.

Chapter 19

Shanti sucked air in, panting with fatigue. She'd heard Sanders yelling a while ago, his vicious body ripping and tearing his way out toward her, but he couldn't get far enough. She was cast off in a sea of filth, disgusting Mugdock creatures all around her. Even Lucius had been forced back, trying to stick with her, but under siege and unable to hold his ground.

She was actually happy. She was tired of this life, tired of overwhelming odds. She wanted to do her part and let the sea take her under, to die in battle, like her parents and grandparents. She would go down, but first she would take as many as she could.

Summoning all her remaining strength, Shanti cut off the connection with Lucius and her Honor Guard, hoping they wouldn't be overcome by the fear she was keeping hidden from their brains. She brought her mental net tight to her surroundings, then rezoned it out in front of her, aiming for the largest mass of enemy. There wasn't much she could do with those behind her—she was too tired to pick out individual mental paths. She might accidentally hit some of her own, and that would defeat the purpose.

She blocked a thrust headed toward her head, turned another to the side, and grabbed the two minds in front of her as if her hands were made from needles. Mugdock released their swords immediately and clutched nasty, matted hair. Dirty faces screamed in agony as they fell.

Now was the time.

She seized everyone in front of her, out for fifty spans, all those bundles of emotion and intent flashing in her mind's eye. She focused her power, called up her strength, pulled at the life-force in the surrounding wood, and *flashed*.

A huge jolt of power ripped from her, dropping her to her knees. Sinking into hundreds of minds. Boiling spires with searing edges. Burning out their minds.

The battlefield erupted in tortured screams. Swords dropped, falling into the mud with a soft thud. Dirty nails dug into temples, the pain unbearable. Consuming. And, finally, killing.

Shanti allowed a relieved smile as she fell, face first, into the bloody mud. It was finally over. This life filled with pain and loss could finally be forgotten.

She was pushed ahead of him, roughly. She didn't want to go. She couldn't. Her grandfather had been cut down ten feet from where she worked. Her Chance had felled the man, but there were more coming. Tens of hundreds of thousands running up the slope. They were beaten. She was beaten. They had lasted longer than expected, but the inevitable had come to pass. She had a destiny to fulfill.

"Go, Chosen. Go!"

She was pushed again, large hands steering her, forcing her to move away. Forcing her to retreat. Moving her to the path that would lead into the hills. She had her map and supplies hidden. She would start on her journey.

Chance pushed at her. Harder now. She stumbled through the narrow lane of her village, the place deserted. Everyone had been evacuated to either join the fight or get the children away. Some had to knowingly sacrifice themselves so that others might live.

Past the village they saw the first signs of struggle. Some of the enemy had snuck in the back, probably trying to ferret away anyone they could. The Graygual wanted specimens and promised a handsome payment for any living captures. They didn't care the sex or age; they wanted examples. They would pay more for young women, however. Women exactly Shanti's age and description. They wanted the woman that could kill from thirty paces away. They wanted her alive. They wanted to tame her. Then breed her. Then use her and her offspring as their ultimate weapon. The safe guard against the new empire.

Chance pushed her along until she was stumbling into the small clearing behind her village. Into the pleasant green meadow where she had gone often with Romie. Her first kiss had been next to that old shed. She had lost her virginity to him just under the tree at the edge. It had been the site of some of her best memories.

The breeze of the afternoon gently disturbed the green blades of grass. The flies disturbed the dead bodies.

Shanti hesitated with surprise at the sea of limbs piled together, sticking out at grotesque angles.

Chance shoved her forward, steered, and shoved again, working around the sightless eyes, the sagging faces. She felt like a wooden puppet held together with cable pulled too tight. Her legs and arms wouldn't work properly, her head bobbing animatedly on her wagging shoulders.

From a bloody patch of mud, brown eyes stared at her, rims outlined in blood. She staggered, a sob ripping from her throat.

They hadn't told her Romie was one of the Sacrificed. He hadn't told her. He'd said he would be safe! He would be there when she got back. He was going to look after the children, he said. He wasn't one of the best, but he was well liked. They had agreed to let him go.

She crumpled to her knees beside him, pawing at his blood stained chest. Strong hands grabbed her shoulders, trying to drag her away. Her cries reverberated across the dead meadow.

Romie had offered to die for their people. For her duty. For his own.

He was leaving her to a world devoid of his spirit. Of his earthen eyes. He had left her forever, and she had no choice but to continue. Now alone.

“You must go, Chosen. Go! Keep going!”

Chapter 20

Shanti opened her eyes in the dim light. Agony flared through her body.

Pain meant she wasn't dead. Now how did that happen?

She wiggled her toes. It felt like two might be broken. She moved her fingers. They worked just fine. Each knee lifted with incredible muscle pain, but nothing deeper. Arms the same. Ribs felt like someone was sitting on her chest. One or two were probably cracked. She'd gotten a good blow by a *fleking* colossal. She'd ensured he died slowly with a puncture to the stomach, but still, it hadn't been her finest moment.

She was in a sterile-looking room, all white except for the furniture, which was metal. So much metal. This place was so rich it was almost disgusting.

The door opened, revealing a tall man with a thin frame and thinner hair. He had a put-upon expression and a wooden board in his hand.

"Lovely to see you again, Doctor. To what do I owe the privilege?" Shanti asked in a strained voice, trying to ignore the throb of her ribs.

"Yes, it seems your wit is intact. Goodie." The doctor closed the door behind him, his face getting grimmer.

"How did I get here?"

The doctor pulled a chair from the corner and placed it at the middle of her bed. He sat slowly, crossed his ankle over his knee, and leaned back, thin slab of wood resting on his lap. "You were brought."

"Ah, this is a game, is it not? Twenty questions? Yes, Leilius loves this game. How is he, by the way? How are they all?"

The doctor surveyed her, his face impassive. "Alive. For now."

Shanti tried to sit up. Pain stabbed her midsection—definitely cracked ribs—but she pushed through it. The sheet dropped to her mid-section and she realized she was in one of those bloody nightgowns the doctor loved so much.

"What do you mean *for now*?"

"Ah, you see? It is rather irritating when someone doesn't adequately

answer another's questions, is it not?"

Shanti glared at him. She knew better than to open her *Gift*, though. After what she'd done, it would definitely hurt. She winced just thinking of it.

"Yes, painful, isn't it? Being wounded often has that effect. But what do I know; I'm just a doctor. And yes, we do have a school for that here."

"Are you going to tell me, or are you going to force me to beat it out of you?"

The doctor gave a loud sigh and looked at his small, rectangular board. "Cadet Leilius is in the mud tub, sitting up to his neck and tied that way, because he kicked Commander Sanders in the shin when he wasn't allowed in here to make sure you were okay. Gracas is right next to him because he tried to punch Commander Daniels for the same reason. He missed, of course. He now has a black eye. Xavier is carrying rocks from one side of the training yard to the other because he was able to successfully punch Sterling, who had barred his way. Let's see." The doctor consulted his board again. "Ah yes, young Marc suffered a stab wound to his leg, but he is mending nicely. Rachie got a rather serious wound down his chest. I have stitched him up, and he will heal in time. He will forever have a scar, but he informed me that women like men with scars, and was excited to test the theory just as soon as he is released."

Shanti took a minute to thank her Elders their care. She'd grown fond of those boys—she would hate to hear any harm had come to them. "Then what did you mean 'for now?'"

"The Captain hasn't gotten around to speaking with them about refusing his orders and following yours."

"Oh. Yeah, that probably pissed him in."

"I see you are working on your slang. How lovely. You aren't quite there yet, however."

"Lucius?" Shanti continued.

"Will have a great many women, if young Rachie is correct. He is alive, though. Sanders just barely got him out. He didn't want to leave you. Neither of them did. For some reason."

"Sanders pulled me out?"

The doctor gave her a flat, assessing stare for a moment. "Sanders couldn't reach you. He did try, but...." The doctor shrugged with one shoulder.

“Are you trying to teach me humility, doctor? Because the last person who tried was unconscious for twenty-four hours.”

“I don’t doubt that. The difference between me and that unfortunate fellow is that I know a lost cause when I see one.”

Shanti stared at him. She would get up and shake it out of him if she had to. Although, she really hoped she didn’t have to. It hurt just to sit up.

The doctor must have read her mind because a ghost of a smile flickered at his lips. Finally he answered. “The Captain pulled you out. He wasn’t too happy you weren’t in the secure hold.”

Shanti couldn’t help blurting, “The Captain did? Why?”

“That is a great question.”

“How did he get to me?”

“By doing what he does—charging in, taking what he wants, and charging back out leaving a trail of bodies behind him.”

So Cayan had gone after her. But why? Also, what an idiot! He was in charge of a whole city. Risking his life for a foreigner just to get the last laugh was just plain stupidity. And if she didn’t hurt so badly, she would go tell him.

The doctor still gazed at her with his unimpressed countenance. Shanti suspected he loved being put out just for something to make a show of. He said, “He is mending, too, in case you’re wondering. I noticed that you didn’t ask.”

No, she hadn’t. She didn’t want to hear how badly she owed him for her life. For giving her people another chance. It was a large pill to swallow.

The doctor continued in his dry voice. “He had cuts all up and down his left and right side. Gashes, fairly deep, in his back. Two bruised bones, but nothing was broken. Here’s a question for you: some of the recovered bodies, those that died at your feet and another, oh, sixty paces out or so, didn’t have a mark on them. They died in agony, that was clear, and most were clawing at their face, eyes or head—one had bloodied his ears—but none had an actual wound. Would you know anything about that?”

Uh oh. “You would know the bodies I killed—they had sword marks, or knives sticking out of them.”

“Yes. Excellent knife throwing. If what I hear is true, you made extremely hard shots and never missed. Impressive. I’ve always said, however, that women tend to have better aim, where men tend to throw harder. I enjoy being right. Regardless, that doesn’t answer my question.”

Shanti struggled for breath around her tight throat. She really wanted to lie back down—her ribs were killing her. “What were you doing wandering among dead bodies? Just what kind of a doctor are you? Should I be worried that you were planning to dress me, put makeup on me, and close me in a box?”

“Your evasive conversational techniques need work. However, I will answer, since it is still on track with my questioning. I was asked to survey a few bodies before they were incinerated. Some did not look like the Mugdock, and a great many had no obvious signs of death. Add that to a pair of glowing violet eyes and a fainting woman, and you have need of a doctor’s opinion.”

“And what is your expert diagnosis based on this folklore?”

“Well, that you are impossible to work with and the Captain will have to sort you out because I cannot.”

“Defeatist.” Shanti smirked.

“Yes, it would seem. Now, lie back, because I can see that you are suffering merely to prove a point—point proven, decidedly—and get some rest. You will need it when the Captain gets around to visiting. He is not as... patient as I.”

Shanti lay back with a grimace. It would hurt less to be dead.

As the doctor moved to leave, she thought back to what he said. Cayan would be bursting through in an awful temper any time, she had no doubt. The question was, why was she so apprehensive?

Chapter 21

“Sanders, with me.”

Sanders internally cringed. The hard gravel in that voice slid along his bones and pounded at his nerves. The Captain had not been in a great mood since he returned bloody and wild from the middle of a horde of Mugdock with a limp woman in his arms. Since then everyone had been afraid to be in his sights, especially his commanders.

It was three days after the battle. Daniels and Sterling were leaning against the wall in front of the pyre, watching as the last of the smoldering bodies were transferred into a huge pit.

“Yes, my liege,” Sanders said meekly, stepping in behind the long stride.

They walked back into the city where every person they met gave some signal of thanks to the Captain. Enlisted men gave a salute. Civilian men gave a nod so deep it was almost a bow. The civilian women looked at him with love-sick eyes.

The Captain was heading toward the hospital. *Oh no.*

Panic started to crawl up Sanders’ spine. He looked in earnest for an escape, for a reason he had to be somewhere else. He almost wished they were being attacked again. It was the last meeting in the world he wanted to attend. *Anyone* wanted to attend.

They walked in through the door. More nods. More smiles and sparkling eyes. More salutes. A few uncontrollable grunts that Sanders let slip. If these idle bodies loitering in the halls could read his mind, they would realize those low guttural noises he couldn’t help were actually calls for aid. Why was no one helping him? Did they not see where he was headed? And with whom?

Instead of turning right at the crossroads, though, they went straight ahead. Down a large white corridor. They were going to the badly injured ward.

Sanders gave a huge sigh of relief.

The Captain stopped in front of a closed door and paused. After a

deep breath Sanders probably wasn't supposed to notice, he knocked quietly before stepping inside. He motioned Sanders in after him.

Sanders stepped into the sterilized space and immediately winced. It was a well-known fact that fighting men of Sanders' caliber did not enjoy that overly clean lemon smell of the hospital ward. If you smelled it, you were either attending the sick or dying, or one of them. All bad things.

Lucius was in his bed lying flat on his back, no color in his face. He had a bandage around his head, white squares of gauze around his neck, and a mending broken nose. Sanders was sure there were more bandages beneath the sheet.

"Captain, Commander Sanders," Lucius said by way of greeting. His voice was shaky and weak. Being that the man had been near death when he was brought in, the fact that he was conscious and talking was a great stride.

"Lieutenant." Sanders gave a stiff nod. "Good to see you are on the mend."

"Yes, sir."

The Captain took a chair from the corner and pulled it close to Lucius' head. "I thank you for your valor, Lieutenant. I would've hated to lose you."

Lucius and the Captain had grown up together. It was said that the Captain trusted no one in the world as much as he trusted this childhood friend. And that was a nice sentiment, but why did Sanders need to sit in on this? He didn't want to see any of the Captain's vulnerability. That wasn't what men did. That should be saved for the wives.

"However, I was under the impression you were given strict orders to take the foreign woman to the hold?" the Captain went on.

Oh. That's why. Somehow this, too, was Sanders' fault. Great.

"I was, sir." Lucius didn't lower his eyes. "She did not want to go."

"Often women do not want to do what is in their best interest. It is why we have to subtly help them see reason."

"My approach was subtle, at first, sir. Then, when she punched me, it was less so. Finally I had no choice but to follow her lead."

The Captain paused before saying, "I am to understand you followed her lead willingly, Lieutenant. Directly to the front line. In front of a well-put-together group of trained, battle-hardened men."

"Yes, sir. They were also inclined to follow her lead. She has a way about her, sir."

The Captain stared at Lucius for a tense moment. The other man tried to hold the gaze, but inevitably, as they all did, dropped his gaze to the floor.

“She would have been captured.” The Captain had a hard edge to his voice. Sanders took a step toward the door.

“Yes, sir,” Lucius said weakly.

“She’s a woman. I’m sure you can imagine what would’ve happened had she been captured?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is that a fate you would want for your mother, Lieutenant? Or your sister?”

“No, sir. But in my defense, I wouldn’t have been able to stop her, sir. I tried to fight beside her and keep her safe. It was all I could do.”

After another minute of hard staring, the Captain lowered his head. Then stood. “She is a hard case. Sanders has yet to maintain control over her. Being that he is of higher rank, I can hardly expect you to fare any better. I had hoped, but I see that was in vain.”

“I would like to stay on her detail, sir,” Lucius stated with a high chin.

“You are compromised, Lieutenant.” The Captain spoke simply.

“She’ll trust me now, sir. She doesn’t want followers, she wants men-at-arms beside her.”

The Captain stopped as he headed for the door, his back to his old friend. Lucius took that as a cue to keep going. “She entertains when someone raises an objection to her schemes. She’ll hear my complaints and advice. She’ll defer to me if I can convince her.”

The room got thick and sluggish. Sanders tried to push himself against the wall, not wanting any part of this conversation. Any movement might draw notice. He wanted Lucius to get the post so he wouldn’t have to take it.

Finally the bands that made breathing laborious released and the Captain nodded. “Very well. When you are better, we’ll see how it goes.”

“Yes, sir.”

Out in the hallway the Captain said in conversational tones, “Lucius just did you a favor.”

“I caught that, sir. He’s a better man for it.”

“Yes, he’s always had a heavy dose of courage.”

Sanders cleared his throat. “I saw her fight, sir. He wouldn’t have been able to force her to the hold. Not with his life.”

“I know that. I still wanted him to try. Battle is no place for a woman. Not when she will become a prize.”

“I don’t think she was planning to stay alive long enough to be a prize.”

“For that reason, also.”

They turned a corner and started down the recovery corridor, stopping in front of a wooden door. The Captain knocked twice then immediately stepped back when the door opened. The doctor stepped out, realized who it was, and closed the door behind him.

“You’ve picked a fine time to call on her,” the doctor drawled. “She is out of bed and staggering around the room. Apparently that’s her way of saying she’s miraculously healed after only three days.”

“And how is she faring?” the Captain asked, not put off by the dry delivery.

“Oh, how wonderful. Someone who actually wants her real diagnosis. Two ribs are broken. She is unconcerned about those. Three toes are broken. She concedes that the Mugdock are heavy. There are muscle pulls and strains all over her body. She also helped me do my job by noting her gift is strained, whatever that means.

“Oh, and she has learned a new swear word. It starts with “c”, is predominately used on women in an extremely derogatory way. She thinks it is hilarious. Watch yourself.”

The doctor walked away with a rigid back. Sanders had the feeling the c-word was no longer solely used on women. He couldn’t help but smile. Until he saw the murder in the Captain’s eyes. It sufficiently ruined his mood again.

As the doctor had said, Shanti was standing. Laboriously, but standing. She was leaning against the wall looking out the window, her gaze on the distant trees. Her body looked like an abstract painting, splotched with a myriad of colors, mainly blue, yellow, purple, and red. Between her injuries, her skin was the same translucent white he’d noticed when she was near death in the dead forest. Unlike then, he noticed she had a much better form than when she’d been carried in a few short weeks ago. Her muscle was sinewy and graceful. She was taking on the shape of a woman again, hips and breasts and—

Sanders turned away, which he probably should have done

immediately after realizing the piece of fabric on the floor next to the door, as if thrown at a retreating figure, was her nightgown. He had seen many a naked man, being that there was not much privacy in the field, but he'd only seen naked women when he was about to—

Shanti turned at the uncomfortable groan.

“Clothes, please,” the Captain said easily, leaning against the far wall. If he was troubled by the perfect form of the naked woman—

Sanders groaned again, squeezing his eyes shut. He was not strong enough for this.

Shanti gave the Captain an irritated stare. “The fabric gets in the way of sleeping.”

“You aren't sleeping. Put it on.”

“No.”

“You're causing an awkward situation between Sanders and Junice at present. It's not very nice.”

Shanti glanced at Sanders and sighed. “Why is this nation so worried about nudity?”

“Humor us.”

As she crossed the room, moving like a panther, she picked up the fabric and slid it over her head. Sanders tried desperately not to memorize the look of billowing gray material flowing over perky, well-formed breasts. He also tried not to watch the cloth as it made its way—

The room filled with the sound of a head repeatedly banging against the door.

“I have no funnies, so I don't need an audience,” she said, returning to the window.

“Jokes,” the Captain supplied. He seemed to find her black mood entertaining.

“I want out of this room.” Shanti's eyes focused on the trees.

“You're not healed.”

“I'm healed enough to leave this room.”

“Where would you go?”

“The park.”

“Then?”

Shanti was quiet. She was no longer welcome at Sanders' house. A foreign naked woman fighting with the also naked man of the house in the middle of the night was not something wives got over. Or forgot about.

Shanti understood that.

“It’s time for you to tell me who you are,” the Captain asserted, taking a chair.

Sanders preferred to stand. He was still uncomfortably tight in his groin.

“Is your wife okay?” Shanti asked suddenly, turning to face the Captain. Her eyes flicked to Sanders. “And Junice? Is she okay? And your *bairn*?”

“Our barn?” Sanders asked in confusion.

“Child. Baby. Little ‘un. *Bairn*.”

“How did you...”

The Captain’s eyes swiveled to Sanders with a question. Sanders answered them both. “She’s fine. They are both okay, as far as the doctor can tell.”

The Captain nodded in a congratulatory sort of way. Shanti turned her gaze back to the Captain. “And your family? Did they get to safety in time?”

Sanders was still confused. Surely she knew the Captain had lost his parents—or else why would he be Captain?

“Unfortunately, I have no family to speak of.” The Captain’s tone was matter-of-fact, but Sanders could see a little of the leftover vulnerability from the conversation with Lucius. Sanders shifted uncomfortably as the Captain went on—being in this room was worse than the last. “If you are asking about Tanicia, she’s okay, as is her family, as far as I’ve heard. There were no civilian casualties.”

Tanicia? If Sanders remembered correctly, that was a short brunette with great curves and a giant rack. Why—*Oh*. He must’ve had company the night Shanti barged into his house. A passing fad, just like all his girlfriends. The man changed women like underwear.

The Captain stared at Shanti, his face blank. She stared back. Communication of the silent variety trickled between them until Shanti’s face dropped.

“That *rat bastard!*” she exclaimed suddenly. Sanders flinched and reached for his sword before he could stop himself. “I’m not beautiful in your culture. Fine. But he didn’t have the *fornikas* to tell me to my face he didn’t desire me? Instead he hides behind the myth that sex before mating is forbidden.” She turned back to the window, her back rigid.

Sanders blinked a few times. “Fornkas?”

Shanti turned back to him with sadness weighing down her features. She pointed to his bulge in his pants, which had been easing down, and now gave an excited lurch. He needed to get the hell out of this room and back into the world where women were properly clothed. Or home where he was allowed to have sex.

“Balls, I think,” the Captain said quietly, his eyes focused on violet grief, which had nothing to do with whoever she was talking about. It seemed like old pain—scars from her past that were now resurfacing. “Of whom are you speaking?”

Shanti turned again, her back to the room. Her grief was so fresh, so sharp, she looked like she would break in half at any moment. Whatever had happened in her past, it must’ve been traumatic for her to haul it here and not be able to contain it.

“Are you speaking of Lucius?” the Captain asked, quieter now.

“No, but how is he healing? I am trying to help but I don’t have much strength. I can’t keep contact for long.”

“Come again?”

“I would love to come the first time, but the man of my choosing is not interested. I could really use that distraction right now.” Her voice trailed away as she stared out the window.

The muscles in the Captain’s arms flexed. He was starting to lose his patience. He took a second to calm himself, something he had to do often in this woman’s presence, which Sanders had some experience with, and changed gears. “Where are you from?”

“That is not working, and I am not planning to tell you.”

Sanders look around in confusion. *What wasn’t working?*

The Captain said, “I had a meeting yesterday with an interested trading party. Sanders can confirm—he was there. He often organizes protection for trade routes. He has a head for numbers. I value his opinion in those matters. As I do in this matter.”

“I’m fascinated, both by the news and also by the randomness of this continued conversation.” Shanti continued to stare out the window.

“In addition to setting up a possible trade route, they inquired if we had seen a young woman pass this way. They described her as not exactly beautiful, but visually arresting. Tall, light features and hair, regal...”

Shanti had turned to the Captain, her eyes on fire, her face devoid of all color. Fear lurked just behind the death in her eyes.

“They said she was the wife of their Lord,” the Captain went on in a smooth voice. “She was apparently taken by a hostile party when traveling and was now feared lost. They are searching for her. They brought her up before I could ask about you, as a matter of fact...”

Shanti stared, a rigid figure in a loose robe standing in front of a bright window. Her eyes started to glow faintly. The room condensed and blazed. Spikes of pain assaulted him. His bones started to vibrate until they felt like they were cracking. His skull was too tight. His eyes sandy and raw.

The Captain’s eyebrows crawled down the bridge of his nose like two caterpillars. He stood slowly, his whole body flexed, the thick cords of muscles making ropes and ditches down his arms, legs and torso. “They mentioned she had violet eyes.”

A thick pulse of electric energy flashed into Sanders. He could swear his skin was peeling off. Her eyes were glowing more now, power within them dancing, the air in the room forcing his breath out in painful gasps. His brain started to buzz, slowly at first, then like knives were scraping against it. Needles stabbed into his ears. He clutched at his skull, the deep ache exploding out, forcing out a scream.

A second later he was devoid of pain. Panting. Scared—he’d never been so scared in all his life. He huddled in the corner. What the hell had just happened?

A second after that he felt invisible hands crawl up his body. Small, tickling spirals, trailing up the small hairs on his inner thighs. He brushed at his legs. Nothing was there. But it *felt* like something was there. Like a caress, firm and loving.

He gulped loudly, patting at the feeling. Trying to wipe it off. *What the--*

No, *now* he had never been so scared in all his life. Especially since that tickle felt so, so fucking good.

An invisible hand cupped his ball sack. He yelped, dancing around the floor, swatting at his nuts. Something lightly stroked his dick.

He froze.

It was logically uncomfortable, the pressure from invisible hands. Soon logic was gone, though. He couldn’t think past the rubbing. Pain he could ignore, but this...

The pressure. Where was it coming from?

It wasn’t a real person, did he care?

Oh... he probably should...

He fell back against the wall with his eyes closed. This was wrong. Whatever was happening was not good. Except it felt good. He couldn't stop—he wanted to—

Another blast of pain cut through the pleasure. A flash of light burst behind his eyes. He staggered against the wall, blinded momentarily with the hot spikes of pain.

“ENOUGH!”

It sounded like the Captain, but Sanders couldn't focus. His cock was hard, his head felt like someone had stabbed a knife through his forehead—what...the fuck...was *happening* in this room? Every time he had to deal with the woman, something like this happened. Every time.

Why was it always him? Why didn't the Captain give someone else a turn to deal with her?

Sanders glanced at the door. He might just brave the Captain's punishment for leaving right now.

Chapter 22

Shanti watched the Captain approach slowly, his eyes trying to hide the fear. She had been too weak to kill him from even a few spans and was afraid to touch him. He learned fast. Touching would make her ten times more powerful, but him as well. If he tried to block, or reciprocate, she would struggle, and he could then snap her neck. She had no weapons and could barely stand. She was practically defenseless.

“If you turn me over to them I will kill myself immediately, leaving you with nothing to trade,” she said in a seething whisper, trying to keep herself upright.

He stopped directly in front of her. “How?”

“By reversing what I just did to you.”

“Were you intending to kill me just then?”

“You’ve caught me at a bad time. You’re lucky.”

“Why shouldn’t I turn you in and take my chances? They’re offering me a sweet deal. The amount of money they’re throwing at me, at this city, is staggering. They even offered to end our troubles with the Mugdock. Our people would be safe. Trading you would be to our advantage.”

Shanti’s stomach twisted. “They are offering you slavery. They don’t trade, they own. You, as a leader, are too powerful. You would be killed immediately. Your army, as you call it, would be destroyed or taken into their ranks. Your people would be spread apart so you couldn’t band together. The prettiest in your city would be taken—you’ll be told they’ll be put up in the best houses, given the best schools, then can come back when they are enlightened. Instead, they will be granted to the seniority battle commanders or government to play with. Some will go to the ranked men to be used. They have all sorts of interests, women are just one. Little boys are a favorite. Watching torture, bestiality, whipping—they love fresh meat, no matter the flavor.

“And that’s if you don’t reveal what you are. As soon as you lose control and fill the room with a display of power, they will know. Then you will be taken. Drugged. You are handsome and well built, so the rich women

and men will want to use you. Their leader likes men—he likes to take other leaders by force as he captures their cities, but with your *Hasneas*—your *Gift*—he won't be able to. He can still drug you and chain you to his bed, though. You will like it. You will like what—“

The Captain grabbed her throat and squeezed. Air caught in her lungs, nowhere to go. Lights danced in her eyes from the pressure of his fingers. The bastard was strong.

She used the contact to send a pulse of pure, heavy lust into his brain, throwing him off. He was close enough that his erection was prodding her. His eyes lit on fire. Sanders groaned in the corner, in the radius of power but not getting the full dose. She switched to pricks of pain, searing his skin, aiming for the hand that held her, but too weak to hit it properly. Back to pleasure, confusing him, noticing his hand weakening as he tried to figure out what she was doing. Also trying to resist—men had an easier time resisting pain than pleasure. It had been a wonderful discovery. Back to pleasure, pulsing, prodding at his backside, freaking him out with how good it felt. Testing his sensibilities. Experimenting a little, too. Might as well screw with him as a farewell gift.

She shifted her power, noticing his eyes starting to dull as they looked into hers. Sucking in a breath of air as his hand loosened from her throat. The last of her power swelled, Sanders having fallen over, like a board, straight to his back.

She looked straight into the Captain's eyes, gripped his mind as hard as she could, and prepared the knife. She stabbed.

And splintered on a block.

The Captain's eyes had cleared. She hadn't noticed. She was clutching to her strength as weakly as a leaf clutching to a branch in Fall.

He had been hanging on to try and figure out how she constantly blocked him. She'd been doing it since he came into the room. He would never know how close he came, because she could have done it. With contact, she would have ended him and probably taken Sanders with him. At full strength she could shatter that block and the mind behind it. She was far, *far* from full strength.

“You would've regretted it,” he said softly, his voice all kinds of strain, his face showing none of it. “You would have regretted killing me.”

Oh. So he did know how close. Which meant he had picked up another little trick. Which also meant he was capable to using that trick. It

was not a pleasant discovery, though it wasn't exactly a surprise, either.

She was out of options. "No, I wouldn't have. I would have been close behind you when your people found out. If they didn't kill me right away, Commander Daniels would've traded me in a heartbeat. My people, however, would have regretted it."

The Captain removed his hand and Shanti fell. He scooped her up before she hit the ground and laid her on the bed. She didn't bother trying to hide her trembling. Her body and mind both were spent.

"That was fucked up," Sanders shouted from the corner.

The Captain regained his chair. "*Hasnias?*"

"A divine gift given to us by the Elders—your gods. An immortal weapon or tool in the hands of mortals. In my language, it is *Hasneas*, which means *Gift*."

A hunger flashed into the Captain's eyes, and then wariness. After a moment, he changed the subject.

"Your Honor Guard disobeyed my orders." His tone was smug. He'd felt like he won that battle, blast him.

Shanti didn't bother answering.

"They were responsible for killing over a dozen men," he continued.

"Good. Who got the most?"

"Leilius. Apparently he has a knack for sneaking around. His father said he got in trouble a lot for picking on his little sister and hid to try and escape trouble."

"Good trait. Take him hunting, let him define those attributes."

The Captain studied her.

"If you want to, obviously." She was probably supposed to go through the chain of command for that suggestion.

"The men they killed did not look like Mugdock," the Captain volunteered.

"Is that right? Were they women? If so, check for missing soldiers. They'll kill anything they can't screw, and take anything they can. They are great with nets, ropes, and knives. They also like strap-ons a great deal, so beware."

"They were slight men with fair skin, like yours."

"All of them?"

"Yes. All."

Shanti felt a jab of fear. Again. It was getting irritating. "What type of

weapons did they carry?”

“Large swords with a wide tip, or wicked looking knives.”

“Yarn or string on the hilts?”

“Yes.”

Shanti sighed in relief. “Not Graygual. Thank the Elders their mercy. The Graygual do not know I’m here. Not yet.”

Sanders staggered into view, his hair mussed and his eyes wild. “Why the fuck am I in this room with this perversion? What the fuck is going on? Sir. Let’s give her over and be done with it!”

“None of that was aimed at you, Sanders.” Shanti closed her eyes. “It was aimed at your Captain. You only got the backlash. He got the full blast. And he wasn’t witching.”

“Bitching, I think you mean,” the Captain helped.

“Bitching? Female mongrel?”

“Female dog, yes. Also slang—a derogatory word for a female. Also slang for whining.”

“For all your culture says you love women, you certainly have a lot of nasty terms to describe them.”

“I now know why,” Sanders said viciously.

“Who are the men we found? Where are they from and what do they want?” the Captain asked, easily ignoring the man foaming at the mouth in the corner.

“Inkna,” Shanti said weakly, also ignoring Sanders. “They are the financial minds behind the Graygual. They are extremely loyal because the Graygual keeps them in wealth. They are checking your city—analyzing your worth. They are realizing how very rich you are. And how good at defense. They probably now know they cannot take you by force. Not without heavy losses. They are good fighters, but you, as a whole, are better.

“They’ll establish trade. Let them. Start very small. Say you are trying to establish commerce, establishing trust and credit. Make something up. Let the trade trickle increase. Dazzle them with some of your best wares, but keep them constantly trading those that are worst. They know you have much, but they probably don’t know quality. Keep them thinking your quantity is in something not worth as much, and the quality items are sparse.”

“That will hurt our income,” Sanders said, working on breathing to calm himself. His fists were still white-knuckled.

“When they know you have quantity in quality wares, the Graygual

will want to run this operation themselves. Your city is small and rich. All your people benefit. It is not how their system works. With them, their cities are giant. Everything is for sale, including sex. Including...um, mind changing devices. I don't know the word—“

“Drugs,” the Captain supplied.

“Yes, that's right.” Her eyes drooped. She was so tired. “The rich are about ten percent, mostly nestled in the folds of military. The mid-tier is about twenty. The rest are under the boot. You have too many profiting. If you divide up the wealth in smaller shares, a few get much more. That is how the Graygual work. The few run things. The rest try to find a good place to hide.”

“And your people...”

Shanti felt her heart drop in defeat. There wasn't much more to hide and he was too strong to kill. Besides, he now knew her value to her enemy. What was the point in hiding the rest? “The Shamas. We were a quiet people with no wealth. Not in material goods, anyway. Our choice. The Graygual were a young, power-hungry nation when they first came to us. They were starting to branch out and wanted to bring us into the fold. They needed fighters—military. They needed muscle. My people fight. It's what we do. We fight with mind and body. We train all our lives for the conditioning of it. From the memory of a violent past. But we are a small nation. Tiny, really. We don't procreate well.

“The Graygual didn't like that we said no. The next time they came it was to teach us a lesson. They didn't realize women fought right beside the men. They didn't realize that one of us equaled five of their mercenaries. They didn't realize that one little girl in the small, northeastern village could kill people from a distance by thinking of stabbing a knife in their brains. She hadn't known it at the time, either—not until she was pushed to it. Not until survival instinct took over.”

Sanders took a noisy breath and sat down with a heavy plop. The Captain stared, his face blank, his eyes riveted.

“The second time they came was much later. The little girl was a woman. She'd lost her parents in the first skirmish. She then inherited the leadership. The doctrines said that when a girl is born from magic and none, who takes the role of a man, and desecrates with thought, she is the Chosen. She will connect the distant halves into a whole and lead her people to salvation. My father had the *Ahna Hasneas*—the *Warring Gift* in your

language. My mother had no *Gift* at all. He took her as his mate anyway, love trumping all, expecting not to have children. They had me. I inherited his leadership when he died in the first battle. I am the Chosen. Apparently.

“Anyway, false labels aside, I had to learn to lead from age five. I had to hone my *Gift*. I had to be the best fighter anyone had ever seen. I was trained for it mercilessly. I grew into it painfully. The next time they came I was ready, but it was not to be. The Graygual had grown into their leadership, too. They had consumed all nations along the coast and a great many inland. We were their only failure.

“They showed up early one morning, not unlike the Mugdock did the other day. We were long since ready. We had a *Seer*. She foresaw them coming. Also their numbers. We could not win. I lost the rest of my people two days later. I was ferreted out by my *Chance*. He was also my *Sacrifice* when they caught our trail. He stayed behind.”

“How long ago was this?” the Captain asked, leaning forward in his chair with his forearms resting against his thighs.

“A little over a year.”

“You were never captured?”

“You are the first.”

“And they want to finish their task? To wipe out the last of you? You being the last?”

Shanti met his gaze. “No. They want to breed me. They want to build an army out of me. Xandre, their leader, the *Being Supreme*, wants me for his own. He wants the next generation of super fighter to be of his seed. I thought that threat had ended with me gone. But now there is you. And you have learned to block me. You are also easier to breed. You make semen constantly. You can be drugged to give it willingly. They can impregnate a whole city with you and hope a few babies pop out with your *Gift*. Or, they can mix our bodies and have a better probability of success, though I am not sure if they know that.”

“What do you mean, better probability of success?” the Captain asked gruffly.

“My people did not procreate well because like talent has a better chance of producing offspring with like talent. Two *Warring Gifts* would have about a fifty percent easier time producing an offspring than a *Warring Gift* and a...*Sadna Hasneas*. Um...*Empathic*, I think is your word. *Empathic Gift*. A *Gifted* and non-*Gifted* would have an even worse chance still. The

offspring might have some *Gift*, but not always. Until now I knew nobody with a like *Gift*. Now, together we are extremely dangerous, both to current military and future military. We should both be killed. But there might be others. Now I'm not sure. Maybe the Graygual already have some? Maybe there are stronger *Gifts* than mine, or yours. Maybe the breeding is already taking place? Who's to say?"

"Well, I guess that means war is coming, and we'll be on the side with a hard road," Sanders said with his head in his hands. "I wish I stayed in bed today."

"Did they take any of your people?" the Captain asked quietly.

"Yes. A few. Twenty or so."

"To...breed?"

"Disgusting," Sanders spat, pacing.

"I believe so," Shanti replied with a straight face.

"So there is a chance another you—us...another one of us is already created."

"No. They expired."

"What's that?"

Shanti rubbed her temples. "They were taken. They would have been raped repeatedly. Because they were unable to do it themselves, I killed them. I would rather not go over the specifics right now. I need to sleep."

"You killed your own people?" Sanders stopped and stared with a gaping mouth.

"You didn't try to save them, first?" Cayan asked in a sympathetic voice, but with an edge.

Hot tears rolled down her face. "Yes, and yes. The enemy had a city of fighters larger than your city of civilians. I got close, but I couldn't get them out. So I killed them. They begged it of me, and I complied. Please leave. I don't have the strength to make you."

The Captain stood and nodded for Sanders to leave. "Wait for me."

Sanders wasted no time. He was through the door as if the room were on fire.

In the silence the Captain neared. He approached her slowly, reading her face. "What of the children? You still have people waiting for you, don't you? Hoping you will succeed? Where are you going? Let me help."

Tears were still rolling. She felt the brush of his mind on hers, trying to reestablish that link they'd shared in his bedroom. Trying to get in and

form a deeper connection. She closed up tight, locking herself in.

He put his hand on her bare arm. His power seeped into her skin, lighting her on fire. So much power. It was flash boiling her blood. He poked at her barriers gently, seeking a way in, searching for a chink in the armor. His eyes glowed as they looked down on her, blue like the sky. Dark rimmed like thunderclouds rolling through.

“There is no one else. They are all gone,” Shanti whispered.

“Then how can you reunite them?”

Good question. He was too smart for his own good.

“What of the children?” he asked again.

“Why do you care?”

“Because I am of the Old Blood. Like you. Procreation was always hard with my family, too, on my mother’s side. The gifts, as you call them, are carried with the mother. I know the history. You know the use. Together we are more powerful than each of us alone. We stand a better chance.”

“I am at war with the Graygual. You are not. If I were you, I would hide. They are... you stand no chance. For your people’s sake, hide.”

“I think we both know it is too late for that. As you say, we have wealth—we have extremely fertile lands and are well managed. This Inkna was behind the Mugdock attack. They were dressed as Mugdock. They have been poking around our mines, our leather factories—they were getting a good look. War is coming, and I do not bend my knee. We are on your side.”

“You are on your side. I am alone.”

The Captain withdrew his hand, his mind lingering. “As I said, I do not bend my knee. Not even to visually arresting outcasts. You will see it my way in the end. You will eventually need a friend, and then you will realize I am that friend.”

“I need a bed buddy and you don’t fit that role, so I’m good without you. Except, uh...for that other thing. Thank you. For that.”

“For what, exactly?” His eyes were twinkling so hard they belonged on a dance floor as a sparkly ball. Or in Rachie’s room, where she’d seen it. Cayan definitely knew what for.

Shanti cleared her throat. She hated saying she was wrong, she hated saying she was sorry, and she hated having to tell this egotistical ass that she was thankful he saved her life against overwhelming odds. Still, honor dictated that it be done. “For, uh, coming for me. On the battlefield. I would not have made it out without you. So, thanks.”

He looked at her with gravity, his eyes still sparkling, but grounded.
“You’re welcome.”

She nodded. He continued to try and lock eyes.

“Okay,” she said, too tired to play at holding the intense gaze—she’d hoped that would get easier. “Now get out.”

“I like it better when you’re vulnerable.” The Captain took a step back.

“Liar. It makes you nervous. You aren’t as good at blocking as you think you are.”

A grin ghosted Cayan’s lips, his dimples making a brief appearance. When he got to the door he stopped for a brief second, his hand on the shiny knob. “Who was this man that turned you down?”

“Why? Going to give him a pat on the back?”

The Captain turned his face to her, his eyes burning into her for a second. He did the equivalent of *flicking* her in the head. It was a weird sensation, bouncing off her block and tingling her skin. A second later, with a half-smile this time, he was out the door and gone.

The Captain strode past Sanders, not slowing to let the other man catch up. “Do you know why I needed you in there?”

Sanders had no fucking idea, but he wished he’d left that girl by the tree where he found her.

“You have never balked at the fact that she can fight,” the Captain went on. “You have always taken her at face value. You see a dangerous person, while the others see a woman playing with knives. I need the other two commanders on board with this—I need a unified front—and we all need what is in Shanti’s head, me most of all. I need you to help me turn them to my way of thinking.”

“You’ve never had a problem with that before.”

“We’ve never had a situation that confronts our prejudices. All our problems have been within the realm of war. They don’t see that this is, too.”

“She has been nothing but disruptive to my life,” Sanders growled.

“Just think what war will be when we meet it unprepared.”

Sanders blew out a breath. That was true. He hated when the Captain used logic.

They walked a while in silence before the Captain said, “Sorry about the... other thing. That was meant for me, I believe. I am not telling you your

business, but there is no need to relay that to...anyone else. I would prefer that stayed under the hat.”

“The other thing? You mean the invisible hand on my bells and whistle? Yeah, I don’t need anyone knowing that shit. Sir.”

The Captain nodded once.

They continued out the door and back to business. Sanders couldn’t help wondering how much this strange woman was going to mess up their way of life.

Chapter 23

Shanti was on a bluff above the tent on the edge of the fighting camp. They had taken Simon and left his twin sister Simone in the holding cell. Now they marched him toward a tent at the edge of the huge camp, to one of the higher-level battle commanders who waited outside to receive him.

Simon had his hands tied in front of him and four guards surrounded him. His mind-power was weak and his fighting only decent. It was why they had been able to take him. It was also why only four men could hold him.

“The man you requested, Battle Lord.”

“Yes, thank you. Pass it down that the women aren’t to be touched. The Supreme Being doesn’t want any man’s seed in them but those appointed. Anyone who breaks that rule will be killed slowly and painfully on full display.”

“Yes, Battle Lord.”

The filth gestured to Simon. “Tie him to the bed inside. Make sure he cannot inflict harm. The rest can be distributed. I only require this one.”

“Yes, Battle Lord.”

Shanti closed her eyes as Simon was led out of her sight, into the tent.

Shanti could free him. She could kill the man about to do this thing and take Simon right now. Maybe Simone, too. But she couldn’t get to the rest. They were within the clusters of fighters, spread around. The men would be used like Simon. The girls were being herded to a tent with guards, keeping the others away. She would reveal herself, cause a giant manhunt, and probably eventually get captured herself. She could kill herself, though. She could free herself from a life of rape and torture. She would also kill the hope of all of her people with her, leaving these few to the same existence they faced right now without her help.

Shanti touched Simon’s mind. Gave him a nudge.

She felt his awareness. Then his surprise. Finally...his desire for death.

She spread out her mind, found each of her people. Did the same. And with each, felt the same. Even the women—they knew their fate. They were

safe now, but not for long. They couldn't end it themselves; they needed her.

That's when she felt it. Simon—his horror. His fear. His grossly intimate abuse.

Something snapped.

Bowing her head, not caring if this was the end, she latched on to each and every mind belonging to her people. So different than the beastly brain patterns of their captors. She focused on them, feeling that two others were going through the same treatment as Simon. They were suffering. She felt it.

With one blast of pure, intense power, she fried them. It took more energy, but it was quicker. Less painful. Most fell dead immediately. The three strongest fell into the pain, not allowing themselves to scream, until finally succumbing to it.

Simon went limp on the crate, his face clearing.

Barely able to stand, sobs choking her, knowing she had just killed people she had known all her life, she fled. Stumbled and ran. Nearly blind, no strength, she made herself keep going. Legs catching on brambles. Dogs barking, chasing her. Men shouting. She had to keep going.

Had to keep going.

“It's okay. I've got you.”

Shanti thrashed at the arms, crying out, struggling away. Her face was pressed against a chest with no give. The arms that held her were like giant bands of cable. She lashed out mentally and splintered on a hard block.

Cayan.

“Sssshhhh. I've got you. You're safe.” His rough voice calmed her. Reassuring.

She drifted back into dreamless sleep. If only keeping going wasn't so painful.

Chapter 24

The ground cooled slowly as the sizzling sun disappeared entirely from the sky. The electrifying colors of dusk settled into the blues and blacks of night, cloaking the land and hiding its mysteries. Somewhere within the large park Leilius roamed, looking for Shanti, skulking behind trees and blending into bushes, cloaked in black and trying to become the darkness. He was great at hiding, but not so great at moving silently. It was a work in progress.

Five days after the battle, Shanti was recovering yet again, still in the Captain's city. Cayan had offered her a place as long as she wanted. When she was ready to go, he offered her any help he could provide. And while she was thankful, because she needed to heal again, she wasn't exactly comfortable. She felt the pull of the East, the urge to continue with her duty and move the war effort along. Not only that, but she had dragged his people into her struggle. He and his commanders were starting to think of the overall picture now, having an idea of what was coming, and already choosing a side. That was good, obviously, but they were such a small nation—Shanti couldn't help but think she had made a grave mistake by not killing him. He'd be taken, and he'd be used. And right now, there wasn't a damn thing she could do to stop it.

So here she sat, trying to block out the pressure of her duty, her mistakes and failures, and keeping her mind completely closed so Leilius wouldn't have a chance to sneak up on her. It was amazing, and more than a little frustrating, how mangled her plans had become in the space of a month.

As night settled, she heard stomping to her right. It was loud enough to be a massive land animal. If that was Leilius, he would get his ass kicked, no two ways about it.

"Tasha, wait." A male's voice rang through the clearing. Commanding. Controlling, more like.

"Tasha!"

A pretty young woman stomped into view with tears rolling down her face. She had a look of determination intermixed with fear. Behind her

stepped a man the usual height for this land, but he was lean for these people. There was a confidence in his bearing that said he could hold his own, but wasn't an excellent fighter. Dirty fighter, perhaps. Punched people when they weren't looking.

He grabbed the young woman's arm and swung her to face him. She collided with his chest, her arms coming up immediately to push away.

"I just want to talk," he said gruffly. By the way his body loomed over hers, and the way his hips slightly protruded, that was horseshit.

The fear in the girl's body said she thought the same thing.

"No. I don't want to. I'm not ready." She had tears in her voice.

"Please."

He grabbed her with both hands. "You can't lead me on and then walk away, Tasha. That's not how this works. What am I supposed to do..." He shook her a little, pulling her back toward the trees.

Boy-oh-boy did he pick the wrong time to step into Shanti's life. With her nightmares waking her up screaming three nights out of four, she was not in the mood to witness any more social injustices.

Shanti stood up silently and walked closer slowly, trying to control herself before she jumped into this altercation. Because she would absolutely be jumping in. In this city, based on its rules, no woman should be manhandled. It was like roughing up an *Empathic* in her village. Or someone not engaged in the fighting arts, man or woman. The strong didn't pick on the weak.

"No, Tommas. Please..." the girl begged.

"Oh, hello," Shanti said casually, walking into a spot of moonlight in the small clearing.

Tommas startled but held on, not letting go of his prize. Tasha stayed mute, mouth closed tight. Her eyes said help, but they also revealed guilt. Possibly she had been making out with him in the trees and he tried to go too far. Didn't make it right, but this woman was too young, or too entrenched in social customs, to know that.

"What do you want, bitch?" Tommas asked with a snarl. "Can't you see I'm having a private moment with my girlfriend?"

"Ah yes, bitch. I don't love that word, myself. Passive aggressive. I much prefer cunt if you are looking to make a point. Much more vulgar, don't you agree? Widens people's eyes. Regardless, I wanted to know if I can assist in any way? It seems there is need of a mediator."

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You seem to be having a dispute. I thought I might be able to solve the situation logically. As an impartial third party, of course.”

“Fuck off, you stupid *cunt!*”

“Oh, lovely. Two of my favorites in the same sentence. I just love the word *fuck*. It’s very similar to *flak*, in my homeland. You can hear the similarities. The meaning is slightly different, however. *Flak* is more of ‘everything good in the world suddenly going wrong’. Turning to shit, you might say. Fuck seems to be more sexually based, however loosely. But *oh* the things you can do with it, am I right?”

Tommas just stared. He had no idea what she was talking about, what was going on, and why his vehemence wasn’t scaring her off. She used this distraction to move ever closer, lackadaisically getting into range so that she could get Tasha away and then have some sport with Tommas.

“For example,” Shanti continued. “You can use it as an action: I am going to fuck you sideways and call you Martha. Or as a thing: you are a dumb fuck. Or as—“

“What the fu—what do you want?” Tommas spat.

“It is certainly used more often when angry, yes. I have noticed that.” Shanti was a step away now, her feet light on the ground, in predator mood.

“Fuck *off!*” Tommas threw out a hand to push Shanti away at the shoulder. Instead of blocking, or swiping it away, or even letting it reach its destination, she instead grabbed it and pulled.

Tommas lost his balance immediately and took a giant step in Shanti’s direction. He let go of Tasha in anticipation of landing on his face. Shanti stepped around him deftly, putting herself between the two.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Tommas growled. He’d just decided to kick her ass.

What a small minded idiot. As Rachie would say, he was in bad need of a bitch slap.

“Tasha, there is about to be violence. You’d best run off now,” Shanti said calmly, her eyes never leaving Tommas. “If you head east, you will probably run into a fifteen-year-old kid called Leilius. Ask him to take you home. Stay away from this Tommas creep. If he comes near you again, you let me know and I will sort him out. Yes? Hurry along.”

And she was running away east. Good girl. Now for the creep.

“What the fuck, Tasha?” Tommas frothed. His disheveled glare found

hers. Something was wrong at the basic level with this youth. He wasn't safe and probably just starting to show the signs.

Luckily, she had a great deterrent for future violence in others. It was called *fear*.

Tommas's body was square to her. "What do you want, you nosey slut? To take her place?"

"Slut? I'm unfamiliar with that one. But since you were so kind to use it in context, I think I get the jest. Gist? Jest is a joke, I think. Although, that also works."

"Screw this. No one will believe you over me." Tommas struck out, the back of his hand swinging at her from across his body. He was *impossibly* slow.

She ducked under.

"Oh, you're fast, huh? Had a father that beat on you?" Tommas asked, the bravado having slipped a bit.

"Ah, yes, pouring salt in the cut. I must warn you, that is not wise, Tommas. Not with me."

He reached to grab her, apparently not realizing his body advertised the move a full two seconds before he actually did it. She simply slapped his hand away. She was getting bored.

"You aren't in the army in this city are you?" she asked even though she already knew the answer. Sanders would throw him over the wall in frustration.

"With those deadbeats and that fairy Captain? Yeah, right."

"Dead. Beat." Shanti shook her head, spinning around as he circled her. "Fairy Captain. Your slang is way beyond what I know. You cannot control your anger, and you don't have much stock in morals. This is not a good combination. I can cure you of that—"

He rushed her with the intent to tackle. With his whole body bent and his arms spread wide—he wasn't great at judging opponent size—he shuffled toward her and prepared to dive. Since she had plenty of time to think about it, she let him tackle her, making sure she fell slightly to the side. She was curious to see if he was any better on the ground.

He tried to pin her with his body, rage taking over his movements. Since she was to the side, she angled out and gave him a sharp blow to the middle of this back. He cried out, his adrenaline rushing in to fill his body. It would make him faster and slightly stronger. Hopefully.

He angled up with his torso and tried to yank her body back to the ground. She grabbed his wrist and twisted it painfully behind him, then let go when he gave a hoarse yell and his chest hit the dirt. It really seemed like he was *trying* to lose.

He tried to grab her around the waist, turning on his back to do it. She let him, angling her body to the top of him and straddling his stomach. Then she grabbed his fingers, bending them across the back of his hand, twisting back and down, making the nerves and tendons tweak painfully. It was an extremely easy, and extremely effective, arm lock. He cried out again, his body trying to turn, but since both hands were captured, he just wriggled around.

She bent his arms under her legs, braced herself, then let go. She quickly pulled out her pack of needles from around her belt, and before he could get his arms freed, put one in the nerve at the top of each arm, near the shoulder, to give him a sleeping sensation. It would be painful to move. He was too much of a coward to push through it.

“Well, Tommas. You’ve got yourself in a right pickle this time. See, I do know some slang, huh? Anyway, here’s what I’m going to do. I am going to teach you a lesson.” She licked her hand, then gave him a hard slap across the side of his face. To his whimpers she said, “Yes, it hurts more when the slap is wet.”

She did the other side, leaving an identical welt. He cried out.

“Tommas, you should know that only cowards pick on the weak. And while, by definition, that makes me a coward, you were posing as a big man, so I think I am just, don’t you? I mean, I have talked myself out of killing you, so that is a step in the right direction, don’t you think?”

“Fuck you!”

“Yes, we’ve covered that.” She punched him in the kidney, then the other kidney. She gave him a dead leg and then the kidney again, careful to hit in exactly the same places. The damage would last longer.

When she finished she raised her voice above his sobbing. “Also, only dead men rape women. Or bully them. If I hear you’ve raped anyone, Tommas, I will finish this. Do you understand what I am saying?”

It was then that she heard the footfall to her right, soft and at the tree line. The person either had a weapon, was Leilius, or wasn’t planning to hurt her just yet. She very nearly opened her mind to make sure, but she trusted Cayan to be right behind the person if they were dangerous. It was a huge

leap of faith, yes, but judging by their dealings so far, he considered it his duty. And he viewed duty similar to how she did.

Not bothering to get up, or secure Tommas any more than she already had, she looked up in that direction. Sterling stepped slowly out of the shadows, his eyes hard and his face a mask of vehemence.

“Oh. Hello. He a friend of yours?” Shanti asked conversationally. Tommas whimpered.

“We don’t generally punish our citizens with immediate violence.”

“How do you know I am punishing him? Possibly I am trying a new sexual experience.”

“I was drawn by his argument with a woman. Tasha, I believe. You stepped out from your hiding place before I was upon them. I didn’t expect you to defend her honor.”

“What did you expect, that I would help Tommas?” Her voice took on a dangerous edge, directly reflecting her feelings.

“You are a woman who knows how to fight. It was possible your tastes border on perversion.”

“Interesting thought process. What judgment does a woman get if she knows solely how to defend herself? Light disgust and minute snubbing in social settings? And what if she is actually raped because she doesn’t know? Pity from everyone she meets? Lose-lose situation, then, huh? You like your women helpless, is that it?”

“When I was a teenager I met a woman who was passing through. She fought for a living. She indicated it was her culture’s way. She... Her tastes...”

“Mardis. Is that who you are speaking of? Generally a short people with big breasts, black hair, whether died or natural, and a tendency toward domination? Whips and chains and leather? It seems I am compared to that nation a lot in this city.”

Sterling’s eyes got harder. He tried not to grimace, and failed.

Shanti got up with a light kick to Tommas’ ribs. “Then you’re forgiven your judgment. I had a run in with one of them. She offered that I join their clan—that’s what they call a small hunting party. Their prey were men. Younger the better. Lure them in and debase them. Try to strip them of their manhood for sport. Yeah, I went back to her clan. Then I killed all five. Maybe the woman you...met was in that party. Maybe I’ll find her another day and bring her back to you. Who’s to say?”

“I would never hurt a woman, regardless...”

“Sterling, I got newspaper for you. There are a lot of nations in this little world of ours. A whole lot. And most of them have only fighting men; it’s true. But a great many have women in the ranks, too. A great many, Sterling. If a woman takes up arms against you, you will either need to kill her, or train up your own women to do it for you. Because one thing I know: they will destroy all that you hold dear, despite your sentiments regarding my sex.

“And with regard to punishing with violence... well, I wasn’t punishing. I was teaching him a lesson. And if he rapes anyone, woman or man, I will kill him. That is a truth, Sterling. I have put my word on it, and so it will be done.”

Tommas whimpered again.

“You will hang for it,” Sterling said easily.

“No, I won’t.”

“Why, because you think you have favor with the Captain and Sanders?”

“Favor with the Captain? I couldn’t think of anything more intolerable. Being controlled is not one of my loves. And Sanders would probably tie the rope for you. No, I won’t be hanged. If it comes to that, I’ll be on my way sooner rather than later. Leaving is inevitable, anyway.”

Sterling’s eyes squinted. “You helped us. This is not your land. Why should you care?”

“Wow. You must’ve learned conversational direction changes from Cayan, huh? Well, by asking that question you have proved you are an idiot, Sterling, or a bad person.”

Shanti walked to the head of a quivering Tommas. She extracted her needles and tucked them back into her pouch. Tommas curled up in a little ball at her feet.

Shanti looked at Sterling, who was still judging her, “I’ll let you take care of the rest, shall I?” She didn’t bother waiting for his nod before heading back to the hospital wing. She technically wasn’t permitted to leave— Captain’s orders. She had to admire the Captain’s tenacity; he kept trying. Unfortunately, he wasn’t getting any better at being let down.

Chapter 25

“Rachie, what are you doing, boy?” Sanders yelled as he marched toward the two fighting cadets.

Rachie was standing with his hands in the air, surrendering. The boy opposite him was crouched in the attack position, unclear what to do when the enemy surrendered before the fight had begun.

“Sir, he plans on clobbering me, sir, but he is standing off-kilter and it won’t be effective. I’d rather not waste my energy.”

Sanders stared mutely at the curly haired idiot. He was too flabbergasted to be mad. “Do it anyway.”

“But, sir—“

“That’s an order!”

Rachie sighed and mumbled, “I’ll just hurt him and you’ll be pissed.”

“What was that, Cadet?”

Rachie jumped and shook his head. Apparently Shanti hadn’t completely beat sense into the lad.

Cadet Jonhas waited for Rachie to look at him, then jumped at the other boy, arms moving in small circles to the side, wrestling style. He fainted once, throwing his whole body to the right. Rachie didn’t bite. Didn’t even flinch. Jonhas fainted a second time, straight at Rachie. Rachie sighed again with a resigned expression.

The third lunge would go live. Jonhas was indeed a little preplanned, but he was still a Cadet. He had some things to learn in the arena of reality that he could only learn with more experienced fighters. Of which Rachie shouldn’t be one. Not with only a month and a half’s worth of whatever it was he did with Shanti and his fellow Honor Guard members. And though it was his job to be neutral, Sanders hoped Jonhas would ring the kid’s bell. Jonhas was the best of the Cadets and soon to move up in the ranks. He’d been at this a year longer than Rachie and showed ten times the promise.

As if reading Sanders’s mind, Jonhas rushed in, arms and legs everywhere, trying to mix up his opponent before he smacked him down... and landed on his back.

Rachie had barely moved. His movements had been straightforward and efficient, and now he stared down at Jonhas with a distraught expression.

“I didn’t want to,” Rachie said in slight embarrassment. “I told you that—”

“Enough!” Sanders barked. Rachie flinched. It shouldn’t have been as gratifying as it was. “Rachie, head to the Pit. Jonhas, keep at it.”

It was time for Shanti’s Honor Guard to get evaluated. He didn’t understand their style, but he couldn’t argue with results. Rachie had been way behind everyone else before the foreign woman showed up, and he’d just won the fight with no strain. The other guys she trained were showing the same sort of results. If they didn’t excel at one art, they were masters at another. Leilius could barely hold a sword, but with a long knife and some cover, he was silent and deadly. Rachie had just proved that hand-to-hand combat was his forte. Marc was now apprenticing with the doctor, which had always known the kid had talent, but hadn’t been able to get it out of him until recently. Gracias was a blur with any weapon he used and often surprised himself when he won mock battles. That kid was under-confident, if anything.

And then there was Xavier. He was a leader. Even the Captain was taking special interest. He was large but still fast. He could work with nearly any weapon he tried. He had great aim with arrows and knives. And most of all, when he talked, men listened. The group was turning into Xavier’s Honor Guard more than Shanti’s. She talked to him, he talked to his men, and they all excelled.

Sanders had asked Shanti about it the other day, wondering if she didn’t feel the pinch of Xavier taking her power. She had shrugged in her unconcerned way and said, “The Captain thinks I can’t be reasonable. So I am giving him his chain of command. What do I care who gives the orders, as long as the goal is met?”

Sanders would care a great deal, actually, but he didn’t want to sound insecure by saying so. But one thing he couldn’t ignore anymore--Shanti had great skill, and she could train. She could be a valuable asset. Sanders hated to admit it, but it was best for all of them if she stuck around. He just wondered how long that would last.

Chapter 26

Two weeks later, Lucius stood with his back to the window, completely naked, when Shanti walked in. The man had a well-shaped body with wide shoulders, but he wasn't overbearing. His muscles were cut and defined, and he stood balanced. He was an attractive man with a calm demeanor and patient air about him. He was a good Chance. Steady, strong, a good fighter, and reasonable. He also wasn't bashful like so many of the men here were.

"I hear you are able to leave this jip-joint?" Shanti asked as she sat on the bed.

"Oh good, she has another wonderful little colloquialism," the doctor remarked in his usual dry tone. He was sitting in the chair, putting his instruments into a leather bag. "With apparently a complete disregard for privacy. I wonder why no one has tried to take her home to mother?"

"I am being released today," Lucius said, ignoring the doctor.

"I hear you are to return as my Chance. Was that your choice, or were you appointed?"

"Your Chance? I've heard you use term before. What does it mean?"

"My...co-fighter, I guess. My teammate. The one who watches my back, you might say. When I need protection to use my *Gift*, you provide it."

"Caretaker comes to mind," the doctor commented.

Shanti shook her head in frustration. "It's hard to explain, I guess. You are my charge, I am yours. We are—we trust each other—" She shook her head again. "It's hard to explain."

Lucius nodded slowly. "I volunteered."

"Good. Otherwise it wouldn't work. You'll be like a sibling to me. A brother. It forbids anything sexual. Our bond, when it comes, needs to be closer than that. You need to leave me behind if that is for the good of the people. And I you. Love and sex make people crazy—makes people irrational. They do stupid things, especially men. There is no logic in it. It does not belong on the battlefield."

"Understood."

“Not only men do stupid things for love,” the doctor chimed in, placing his bag on the ground and clasping his fingers in his lap. For a man who loathed dealing with Shanti in any capacity, he was happy enough to banter against her comments.

“On the battlefield, I meant,” she clarified. “Off the battlefield women are their own force. I once tied a woman up and hung her from a tree by her ankles because she went after my—“ Shanti broke off immediately as an image arrested her—her love, lying with opened, sightless brown eyes covered with a film of blood. She lowered her head and focused on her breath, forcing the image away.

The room went deathly still; apparently the doctor and Lucius were unsure what to say to a strong woman showing weakness. The door opening was a welcome relief.

“Oh, Captain, I’ve been meaning to ask you—“ Shanti said after the large figure came to a slow halt in the doorway, studying naked Lucius for a second before swiveling his gaze to Shanti. “What does it mean that you are a fairy?”

The room went very still for a second time, but for an entirely different reason.

“Where did you hear that?” His gravel voice gave her a shiver. It was the “I’m not happy, and despite the fact that my face is showing no discernible expression, someone will die” tone. In addition, his mental touch slammed against her barriers, giving her a weird, spicy tingle deep in her body.

“Even though I would love to explore that sensation,” Shanti said, crossing her legs in relaxation, “since it is strange but not unpleasant, it’s rude to force a connection. You need to stick out a bare piece of skin to ask for permission, or it is considered a punishable and grave offense. It is like me perching in your window and watching a private moment.”

“Are you saying you haven’t?” The Captain’s voice was now amused. His electric blue eyes hadn’t looked away, but his mental touch backed off.

“No, I *jumped* through. That’s an entirely different situation that could have been avoided had your door been unlocked.”

“I don’t ask for permission, I grant it.”

“Then I guess you are out of luck.”

“Luck, you mean,” Lucius said quietly, his eyes on the ground.

“Ah, that makes much more sense. Out of luck, yes. Good

expression.”

“Chuck doesn’t make any sense,” the doctor noted, motioning for Lucius to get dressed. “You are sliding backwards in speech.”

“Out of cow. That makes sense! Out of nourishment. Hungry. We have a similar saying, but since your people are rarely ever hungry, the context was flimsy. Luck makes much more sense since your city puts stock in that strange fantasy. Anyway, Captain, was there something you wanted, because I had hoped to introduce Lucius to the pesky boys who will begin their practice in half an hour.”

“I will be accompanying you to this practice.” The Captain finally crossed the threshold. “The men assigned to you are ready for evaluation but no one has seen them work.”

“Oh, they have tried. It has become a game to hide from Sterling—“
“Commander Sterling,” the Captain interrupted.

“—but we have so far done a great job of it. According to Gracas: if you see us, you will have to be killed. Top Secret, he calls it. Something about hidden files.”

The dimples made a brief appearance in the Captain’s face. “You are welcomed to try to kill me.”

“I *have* tried. It hasn’t gone well so far. But I am still hopeful.”

“Lucius,” the Captain commanded.

Lucius looked up at Shanti. “The Captain has a knack for tracking. He won’t have a problem finding us, and then he’ll just get in the way.”

Shanti smiled. “He hasn’t met someone else who can cheat, but you’re right. That is possibly a game for later. Let’s go, we are wasting time.”

“Fantastic, she is granting hospital releases now. Well, then, what am I needed for?” the doctor asked as he stood.

Cayan didn’t hide his smile.

Down the corridor, a middle-aged man hurried up to their party and stepped next to the Captain’s side. “Sir, he is awake.”

“Give him water but no food. Don’t talk to him or answer questions. I’ll be along later.”

“Yes, sir.” The man hurried away.

Outside into the fresh, though still hot, air, another man approached, holding a clipboard and not wearing the customary blue army uniform. He was small for this town, and balding. “Captain, the ball is set for Sunday

week. I require the name of your date when you have a moment. If you require, I can prime her to match your dress. Also, the trade agreements have been drawn up. Those will need to be gone over. The first delivery is past the Mugdock lands but the cargo is small. The rewards will be plenty.”

“I’ll see to it this evening,” the Captain answered, not sparing a glance as they moved down the hospital steps.

“In your office, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Very good, sir.”

And the man was gone.

Half way through the city someone else approached about repairs to the fence. Further still someone found him and asked about agriculture. Someone else about some mining operation. Shanti realized that this man was the hub of the entire city. Everything went through him. If he were removed, it would cripple the city. It would then become the civilians clashing with each other for power, and the military men fighting for top command. The wealth and prosperity of the city would fall into mayhem.

And the fool had risked everything to pull her from the middle of a battle. Stupid, but also, what an incredibly steep price to repay for her people’s lives.

As they entered the trees, Shanti slowed her pace. The fresh breeze tickled her cheeks as the lush vitality from the trees infused her *Gift*. Her feet sank into the loosely packed dirt. Shade cooled her sun-kissed skin, her coloring a few shades tanner from the intense sun. She closed her eyes as she pushed her mind wide, seeing in her mind’s eye the swirling colors of Cayan and the Lucius’s steadfast tones. Wider she pushed, finding the boys waiting for her over a hundred spans in the trees, and the edges of citizens going about their business in the town. Wider she stretched, pushing until the whole city looked like a collection of small, pulsing orbs. In the short time since the battle, she’d regained her strength nicely.

When she opened her eyes the Captain was facing her. She hadn’t heard him move. Or Lucius, who had stepped away. Cayan was holding out his hand.

So he did ask permission if he really wanted something. Interesting.

She touched his arm, skin on skin. His mental touch brushed her barriers and she opened up, allowing him a shallow connection. She’d done this a million times before; sharing feelings and sensations with another. Her

people used it to establish a connection for support, to train the young or get trained by the old, to share knowledge, or cement a deeper level of intimacy. The last thought called up a picture of Romie, his earth eyes shining with love.

Pain gripped her heart and ripped. Staggering, she felt Cayan's strong hand bracing her, keeping her upright.

"Sorry," she muttered, shaking her head a little to get her mind in the right place.

Before she knew what was happening, a deep blast of profound compassion washed over her. Cayan had felt her tortured past and was responding. He hadn't learned to keep his feelings to himself, and with a deep well of power to rival hers, she couldn't stop him from intensifying their connection.

He pushed deep down into her, filling her up and merging their power. Her whole body went light. The ground dropped away and her mind soared, pushed so far out that the world became a map of colors. Glittering, glowing, and tinkling, it was like sun flares. Her skin sizzled with the power flowing through her. It danced and played, meeting his. Growing. Blooming, and then blazing. Her eyes started to water and her skin began to singe. It was wild and raw and completely out of control. It was a warning.

"Ease up," Shanti said through clenched teeth, feeling like she was floating in a void, no sense of direction. She clutched onto his arm with both hands, needing solidity. She felt his hands grab her shoulders then reel her in, needing the same thing.

"Ease up! Pull it back in!" she shouted, pushing at his steady torrent of power. Struggling with it. Molding it. Trying to force it out of her. It was like trying to build a dam in a flood.

Lights blazed brighter, power surged around her, pulling at the seams in the fabric of her being. Her *Gift* wrapped around Cayan's, melding the two, and then blazing brighter still. Color bleached and reformed in crystal clear imagery. The brain paths of every living thing for almost a league presented themselves in dots like a heat map. They pulsed and throbbed, matching her body. Emotions flooded her. Intents, desires, motives—her mind was fraying, Cayan's with her. And then suddenly it all shut off.

Shanti struggled for breath, flat on her back. Wrung out, the hot tingle of warning electrocuted her skin. Beyond that, though, was such an intense joy she was high off of it. It was probably the most grounding of all. A joy

that intense was habit forming, and that was a terrifying thing with that much power. Especially with a man she barely knew who had no control.

“Is it always like that?” the Captain asked in a shaky voice, getting slowly to his feet. Lucius was standing between them, white faced.

“No. Do you feel tingling in your skin?”

“Yes.”

“That is not good.”

“I figured. And the elation?” He reached around Lucius to help her up, but she shied away from his touch and hopped up.

“What’s elation?”

“Intense happiness. Almost too sweet.”

“Also not good.”

“I figured that, too.”

“What was that?” Lucius asked with wide eyes. “Your skin burned my hands when I tried to separate you two.”

“It is something best kept to yourself,” Cayan said in a flat voice.

Lucius nodded, troubled. Shanti knew how he felt; she wasn’t much better off. And she certainly didn’t like the speculation in the Captain’s eyes.

“Let’s go.” She nearly sprinted ahead. She had no idea what happened, but it wasn’t the time to dissect.

It was a short walk made long by Shanti’s acute analysis of the boys who had gone before her. They were supposed to leave no trace of their passing. Instead, there were broken tree branches, Gracas’ footfall, Xavier’s large frame knocking down leaves, and any number of little things an experienced tracker would see. Like Sterling, who was on their trail constantly.

When Shanti and crew finally reached the large clearing chosen for that day, the boys were play fighting and horsing around. Shanti cleared her throat. As if she’d shouted, everyone immediately fell into line, facing her in order of seniority. How they figured who was ahead of whom, she had no idea, nor did she care. That was Xavier’s department. To her they were all one and the same, in need of different types of training because they had different skill sets.

“I take it you didn’t hear the three of us coming?” Shanti began, strolling toward them, though not directly in front of them. She didn’t like addressing them in the weird line formation. It was too contrived.

Cayan, however, felt perfectly fine standing directly in front of them,

their backs perfectly straight.

“No, s’am,” they answered in chorus.

“Please take a moment to notice how large the men are who accompanied me.” They did. “They made no sound and probably left no trace of their passing. Xavier, how does that correlate to yesterday’s excuse?”

“They are larger, or as big as me, and therefore I have no leg to stand on,” Xavier answered dutifully.

“Precisely. Gracias—you salute me again and I will use that hand to painfully put your face in the mud. Yes?”

“Yes, s’am.”

“Why is it that when you have a sword in your hand, you are light footed, but when you walk naturally you leave a heavy tread? Are you worried the ground will disappear unless you stomp on it?”

“No, s’am.”

“You will spend half of tonight and half of tomorrow night practicing in the dark. Take a sword with you. In the morning you will take me along your trail and point out places you performed a misstep. Yes?”

“Yes, s’am.”

“I am glad to hear you cleverly disguising your distaste for that punishment. Okay, Sterling is making his way in our direction. We need to change locations. Xavier, you will have Leilius at your back. Leilius, count the infractions, but cover them up. Gracias, you lead Marc—excellent work, by the way, Marc. It seems you finally realize this training is useful. Or maybe that you’ve come to grips with the fact that you will someday have to be in the field.”

Mark pouted. “The doctor said that the next time you follow us and jump out to yell ‘boo’ he’ll no longer train me. Since that is always your punishment, because you know the doctor hates surprises, I figure I should stop messing up.”

“Too bad. I love scaring you two. Fair enough. Rachie, you are doing well. You can follow the group of your choice. My team will follow the other. Yes?”

“Yes, s’am.”

“Good. Off you go. And hurry, Sterling is moving fast this time.”

They all looked at Xavier, who looked at Lucius. Who looked at the Captain. Who nodded.

As all the boys took off, Cayan fell in beside Shanti. “Sam?”

“Do you not realize how much longer that chain of command takes?” she asked, noticing Lucius falling in behind them.

“If I were giving the orders, there would be no reason to check in,” the Captain said with a pompous air.

“But you’re not giving the orders.”

“You’re welcome.”

Shanti pushed down the irrational urge to punch him in the throat. “S’am is a mix between sir and ma’am. It was the only title Leilius could get right more than once.”

“How often does Commander Sterling try to find you?”

“Nearly every day. I used to change the times we met to keep him away, but it turned into a sort of game, and it is great practice, so I changed the times of our practice to his idle times.”

“Has he ever found you?”

“Not so far.”

“Has he asked to watch your training outright?”

Shanti snickered. “Nope. He took it upon himself to snoop. Then he realized we were on to him, so he did it to prove a point, I think. He was exuding determination for a solid week. Now I think he is playing the same game. He wants to best us. We want to keep besting him. A merry chase it has become.”

“He doesn’t mean you harm?”

“No, I don’t think so. He is intrigued, is my best guess. And like I said, now it’s a game.”

“Commander Sterling doesn’t play games.”

Shanti shot him a sideward glance. “Maybe you just don’t know the ones that turn him on.”

“Is he the one that turned you down, then?” His tone was light, but the air got heavy. Shanti could tell Cayan was trying to hold his power at bay. He wanted to reach out and find out for himself, since he was a nosey bastard, but it seemed he also wanted to start controlling his *Gift*. Restraint was a very good thing with him.

“No, but thanks for reminding me about that. I hate having unanswered questions.”

The sound was not quite a growl, but it was close. It seemed the Captain hated mysteries. Men were incredible gossips!

They met up with the boys again. Shanti congratulated them on doing

better, then put them to work. Knife throwing was first. It was a handy skill to have no matter the overall discipline. If a baker needed to escape in a hurry, and saw someone coming through the door, throw the knife and run. It was an easy item to carry on one's person; you didn't have to be close to use it effectively, and one throw could kill with a small amount of exertion. The boys worked hard at it, and Shanti helped them in each stage of their training. Only Xavier and Gracas were able to hit revolving and rotating targets effectively, but the rest were definitely coming along.

Next was archery. Rachie was excused, as was Leilius. They were crap. There was no point in wasting anybody's time. Instead, those two worked on creating traps that could be left behind on a trail, intended to ensnare their victim, or simply kill or chop something off. Lucius and the Captain were extremely interested in that discipline.

"Your people did this often?" Cayan asked, memorizing the construction of one particularly gruesome contraption.

"Not often, no. I have, though. I have been hunted for the past year. Leaving these in my wake has...well, I'm still alive, so..."

"They work."

"Very well."

Cayan straightened up and put his hands on his hips, analyzing her. "But anyone could fall victim. Civilians."

"Yes, which is why you only leave it when your life depends on it. Okay, boys, take it down."

His mind brushed hers again. "You've had some close calls."

"Very." Shanti turned away from those probing eyes.

"All right—" What she recognized as Sterling's brain pattern was winding closer. They were taking too long. They had about half an hour before he would find them. Bloody good tracker.

"Time for your disciplines. Let's push ourselves this time. Rachie, you are fighting with Lucius. No weapons. Give him hell. Leilius, I want you to see how close you can get to Sterling before he recognizes you. If he spots you, throw the fake knife and run like hell. If he chases you... well, I guess you'll see how fast you are because you'll surely get in trouble. Marc, watch Lucius like a hawk. He is one of us now. If he pushes too hard or gets hurt in any way, you are responsible—I can run very fast, so attempted escape will not help. Gracas, grab the real sword. You are with me. Xavier, try your size against the Captain. I have a feeling he'll wipe that stupid smile off your face.

Or he'll make that face less handsome, and Miss Baker's daughter won't like you anymore."

The other boys chortled with laughter. Red filled Xavier's cheeks.

"All right, get gone."

Shanti took a moment to watch as Xavier walked up to the Captain very slowly, analyzing. Trying to figure out the way the Captain's body worked. Trying to work out the best method of attack. He didn't get long. Cayan was experienced, and battle didn't allow slow, analytical thought. He lunged, movement so fast it was almost blurry. Xavier parried and retreated immediately, backpedaling in surprise.

Cayan slowed down for the younger man, picking a pace faster and more aggressive than Xavier was used to, but within his reach. Xavier saw this, blew out a breath that probably emptied his ego balloon, and got to work.

Well done, Captain.

Shanti connected with Lucius' mind, not trusting the medic-in-training to recognize the warning signs. She felt the spicy touch of Cayan doing the same thing. The bugger learned way too fast. But maybe that was a good thing now?

She still wasn't sure.

All of a sudden, a blur of metal whisked by her face. Gracas had turned on. The kid was like a switch. On or off, no warm up, no half way. He barely knew how his body worked, but the small control he did have was thrilling. Someday he might surpass Shanti with his skill in weaponry.

Someday.

The clang of metal rang through the clearing as Shanti's sword rushed into the fray. Shanti couldn't help a smile as they got to work.

Twenty minutes and a solid sweat in, Shanti was on the attack, attempting to teach Gracas never to retreat straight back. That he should angle to one side or the other, trying to figure out how to turn a retreat into an attack. He was learning, but slowly. He'd fallen over every rock and stump in the clearing.

As they fought, Shanti and Cayan paid attention to each other so they didn't direct their fighters into one another. Suddenly Marc yelled, "Enough!"

In a flash of an eye she had disarmed Gracas and was at Lucius' side,

evaluating.

“I’m fine for now,” Lucius said, breathing fast but not overly taxed. Shanti would have let him go a little longer.

Cayan had thrown Xavier across the clearing and was walking over with a stern expression. He looked at Marc. “Report.”

The color drained out of Marc’s face. His body bowed and his face tilted toward the ground. Scrubbing at his nail, he muttered, “He is fine for now, yes, but his state has been weakening exponentially. He would injure himself before realizing he’d passed the line. It’s wise to stop him now, or at least dramatically slow his exertion.”

Shanti shook her head. “Too many unknown words.”

Marc peeked up from under his lashes. “It’s like eating fast when really hungry. You eat too fast for your stomach to process how full it is. Before you know it you are too full and feel sick. If you get nearly full, then slow way down, you’ll stop just as you hit the full line.”

“Ah.”

Cayan raised his eyebrows at Marc.

“She understands food analogies best,” Marc explained.

“Well,” Shanti said, taking stock of Sterling. He was now heading toward the west, which would not intersect with their practice. “Sterling—“
“Commander Sterling,” Cayan interjected with a warning in his voice.

Shanti turned her face to the Captain, met his stern gaze, and then turned back. “Sterling is either chasing Leilius, or taking him to a whipping post. We are good to stop for today. Thank the Captain for beating the stuffing out of Xavier.”

Everyone clapped.

“Give a nod to Marc, who actually gave an order based on his profession, to a superior officer, in front of *the* superior officer, and still had enough *fornicas* to insist.”

Nods all around.

“*Hoenista*.”

Everyone did a slight bow and started wandering back toward the inner city. Except Cayan. He stood where he was, watching Shanti. Lucius, unsure, waited with him.

Shanti, finished talking with Gracias about ways to practice, noticed the scrutiny, and furrowed her brow. “What?”

Cayan waited for everyone to disappear before saying, “I need a

favor.”

Chapter 27

The dungeon smelled like urine and fecal matter. Sanders stood against the wall, trying not to inhale through his nose, eyeing the two recently captured prisoners occupying the cells. The large, dumb, lumbering Mugdock paced and swore, threatening the guards with pain and retribution, banging at the bars and kicking at the ground. The other, a foreigner, sat peacefully, watching his surroundings with calculating eyes.

It was the foreigner who gave Sanders pause. The slight man sat as peacefully as could be, not at all worried about possible torture. Almost as if he had the upper hand.

Delusion, that was. If left up to the prison guards, the torture would've started, asking questions of the stranger's involvement in this land. None of Sanders' men liked anomalies in general, and certainly not anomalies in league with their sworn enemy.

Speaking of the sworn enemy, that filthy Mugdock was the reason for the incredible stink. It was like a farm animal that stayed out of the rain. It almost singed the nostrils it was so potent.

Did they not have the ability to smell? How could they stand themselves?

The Mugdock would've been tortured for a different reason—for revenge of comrades lost, of ancestors stolen, and material goods destroyed. Pretty simple, but the two Peoples had a long history.

Sanders, of course, would just as soon kill them both and be done with it. He didn't have the stomach for torture. Nor the patience, if he was being honest. A clean, fast death was the way to go. It's what he'd want for himself, and what he would give to someone else.

Wasn't his show, though. He was just the grunt. And, unfortunately, in charge of the prison. And that was only because the men listened to him where they wouldn't Sterling or Daniels. The Captain didn't want these prisoners roughed up just yet, and Sanders was the man keeping everyone at bay.

Sometimes he hated being good at his job. Especially when it smelled

this bad.

As if hearing the thought, the Captain walked in, an eraser wiping all Sanders' thoughts from his head. Shanti stood right behind his boss, Lucius in tow. All the men already standing around the prison backed against the wall, giving ample room for the leader of the city.

"Have they told you anything?" the Captain asked in that low, gravelly rumble that could loosen a man's bowels.

Sanders shook his head. "We've done some light coaxing, but nothing too extreme."

The Captain turned to Shanti, who was staring at the occupant furthest from the door. The foreigner. Her face looked like a freshly peeled scab, pain dripping down her face. She didn't notice the Mugdock, even though he was reaching through the bars at her. She didn't notice Sanders or any of Sanders' men. She only had eyes for that man in the far cell, silently gazing back.

The Captain stared at the Mugdock, a small nerve pulsing in his jaw. He spoke to Shanti. "We need information out of them. They won't tell us anything. I would rather not torture, but that is the next step. Can you... convince them to give us anything?"

Shanti's arm drifted toward the Captain, her gaze still locked with the far prisoner. "Touch lightly but keep within yourself. Don't reach. Lucius, don't wait so long if we lose ourselves."

Lucius shifted nervously, shuffling closer to the two as if it was the last thing he wanted to do. The Captain stared at Shanti's outstretched hand with determination, probably the only pretty girl he was afraid to touch. The Captain reached out tentatively and touched her arm with his pointer finger. His face strained immediately; hers cleared. Both of their eyes started glowing faintly, which was Lucius' cue to step closer, his hands reaching for their shoulders. In a few seconds it was over, Shanti stepping back quickly and the Captain reaching for the wall to steady himself. Sanders just shook his head.

"Better," Shanti said distractedly, her gaze finding the man in the last cell again. A small smile played on the prisoner's face.

"Start with the Mugdock. It won't matter if you kill him," the Captain said gently, his face all kinds of compassionate. "Hopefully you won't be so keyed up by the time you get to the other." Without looking away, he addressed the cluster of men in the room. "Everyone besides Lieutenant Lucius and Commander Sanders, clear out."

Sanders took two steps toward the door, watching the retreating backs of the prison guards with envy. Being in the same room with the Captain and the foreign woman was enough to get a man stabbed. Or worse. Much, much worse, in fact. Even though it might feel good. Which made it even worse still.

Shanti approached the Mugdock slowly with that panther's grace, her gaze often straying toward the man in the last cell.

"So you do exist," the foreigner said. His thick accent curled the words at the ends like burnt paper. His trickle of a smile was just visible in the gloom.

Shanti didn't stop at the Mugdock's cell. Instead, she kept stalking toward the smug foreigner. "Yes. You have found me."

"And you found a mate. We thought it was impossible." His gaze flicked toward the Captain.

"No. No mate. Not your master, nor anyone else."

"He is only my master when it suits. Until now, it has suited. But now I have found you, and you have found a mate. The legends say that once you find a mate, your power will increase. I like to be on the side of the winner. And you have a wealthy mate with knowledge to turn rocks into treasures. I could be an asset to you. I know how to multiply treasures."

Shanti squared her shoulders at the man in the cell. "The legends are wrong. I had a mate before, and I did not get stronger. Your kind killed him."

"I do not think you understand how I use the term *mate*."

"Maybe not, but it doesn't matter. You'll play both sides if allowed. But you will not be allowed. I will kill you long before then."

The man tilted his head, his light eyes filled with humor. "Confident, I see. But what if I escape?"

"You aren't fast enough to outrun my reach."

"You think you are that strong."

"Yes."

From his seat on the stone floor, the man leaned forward to analyze the girl. His pale eyes started to glow faintly, a smug smile crossing his face. Those sickly eyes turned to look directly at the Captain. "Maybe we should kill another one of your favorites. Or have you grown used to it?"

The Captain sucked in a noisy breath, his whole body flexing. His fists curled into tight balls, his face started to turn red from pain or anger, Sanders couldn't tell.

The prisoner's lips curled in a smile. "He is untrained. Amazing turn of luck."

"Cayan," Shanti said quietly, studying the foreigner. "Think of a shade behind your eyes. Envision the shade closed. If it is too hard, then envision using both hands to reach up, grab the shade with all your strength, and bring it down over your eyes."

The prisoner squinted, the curl of his lips dwindling. The smugness dripped off his face as he stared at the Captain.

"Yes, he learns fast. Shocking, I know," Shanti said conversationally. "In related news, that is a neat trick. Can you all do that?"

The foreign prisoner leaned back with a startled release of breath, then stood in a rush. He backed against the wall until his back slapped stone. Shock and incredulity warred on his face...until fear took over.

"Uh oh, now you can't get away." Shanti chuckled darkly, pain never having left her face. Her voice dipped an octave, hoarse with feeling. "You see, when you use little tricks like that, I learn them. Then I adapt them. Then I exploit them. Now I have you, little mouse. Where will you hide? Shall I make you dance?"

"No! That is impossible!"

"You have very little power, mouse. You were so confident before, but I bet you see now why I am sought. Do they know there is another? He is just as strong and his power hasn't even opened fully. He is raw power, and I am excellent at finesse. You see?"

The man started screaming, clawing at his face. He began swatting away invisible flies from his back and arms, terrified of something he couldn't see. Shanti leaned forward ever so slightly, her eyes glowing more now, her mouth turned down at the corners.

"Your people should not have killed someone I loved, little mouse," she said softly. "It makes for very little pity."

"No! It was not me. I did not touch him! "

"But you know who did. You were there," Shanti whispered, her face cracking, revealing visions of death. Of loss. Of misery so intense it sucked all the happy thoughts from the room and corroded their memories.

Sanders took a step forward even as the Captain did, not knowing exactly what to do, but wanting to cure this woman of that pain. The sight of it broke his heart. No one deserved to see a loved one killed, and then get confronted with it like this. No one.

He flinched when the prisoner yelled, stopping his advance. With a terrified expression, the foreigner jumped up and circled the small cell like a trapped animal. Panicked grunts escaped his mouth. Then whimpers. He turned toward the wall and started running with his head bent. He was trying to knock himself out to get away! After two steps, his legs lost their locomotion. He fell over sideways, crying in huge wracking sobs on the dirty floor.

“I can’t let you kill yourself, little mouse. Not yet. I need you. I need more tricks. You will die soon, though. All of you. For the things you have done. And the things you have allowed to happen.”

The man started screaming again. A high-pitched pronouncement of the utmost level of anguish. Lucius started forward, but the Captain was there before him, placing his hand on Shanti’s shoulder.

“How extraordinary, I can keep him from blacking out. Do you feel that, Cayan? His life is literally in my hands. What a nasty little mouse to think that up.”

“That’s enough, *mesasha*,” the Captain said softly.

Alarm caused Sanders to turn away from the charged scene to stare at the Captain. Then at Lucius, who had just stepped forward in concern, hands reaching toward their shoulders again.

“If I’ve landed in a lover’s triangle of some sort, I am going to quit,” Sanders muttered. He scratched the center of his chest where the lump had formed. “And if I develop a soft spot for that fool girl, I’m going to throw myself down a cliff.”

His muttering cut off as Shanti swayed. The Captain scooped her up as if she weighed ten pounds. Then those fierce blue eyes were looking at Sanders. “Make sure that man doesn’t kill himself. Talk to the Mugdock again. Tell him we will spare him the pain if he answers our questions.”

“Yes, sir,” Sanders answered crisply.

They swooshed out of the room, plunging Sanders and the prisoners into thick, syrupy silence, only broken by the occasional whimpers of the foreign man.

The Mugdock said, “You ask, I answer.”

Chapter 28

It had been three days since Shanti had started on the Inkna man. She had learned a handful of torture techniques the man was very familiar with, but nothing else of value. He didn't know what the plans were concerning the trading, only that he was in charge of killing the Captain. It seemed he allowed himself to be taken to this end. He hadn't thought anyone in the city had mental abilities.

His mistake.

Unfortunately, for the fact that he understood how important Cayan was to the city meant his kind did, too. If they knew, it was only a matter of time before the Graygual knew. A timer had started on Cayan's life. On the lives of everyone in the city, actually. Shanti had prolong the inevitable, but eventually Black Death would come calling, trying to snatch another soul for the Underworld.

Her duty was growing by the day.

Sanders had been gone for two days on the first trade run. Knowing that one of the Inkna wanted to kill the Captain was enough to make Shanti advise cancelling the trip. Sanders and the other blockheads decided, however, that it would be best to act like they had no idea of the treachery. They had brought plenty of guys, they were going to an open location, and they doubted anything more serious than failure to pay could happen.

It had not helped her rapport with the Captain and his top tier of men that she cursed them all and told them how absolutely stupid they all were.

"You look wonderful."

Shanti came out of her reverie to notice Molly standing over her, holding a strand of green, sparkling gems. It was a half an hour until the ball, which was mainly for the city's elite. Apparently anyone with some power wanted a reason to pat themselves on the back. She had no idea why the Captain insisted she go.

Shanti threw a quick glance down at her silk dress, which clung and flowed over her peaks and valleys, like a cascade of water over glistening rocks. She'd been asked to dress in something appropriate for her people, and

so she'd given specifications to a dressmaker for the design. She had not specified a color. What she received back was almost exactly the shade of green she'd worn and discarded in front of the Captain at their first meeting. She had a suspicion the dressmaker had a sense of humor. Also that Molly was a gossip.

"Wearing paint on my face isn't a great idea," Shanti declared. "When I rub my eyes, I'll smear it down my face."

"Yes, dear, but it makes you look glamorous. Very exotic."

Exotic. That was Molly's favorite descriptor. That, or striking. In other words, not beautiful, but well appreciated for putting in the effort.

Shanti didn't care. She wasn't here to find suitors.

She pulled her long, blond hair off her shoulders so Molly could fasten the necklace. "A necklace is a great way to allow someone to choke you without having to bring their own supplies," she muttered.

Molly tsk'ed. "Hush, now. The Captain won't let anything happen to you."

She stepped back and turned Shanti around. Her gaze glided over Shanti's form. "I do wish you would've worn something a little more...usual. I can see the outline of your thighs!"

Shanti ignored her.

"Anyway, the buggy is here. You look striking, dear."

A jostling ride in a horse drawn cabbage cart later—why she wasn't allowed to walk was beyond her—she and Molly, who was going as something called a chaperone, walked into Cayan's large mansion in the middle of the city. The residence was ablaze with candles, showing off spacious rooms with large windows and high ceilings. The furniture and decorations expressed the utter wealth of the city and the many extravagances they took for granted: metal stands holding candles, huge canvas tapestries on the walls, wood and leather furniture. The Inkna had a good eye for such things. It was only a matter of time before they showed up again, like sea foam before the tide.

They entered a spacious main room with candles hanging from large, shining metal and gem contraptions that looked like upside-down spiders. Candles on stands, like in the streets but more delicate, stood on tables and graced the walls. There were flames everywhere. Apparently no one realized how dangerous fire was.

“This mansion is a family heirloom,” Molly said conversationally, gesturing around them at the finery of the large mansion. “It has been in the family as long as the family has been in charge of running the city. Way back when they were called kings. Now they are Captains. That change came with our Captain’s great-great-grandfather, of course.”

“Uh huh.” Shanti didn’t care. She also had no idea why she said she’d come.

“Oh look, there he is now.”

Cayan was standing across the room dressed in a black, long sleeved shirt that hugged his upper body. His cloth pants moved and sighed with his body, proving men’s fashion, unlike women’s, was reasonably comfortable. His features were straight and bold, softened by his blue eyes and luscious mouth, especially when he dared smile and reveal the dimples. The shadow of raven facial hair had been removed for the occasion.

He cleaned up well.

Which was an understatement.

He lounged next to a willowy woman with slim shoulders, a long, delicate neck, and hair pulled up in weaves and twists accented with small flowers and buds. Her breasts heaved out of her cream colored dress in a display of cleavage most babies would reach for, and her waist cinched down in fashionable torture. Her skin was a hair darker than Cayan’s bronze, and her hair a touch lighter than Cayan’s wavy dark brown. She was distractingly beautiful.

“We’ll say hello to him later, dear. They are talking to a counselor.” Molly patted her arm and led her to a stand of drinks like a goat with a leash.

They hadn’t been there two heartbeats before Shanti heard, “Hello.”

Sterling was standing to her right, straight faced and grim, as usual, this time with his hand held out, palm up. He was a handsome man, if a girl didn’t have a sense of humor.

Shanti stared at his hand in confusion. He didn’t have the *Gift*, why would he request a mind link?

“Shake his hand, dear,” Molly whispered.

“It’s okay.” Sterling lowered his hand to his side. “That is just our custom. How do you greet someone in your land?” His stare was flat and intense, his complete focus on the conversation. Shanti tried not to squirm under the heavy gaze, strangely wanting to punch him.

“We offer a slight bow. If we are great friends or feel so inclined,

we'll touch, as you just did, but that represents a deeper intimacy. However, since I'm in your city, I won't be rude." She extended her hand, palm up.

"The woman has palm down, dear," Molly murmured.

Shanti flipped her hand. Without hesitation, gaze locked with hers in a flat stare, Sterling raised his hand, palm up, until it met Shanti's. Warm and calloused—if her eyes were closed, she'd know he was good with a bow and decent with a sword. Which was strange, since he was excellent with a bow and more than decent with a sword. He must've taken pains to soften his hands. Interesting.

The touch lingered for a second, then he pulled away. "You know that I have been trying to find your trainings."

"You know that I've been trying to evade."

He smiled slightly. "Yes. Not at first—I thought I was unlucky. Then you started having them when it was most convenient for me. Always a step ahead. It was not a subtle clue."

Shanti laughed. "It was good training for us. *Is* good training, I should say."

"They're getting better."

"That's funny, I would've said the same about you."

He laughed this time. "No. I'm learning the signs. I thought I was learning faster than you could teach. Then you sent me on a ghost trail."

"That was Leilius."

Sterling glanced over Shanti's shoulder then back to her. "I have left my date. I should get back to her. Before I do, I would just like to say... I wrongly judged you. I see that you're not like... I see that you mean well, and are what you say."

She couldn't repay the sentiment. He was exactly how she'd judged.

"Have a good evening." He gave her a deep bow, his interpretation of her custom, and walked away smoothly.

Without a moment for reflection, Molly took her by the arm and led her across the room. Why? Who could say. They picked a new place to stand seemingly at random, that spot just as good as the first. The next spot was, too. If Molly wanted exercise, they could have walked to the ball in the first place.

"How long do we have to stay?" Shanti asked as they followed a slowly moving crowd around the room like cattle.

"At least until the dancing. Do you want something to drink besides

water?”

“No. Thank you.”

For the next couple dozen minutes Molly chatted, introduced her to a handful of people who stared, and walked around the room slowly. It was boring and awful and Shanti just wanted to go home. Until she saw Jerrol. He was with a woman who had many gems on her neck, all different colors, and a bright purple dress. She was pretty and he was beautiful. Shanti wanted him if only to make love while looking into those earth brown eyes, so like Romie’s she got a tight feeling in her gut every time she saw him.

“Shanti.”

And that ruined it.

She turned to Cayan, standing tall and broad, no willowy woman in sight. In fact, Molly had wandered away as well. Just great.

“Hi Cayan.”

His gaze connected with hers, giving her a similar stare as Sterling had, but not as strangely flat. He raised his hand slowly, palm up. It wasn’t a good idea, but then, people were watching—he probably wanted to look normal.

After a brief hesitation she touched her palm to his, holding her mind in check and ready to battle. Instead of his torrent, though, she got a pleasant vibration of power, available but not used. In addition, that strange spicy feeling unfurled deep in her stomach, sizzling up her ribcage and fizzing through her limbs. She asked him about the latter.

“The spicy feeling--yes. I like it. Is it not normal?”

“I don’t know. No one has ever mentioned it to me if it is. You’re doing well with your control.”

“I’ve been practicing religiously.”

“Good.”

They broke contact, Cayan letting his focus flick to her dress and back. “Your dress is exquisite. It is *risque* but covers everything. Artistic but simple. Cut beautifully. I think the dressmakers are already trying to fabricate it. Many women are jealous.”

“Jealous of a dress. Silly.”

“Jealous of the enchanting woman, not the dress she is in.”

“Enchanting—spell casting?”

Cayan’s eyes twinkled. “If you please.”

Shanti turned away to look at the crowd laughing and chatting, most

of the party often glancing toward her and the Captain. “I’ve never heard witches talked of in a positive way. I think the jealousy is of your date. She is the staple of beauty, is she not?”

Cayan’s gaze was still on her. “She is, yes. How are your nightmares? Lucius tells me you have them every night.” To her scathing glance he said, “Your walls are thin and your screams loud.”

The Captain had stuck her in a tiny, one bedroom house, more aptly called a hut, attached to Lucius’ much larger house at the back of the city. She had been given the illusion of privacy while Lucius’ duty of spying was made easy.

“Enough about me, let’s talk about me...” Shanti articulated in a voice so dry it was amazing one of the nearby candles didn’t light it on fire. She looked away.

“Sterling spoke to you earlier. What did he say?” the Captain asked.

“Aren’t real nosey, are you?”

“Not *real* nosey, no.”

Her glare promised eternal pain. He answered by smiling, his dimples transforming his face into something just shy of perfection. Why did she want to punch everyone she talked to tonight?

“My clothes are easy to move in, and yours aren’t. There isn’t much you can do,” the Captain said easily, reading her mind. Or her face.

“Isn’t there?” Like a needled child, wanting to get even, she gathered power and let it blossom, the air around them crackling with the electricity of it.

His smile disappeared immediately. He grabbed her arm with a quick hand, turning her body toward the wall, probably trying to hide her glowing eyes from onlookers. Her power leapt to him, mingled and spread, vibrating between his body and hers, traveling across their skin like a fizzling plague, igniting little pulses that pooled into their bodies. The spicy feeling became a pleasing scent. His own power rose, unmasked, calling to her, desperate to open out and join, barely kept at bay by his massive strength of will.

The seconds ticked away, chaotic power surging around them, threatening to break free. Shanti desperately forced it down, trying to collapse it, using her life’s training to try and tuck it away. She struggled against Cayan’s answering attraction, the power so intense it seemed to draw from deep in the earth, quaking the air around them with his raw power.

“He informed me of his amendment to his previous judgments,”

Shanti said in a strained voice, trying to control her breathing, jerking her arm away from his bare hand, then grabbing his arm, encased in fabric, to turn him to the wall, too. His eyes glowed more now than they ever had.

“I don’t know that I can hold it, Shanti,” Cayan whispered in a tension-filled voice.

“Step outside. Look at the sky, and envision throwing your mind up to the nearest star. If that isn’t enough, envision roaring with the power. Just make sure to direct it up or we’ll all get a blast. I’ll find Lucius and send him out in case you throw all your life’s energy with it.”

He nodded, his whole body tight, and walked swiftly to the door. Their power ripped in half, fizzling in his wake. Shanti clutched her own power tightly, used to managing its surges, although struggling with the amount now battering against her. She spotted Lucius across the room, speaking to a pretty girl with lust-filled eyes. Still struggling for control, though grappling with less of a burden now that Cayan wasn’t coaxing her power higher, she walked gracefully, attempting to fit in. But when older men edged away warily, she realized her grace was another man’s nightmare. So she settled for a fast walk and a lazy hand on Lucius’ arm.

Lucius turned to her with a question in his eyes.

“The Captain needs you outside. Quickly. Possibly Sterling, too. But only you two. You might need to... *carry* the conversation...”

Lucius barely gave a parting word to the woman he had been leaning into a moment before, leaving Shanti with the impression that they were either very close, or she wasn’t all that important to him. One would understand, and the other didn’t matter. And since she had nothing else to do, she figured she might as well meddle.

“Hello, I’m Shanti.” She couldn’t hide the strain in her voice, wondering when this flux would die down.

The woman, sweet and delicate, tore her gaze from Lucius’ back and met Shanti’s. She smiled in a practiced way. “Yes, hi. Lucius mentioned you. You are foreign.”

There was no movement toward hand touching. Possibly only men and women shook? A glance at Molly told Shanti that the older woman was irritated, but that didn’t help much.

“I am foreign, yes, that’s right. Did you come with Lucius?”

“No. We are friendly, but I am just getting to know him.”

“Ah. Well, he should be ba—“

A burst of power rocked her body, making currents in her blood and wiring her jaw shut. She reached for the wall and just barely found it before toppling. Molly was there in a minute, straightening her. Asking if she was all right. Shanti heard a ripple of nervous laughter around the room, everyone having felt something bizarre with no explanation.

“I’m okay,” Shanti managed, her voice shaky and her body starting an answering growl. Power started to build on its own, reaching away from her body, thrashing against her ironclad self-control. It was reaching toward Cayan. It was reaching toward its mate. The little mouse had been right.

Blood boiled, bubbling up her spine and infusing her with an elation, the equal to which she had never before felt. She stumbled outside, Molly trying to cover for her. Once there she broke away and ran, not knowing what her body was doing, not understanding what this power was, or how to control it. Her dress tore down the sides, her hair flew from her back. She pushed faster, trying to run it off, feeling the night embrace her, feeling like a wild animal on the hunt.

She made it to the park and kept going until she was at the wall. Flipping off her sandals and scraping all available skin, she was up and over and running again, trying to overcome the feeling. Trying to outspurt it. Trying to get to a safe distance where she could figure out a way to extinguish it.

She felt the minds of sentries around her, watching, in their trees, protecting the people, wondering why this half clothed, bloody woman was running. She felt an arrow nock. She didn’t know how she knew—it was an action, not an emotion, but she did. They probably thought she was trying to escape. She stopped and knelt, grabbing each mind with ease, the power bubbling, needing action.

Using a trick she’d learned from the nasty little mouse, she cut out the function of their minds. Not dead, just unconscious. A sleeping spell of sorts, like a coma. One sentry fell and she hoped he’d be okay. Following her own advice, feeling ripped in half, she looked up to the sky, and *ROARED*.

It all went black.

Chapter 29

Sanders opened his eyes slowly. His head pounded. The last thing he remembered was a swarm of little guys descending on his trade party. He'd planned for that, of course. He hadn't planned on the feeling of needles prickling his eyes. That had hurt. Real bad. He'd tried to keep fighting, but fighting three guys when you're nearly blind wasn't an easy chore. And now he knew.

He hated that that foreign girl had been right. She'd probably insist on rescuing him just to rub it in his face.

"You are awake."

"Yes, that is exactly the accent I was expecting to hear," Sanders said, not bothering to sit up. He lay on cold, hard stone in near darkness. The only light came from one torch on the opposite wall. Being that it was a dungeon, there wasn't a ton of natural lighting. "Did I piss myself, or is that smell just an added attraction of his lovely little bed and breakfast?"

"I am told you are the leader of this outfit."

"Yup."

A soft scrap sounded somewhere to the right, beyond the bars. "I am not planning to kill you. I simply need to know some information."

"You might as well just say 'the shoe's on the other foot'."

"The shoe on the foot?"

Sanders snorted in a self-deprecating sort of way. "Never mind. What did you want to know?"

"Would you like some food?"

"Easy ones first, huh? Food would be great. Unless it's poisoned. Then no thanks."

The gloom was dank and smelt musty, the space he was imprisoned in barely larger than his outstretched body. Men shifted at the door, keeping watch.

Well, he hurt too bad to escape anyway, so before the torture started he might as well just take a little nap.

Chapter 30

“I don’t know why they even gave you your own place. You always end up in mine.”

Shanti was in the familiar hospital room with the familiar nightgown that tangled her legs and gave her nightmares of people tackling her. And, of course, the same dry witted doctor who thought lecturing her would do some good. He’d made it clear he didn’t care about her sleeping preferences.

“Did they find me outside the wall or did I stumble in somehow?” Shanti asked as she wiped the sleep from her eyes.

“Same old story. The Captain miraculously found you even though Molly had nearly the whole town looking, then brought you in, yelled for everyone to drop everything and see to the foreign girl who can’t stand on her own two feet for longer than ten minutes, and left with a promise to return. Well, promise and threat are synonymous.”

“He was okay?”

“Actually, no. But that might be the first time you’ve asked. Finally starting to think of someone other than yourself?” The doctor stopped putting his items into a leather bag for a moment as he looked at Shanti. “Ah, the permanent scowl must mean no. Dare to dream. Oh well. To answer your question, the Captain could barely stand. He apparently walked out of the ball fine but didn’t return. He wouldn’t let me see to him, though, so I have no idea what ails him. Though it seems you do. Care to enlighten?”

“I don’t make a habit of messing around in the Captain’s business.”

“Hmmm, I see a shocking lack of proof to that statement. Regardless, I must leave you. I have five sentries to care for. It seems they all fell asleep at their posts. One even fell out of his tree. Amazingly, he didn’t wake up upon hitting the ground. Suspiciously, they happened to be in your vicinity at the time. How strange. But the Captain says there is no correlation so, as the lowly working man, I must defer.”

“I didn’t catch half of what you said, but you seem bitter.”

The doctor stopped halfway out of his crouch and gave Shanti a flat look intended to portray his suffering at her presence. She smiled in response.

“I used to have an easy life,” he said whimsically, picking up his things. “Colds, muscle strains, the occasional accident with a weapon. Now I have unexplained mental weakness, everyone has holes in them, broken limbs—“

Still mumbling, the doctor left the room. A second after that, still in her nightgown, Shanti left behind him. Her head was fine, her body felt great, and that bloody power was starting to build again. She needed to start working with the larger flow or move out of the city. Only two choices at the moment.

As she neared her small bedroom, she breathed in the rich smell of living forest. Her living quarters, which were barely big enough to turn around in, were an add-on to Lucius’ much larger residence. Currently he either wasn’t home or had someone over because his front door was closed. It was too bad—she wanted to ask him about Cayan’s release of power. She knew Lucius would be honest with her.

Halfway through her door she froze, sucking in a familiar masculine smell she hadn’t realized she recognized. Lying on her bed with one arm thrown over his face and the other resting on his flat stomach was none other than Cayan. He was in his normal blue uniform but his shoes were off and set neatly beside the bed. His large feet hung slightly off the end.

“What are you doing here?” Her words sounded like a hasty release of breath.

He lifted his arm away, revealing his clear blue eyes with their dark blue rim surrounded by a tired red. Seeing her, he sat up slowly, moving as though he was a hundred years old. “I needed a place to rest without disturbance and without being in a hospital room.”

“What about Lucius?”

“He’s entertaining a young lady. And he judges. Then lectures.”

Having the city’s hub in her room without the proper control over her power was bordering on disastrous. Plus...what about privacy? She didn’t need much, nor did she have many possessions, but having someone lying in her bed who wasn’t a lover was a bit...awkward. Her personal things, such as they were, were out in the open. He needed to know a few things about her, sure, but those were historical in nature so as to arm himself and his city with knowledge of what would come. There was absolutely no need for him to know the color of her undergarments, or how she liked her weapons stowed, or... how sometimes she wasn’t the most tidy of people. That stuff was

embarrassing and bordering on intimate. It was stuff to share with people close to you, not a city leader, handsome army Captain, and serious pain in the ass.

She crossed to the single chair opposite the bed and sat. This room had a closet, a dresser for the few clothes she had, her bed, a tiny table with candle supplies, and the chair she currently sat in. Through a door to her right was the tiny kitchen: not much more than a sink, stove, and small table. There was no place in her living quarters to entertain a non-naked guest. And despite his near perfect form, she absolutely did not want this man naked anywhere near her person. Only bad things could happen.

“Why did that happen?” Cayan asked with a grave look into her silent mental turmoil. The space issue apparently wasn’t playing hell on his nerves.

All Shanti could do was shake her head. She didn’t know. And it scared her. It was so much power. Too much. She didn’t know how to control it, and it was still pinging in her body, dancing around like skeletons in an earthquake, waiting to be used. She didn’t even have to open her awareness to feel the minds around her anymore. She didn’t have to try to clutch them. Those minds were hers; they were just on loan to their owners.

“Did you ask the prisoner?” Cayan asked, settling back down and throwing his arm over his tired eyes.

“Yes. He just repeated what he said before. If I find a mate, my power will increase. Mate is not wife. Or manwife—I forget the term Junice used.”

“Husband.”

“Mate is...the power’s mate. The other half. I’m not sure if it has to be in a man’s body, but it sounded like it. It’s time for you to tell me what you know. But maybe...outside...”

“It’s time for you to *show* me what *you* know. Teach me.”

“I’ve shown you a portion. So far this is all one-sided.” Should she mention moving outside again? Was he not uncomfortable? Because she was uncomfortable.

Cayan scratched his head then wiggled deeper into the mattress. “The power comes from the Ancient’s. The Old Blood. No matter your belief system, there were a People who walked this land at the beginning. Every religion talks of them. They were the dawning of human kind. To them, power was another sense. Touch, see, hear, taste, smell, perceive. No one knows where they originated, or even if they were a myth.

“Then, as humankind grew, the trail of the Old Blood got weaker.

With each generation it got weaker still. In some places it vanished entirely. That is because the bounty of the blood is passed from mother to child. The sex of the child is unimportant, but the Gifts, as you call them, are in lineage with the mother.” He paused for a second, letting that sink in.

“So spreading your seed to a city full of people won’t matter? You’ll sire large, strong men, but none with *Gifts*?”

“That’s what the stories say. I have nothing written on this, of course. This is all from my grandmother’s diaries, left for me when I was born. She died shortly after. As did my mother.”

Barely suppressed emotion colored his words, but he hid it within the deep rumble of his voice. He wasn’t hiding the flashes of pain from his mind, though. He hadn’t known his mother, not in any real way. Unlike Shanti, who at least had vague memories from her youth, Cayan only had a longing.

“Then you are right, I would’ve regretted killing you,” Shanti said quietly.

A crease formed between his eyebrows. “The bounty bestowed can come in many forms. You are probably an expert on that, from what you’ve said. Your people were isolated; the blood stayed strong. Mothers passed it to daughters who had daughters who stayed within the land to continue to pass it on. Various gifts were bestowed, all in partial potency, until you showed up and got a full blast.”

“Why don’t more of your people have it? And how come you didn’t know you had it?”

“My great-great-grandmother was of the Old Blood. She was a wanderer—not originally from this area. Met my great-great-grandfather on one of her travels and fell in love. She decided to settle in. It’s from her this information, and my Gift, is passed down. Since her, I come from a line of daughters, each having only one child, until me. I am the first boy. And while each mother tried constantly for more children, they only had one to term. It is another reason the blood has nearly disappeared from the land. Fertility. I was told that women with the Old Blood have a harder time bringing a baby to term. She did not know why...but it sounds like your people had the concentration to figure it out...”

“Like-*Gifts* with like-*Gifts* often had two or three.” Shanti cut in. “One family, both parents with the *Warring Gift*, had four. It was the record. Non-like-*Gifts* but still having a *Gift* was less. Usually one, maybe two. A *Gift* with a non- *Gift* had one if they were lucky. It was why my father didn’t

think he'd have a child. It was why my grandfather hated the match with my mother—until I came, of course. Then my mother rubbed it in his face constantly. Until—“ Shanti cut off and swallowed. No need to go down that road. They both knew what happened; Shanti didn't need to voice it.

Without sitting up, eyes still closed, Cayan spread out an arm and put his hand on her knee. The touch vibrated, and the power shifted deep within, but it continued to simmer rather than explode. He left his hand for a second, the spicy feeling igniting, then removed it back to his flat, bumpy stomach. Aside from potentially city-damaging behavior, the gesture, however small, was welcomed. It had helped for the moment, which was all she could ask for with a history like hers.

“I...suspected,” Cayan said in a reflective tone. “I wondered if anything materialized. I mean, I could miraculously bend people to my will at times. Nothing immoral, just... And I occasionally had this extra awareness. But my Grandmother thought my mother would be around to identify any potential. To train it. Since she wasn't...”

“All you had was wondering.”

Shanti couldn't guess what that must've been like. Possibly having such a wonderful, necessary element and having no way to really know. To work with it, or use it. She couldn't imagine *not* having it.

“Did like-*Gifts* see a flux in power?” Cayan asked with his eyes closed.

Shanti thought back. The *Warring* family had all been very strong. Both Jacinti and Franie could cripple from many spans away, but they were older. She hadn't known them before they'd connected. Although—

“It shouldn't matter if they were together,” she said out loud, voicing her thoughts. “We aren't mated, but the power reaches for the other half. We always had like-*Gifts* training with like—I had always assumed it was because they needed to learn within their element. But maybe the power fed off each other, too. Women have always fought and trained with men, so both halves were always present.”

“Maybe that's why women have always fought in your culture...”

“Or maybe it is a bonus for having the foresight to understand that women can be effective if trained correctly.”

“Maybe.” Cayan's mouth turned up in a toothy grin just visible under the large bicep thrown over his eyes.

He was taunting her. If anything, it made the proximity more

awkward. Business, okay fine, she was getting by. Playful...no, absolutely not. As Sanders would say, they weren't friends and they weren't screwing, so they didn't need to have a potluck. And because they weren't friends or screwing there was no way he should be still lying—not even sitting after an invitation, but *lying*—on her bed! Her *bed!* On which also lay some deep purple undergarments that she'd ordered from the dressmaker. They were silk and shiny and luxurious, not to mention small so he probably hadn't unnoticed, but...some intimate areas had rubbed against the fabric currently against his thigh. How embarrassing was that?

Shifting in her seat, she thought about making a grab for that fabric. But more important was trying to get this conversation over with as fast as possible. “So, there might be more of me? Us?”

“In theory.”

“But it's unlikely they'd have the full range of ability.”

“Maybe it crops up when it is needed. Like in a time of war. Now, for example. But regardless,” he took his arm away from his face and met her eyes, “you only thought there was you. Now there is us. There could be more.”

Shanti sighed. “Well, there is us for now.”

He nodded. “There is us for now.”

“And that's all you have?”

“Um, yes. I thought it would make a bigger impact.”

“Uh huh.” Shanti felt drained even though the power lay in wait, simmering just below the surface. “Interesting that I would end up here.”

“Not really. You tend to gravitate toward the thick trees. Your people made a dwelling in a forest even though sometimes you had barely enough. Maybe the trees call.”

“They do.”

“Then is it so strange you headed for the trees where someone else with the same ability might reside?”

“Yes.”

He smiled again. “Right, okay. A cynic.”

“If what you say is true, the Graygual can only breed you if they have me. So you will be useless.”

“Unless they find others.”

“Yes, there is that.”

“Or don't believe the legends.”

“That, too.”

“Now it’s your turn.” His eyes were hungry and wary at the same time.

It was slightly reassuring, knowing that he couldn’t create little war monsters on his own. It settled her turmoil somewhat. However, they could never get caught together, which meant they should separate. At the same time, they were stronger within the vicinity of each other’s power. It was a complicated problem with no easy solution. Currently, she was too tired to try and unravel it.

Bringing her mind back to the problem of his inexperience, she said, “We’ll start tonight. Wear black so we blend into the night.”

“Does that help?”

“You being undisturbed? Yes.”

He nodded but didn’t make a move to leave.

“Should, uhh, I give you a minute?” *To get out?*

She didn’t want to rush him, him being the Captain and everything, but she was tired, strung out, and wanted to battle with him in a large office somewhere instead of her tight quarters.

“I need a nap. Join me.” He patted the bed next to him, his eyes still closed.

He wasn’t smiling but his tone was light. He was telling a joke, she was sure of it. It wasn’t amusing.

“I’ll just... give you some time. On your own.” And she flew out the door in search of a cluster of trees where she could wait him out. She didn’t miss the dark chuckle as she shut the door behind her.

Chapter 31

It felt like his hair was on fire, starting from the follicles. Sanders blinked his eyes and shook his head, trying to rid his head of the constant stream of sweat.

In the dark hovel where they kept him, they had hit him with pain before even bothering with the first question. Still panting, they'd stripped bare and sprayed him with freezing water. Still no questions came. Next they strapped him to a chair and hit him with more pain.

And here he sat, clenching his teeth so as not to scream, waiting patiently for eventual death. Part of him hoped Shanti would come. She would strut through the door in a violet-eyed rage, throw her brain around however she did it, and have them groveling to tell her all they knew. He'd seen it. He was positive that what he was feeling was nothing compared to what she could do.

He sighed in relief as the pain washed away.

"Now, Sir Commander, we have a couple questions for you."

Sanders nodded at the familiar voice, his breath rising and falling, his heart hammering so hard his chest vibrated. "Fire away."

"Auh-hem." It was a throat clear. A small man stepped into view behind the bars. He was wearing a crisp white shirt and gray pants. His hair was muddy brown and his skin was as fair as Shanti's. Next to him stood a man with a similar stature, though hunched slightly, wearing all black.

"I am so sorry to do this to you, of course," said the white shirted man.

"Oh, of course, yes." Sanders chuckled darkly. What was the point of being polite when you were torturing somebody?

"If you answer my questions the pain will stop. If you do not, then it will continue."

"Seems straight forward. How will you know if I lie?"

White Shirt gestured toward Black Shirt. "He will know."

"I guess I'll just take your word for it."

A man wearing a brown sack scurried up with a stool and placed it

directly behind White Shirt. He then scurried away like a rodent. Although, even a rodent would be noticed. That man had been invisible. This must be the hierarchy Shanti had been talking about.

“Tell me about this Captain of yours.” White Shirt sat down and crossed his legs, the model of patience. He had all day. Or night. It was impossible to tell time in the belly of a dungeon. That was part of the purpose of the environment—that alone could drive people to madness.

Sanders pretended to think, angling his head to the dungeon ceiling. “Well, he is a tall man, prone to fits of anger, but really just a soft little teddy bear on the inside—”

Pain. Like sand blasting his open eye, scrubbing away at the retina, digging into his soft membranes. He squeezed his eyes shut, but it didn’t help, the pain so acute he could barely think.

Sanders’ whole body flexed, trying to rip his hands away from the chair legs where they were tied and so he could shield himself. After a year or a minute, the pain stopped suddenly, the memory of the pain lingering.

“Shall we try that again?” Rhetorical question. Sanders didn’t bother answering. “What type of person is this Captain?”

“He likes reading, long walks in the forest, has a warm heart and a soft spot for perky—“ A blast so hot it turned his vision white. Razors scraped across his bare eye.

When he could breathe again, Sanders said, “—women, but I bet you thought I was going to say breasts!”

White Shirt stared at him for a long moment. “Full power.”

Black Shirt answered in a brutal, concise language Sanders had only heard for the first time recently. He wished again that Shanti were here. She would know what they were saying. She had spent a few sessions with their guest speaking his language. That had really rattled him. Sanders should have tried to learn.

The next stretch of pain wrapped around Time and warped it. Small needles sticking into his retina, then moving out to the whites. Nowhere else, just his eyes. Sanders wondered if they could blind him. He wondered if it would hurt just as much after. He bet it probably would. They weren’t actually touching him, so this was something going on in his head. It would remain even if his eyes were plucked out, he was sure of it.

“Now, again, tell me about this Captain. What are his weaknesses?” White Shirt was a persistent little fucker.

“Beautiful women. But then, we all have that problem, don’t we?”

“Not all. Does he have a particular beautiful woman?”

“He has a whole list of them, actually.” Sanders panted for a moment, light headed. Then went on. “If you are trying to get in his pants, you have a lot of competition. He is a bit of a ladies man, if you know what I mean.”

Another blast, but this time much less potent. A mild finger prod instead of a sharp needle prick.

Black Shirt swayed wildly, falling into the wall. The pain cut off as he muttered something to White Shirt.

White Shirt waved him away, staring at Sanders with a patient air.

“Staring contest, huh? Just as bad. I’ll sit this one out.” Sanders hung his head, wishing for another nap.

A shuffle had him glancing up, noticing another guy in a black shirt, this one the size of a woman but lacking the breasts. He took the place of the first.

“Oh good, we have enough for a party,” Sanders said flippantly, wondering how many torturers they had. “I hope you guys dance.”

“How is the government set up?” White Shirt asked.

“You need a name,” Sanders decided. “I like to get names of those I am intimate with. I will call you Betty. And your friend there will be Martha.” Betty raised his eyebrows, his smile dwindling. “Our government is set up with members who care. Bleeding hearts, some of them. Dull lot of—“

This time the pain was all around his skull in a throb. It was kind of a dull ache. It was the worst headache he’d ever had, basically. Less awful than the eye scrub. Small miracles.

“Seems Martha has different talents,” Sanders wheezed. “Not fair taking turns, though. There is only one of me and two of you. But I guess we know who has the most stamina.”

“Do you have reason to believe your Captain will come for you?”

“Oh no, why would he? He and I rarely see each other. He’ll probably send some other troop, if he sends anyone at all.”

Martha said a couple words in their choking language.

White Shirt smiled in a placating sort of way. “You are lying.”

“Yup. But about which part? Him coming, or him and I seeing each other?”

Martha shook his head. There was another exchange and suddenly it felt like his head was being split down the middle. He wanted to reach up and

see if his brain was oozing out the sides.

He missed Junice. He didn't want to die down in this hovel and never see his baby. The selfish part of him did hope the Captain came. If anyone could get him out, it was the Captain. Or Shanti.

When the pain receded, Martha was swaying.

"You boys don't last long do ya?" Sanders rasped.

"They will regain strength. Will you?"

Sanders tried to shrug. He tried not to let his head hang. He managed neither. Thankfully they were out of torturers for the moment. They apparently didn't believe in physical labor, which was fine by him. He closed his eyes and let sleep take the pain away.

Chapter 32

Later that night, Shanti found herself sitting cross legged under a large Elm tree, balanced and relaxed, making peace with the undercurrent of power alive in her body. Cayan sat across from her, also cross-legged, dressed in loose sweats. It was slightly disconcerting having such a large man, mostly a stranger, so close without weapons handy, especially after the last year of being alone and hunted, but she was determined to attempt this. She needed to see where her future lay, and he was pivotal in that. Plus, there was no embarrassing personal mess outdoors, and there was much more room to scuffle or run away, so this was probably a better situation.

Cayan sat peacefully, focused on Shanti, his hands on his thighs. He'd slept in her bed all afternoon while she'd slept in a copse of trees, cursing him. Finally, when he left, she headed back and stared in disbelief at the disturbed sheets. He'd crawled inside. He'd also moved her strip of purple undergarment to the table with the candle supplies. It was crossing the line, but she was too embarrassed to complain to Lucius about it and ask about retaliation protocol. Instead, she'd stripped the sheets so as to have Molly wash them of his smell, which was some sort of mannish musk. It wasn't unpleasant but...still.

He'd met her in the trees at dark, as she'd asked. She hadn't told him where she was, knowing he'd find her regardless. And he had.

"You need to ground yourself," she started, not sure where to look but not wanting to meet his eyes. "Feel the trees around you. Feel the ground under you. Feel the air, notice if it moves, notice how it interacts with the leaves. Center yourself in the world around you. Try to clear your mind."

A quick glance revealed that he was looking at her.

"It helps if you close your eyes when you're learning..."

He held her gaze for a moment before closing his eyes.

"Let me know when you feel balanced. When you let go of all your worries, and all the things you have to do, and whatever else that goes on in your head."

She could just make out a dimple deepening in the moonlight. It

meant he was smiling. Or smirking. Probably thinking she sounded ridiculous. Which she kind of did. She was used to working with kids.

“Ready,” he said quietly in his deep gravel.

“Now you need to open your mind like a flower.”

She watched him, noting a crease between his eyebrows as he looked inward. She took this opportunity to assess him without interruption. His masculine face looked like it was chiseled from stone, then sanded by a great artist. His bone structure was defined and symmetrical, with dark bushy brows that gave his eye sockets a striking depth. When he wasn't busy being so serious and in control, he had a pleasant vibe about him—a charisma that exuded a sort of animalistic primal quality. He was one well-made, handsome bastard. And judging by all the women batting their eyes at him, he was in demand. Some men just had it all.

Too rich for her blood, though—as Xavier said about the baker's daughter, much too high-maintenance. Chocolate was delicious, but when it was too rich, it rotted the teeth.

“I feel your laughter,” Cayan murmured, his eyebrow crease more pronounced. “Is it me?”

“I didn't turn my humor into a physical reaction, so you felt my funny.”

“Mirth.”

“Okay, linguist, you felt my mirth. And yes it was you, but no, not your practice. Anyway, what do you feel?”

“What do you mean it was me but not my practice?” he pushed.

“I was laughing at your personal life, rather than this specific moment.”

“What about my personal life?”

“You are being sidetracked. Return to your practice. *Focus.*” She waited a beat, then said, “What do you feel?”

“Can't you touch me and find out?”

“Normally I would be in constant contact, yes. But I can't control the amount of power in me right now, and don't want your half to excite it.”

“It, or you?”

“Same th—“ His dimples dug deeply into his cheeks. He was playing with her again.

“Give me your hand and we'll try,” Shanti said warily.

The humor wiped from his face like dew from a window. His hand,

palm upward, reached out from his body. She softly slid her hand along his, marveling at the size difference between them. An electric tingle vibrated her skin and flashed up her arm, but no surge. No whirlwind. No ground dropping away...

Their sighs chorused.

“For one,” she said, “your mind is closed up. Which is actually helpful at the moment. For two, I’m glad to see your hands are not soft.”

She felt confusion softly drift around her awareness. His hand involuntarily squeezed.

“Sterling’s hand is weirdly soft,” she replied to his unasked question.

“He uses a lot of lotion. His woman doesn’t like rough hands.”

“Then she is with the wrong man.”

“I think he likes that she is delicate.”

Shanti rubbed her palm around the rough skin of Cayan’s, his callouses screaming out his prowess with weapons. Screaming out safety and protection. “Ah. I’m sure he does with his history—don’t freak out, he told me. It isn’t gossip. I informed him that I killed five of those women. I have an idea what he’s been through. Unlucky.”

“I remember when he was returned. He is a few years older than me—he was in a higher level of training—but I was home when he was brought to my father. It wasn’t pretty.”

“Neither was the way I killed the clan I found.”

“He won’t admit it, but I’m sure he’s grateful.”

“Let’s get back to it. If we don’t figure you out, then he and many others might end up being subjected to worse.”

“Many women have tried to figure me out. Haven’t been able to.”

“I liked you better when you were always serious,” Shanti mumbled.

“I liked you better when you were naked.”

“Most men do. Now focus.”

She scooted a little closer and took his other hand. “You are holding everything so deeply within you. It probably feels like a weight, or a heavy ball, right behind your rib cage. Imagine it...dissolving, bubbling upwards and spreading out, like tentacles...”

She felt the blockage within curl tighter.

“Are you afraid of losing control?” she asked quietly.

“Yes.”

“Don’t be. Hopefully we’ve already hit the ceiling, and we both

survived. I think we'll be okay. I'm more comfortable now; I can be your safety net."

He took a deep breath. "Since my dad died, I'm not used to relying on anyone."

"I care about that, and later I would love to talk about it in length, but right now I am not interested in excuses. Let go of your hold."

He started chuckling. "Is that your default sensitive response?"

"Not usually, but we don't have the time. Usually I..." Shanti shook her head, shedding her distraction. "*Focus.*"

"You're tough," he muttered with a smile, his mind going inward.

"You do this naturally. How do you normally access your power?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I think about things I want to know, then I just kind of...know them."

Shanti blew out a breath. "I suddenly know why trainers hate starting with talent late. Erasing bad habits... Okay, take off your shirt."

Cayan's eyes snapped open. He stared at her for one long beat before doing as instructed.

"Okay." She crawled to his side and kneeled, positioning one hand in the center of his warm back, and one nestled between his pecs. She couldn't stop a flitted grin, fighting her desire to let that hand roam around his well-built chest. The man was a perfectly defined powerhouse. She hadn't seen anyone this well-proportioned in useful muscle...ever, maybe. The men from her land were thinner, lithe. He was...not.

Shanti tried to clear her mind, somewhat distracted by the tingling in both her palms. The warm spicy feeling in her body grew, the effect of extended contact. "You need to stop focusing on that lump of power. Return to balancing yourself. Listen to the night. Feel the trees. Let your head get light. Let me know when you are in that headspace."

After about a minute he nodded. The tingle spread up her arms and into her chest. Heat kindled somewhere deep, whether from the power merging, or something else. Half of her mind was focusing on the task at hand. The other half scanned the cords of muscular armor for weaknesses. She would eventually fight him again, and hopefully, with a little scrutiny, she could find some weak points. It might be cheating, but she was smaller—it was allowed.

"Don't focus on my hands," she murmured, scanning his body. She couldn't help it—it was chocolate for the eyes. "Think of the trees. Hear them

move in the wind. Hear the small animals flit from branch to branch. Hear the whine of the insects around you. Stay balanced..."

She drew her hands up his chest and back slowly and lightly, trailing her fingertips across his smooth skin. She spread out her fingers and brushed his skin, hoping he was loose enough that the power would flow. His mind relaxed further as her hands went wide, moving in large circles, working with her mind to release his unconscious hold. They should have done this before now. She shouldn't have let him lose control before he'd ever tried to gain it in the first place. His personality didn't respect failure, and now he would try that much harder for control. It made her job so much harder.

An hour in and energy crackled between them, but nothing more. No progression. His body was brimming with power, his hold thankfully dissolved, but his control not engaged. He was letting her solidly lead, which would have been great if she was dealing with a five-year-old and a tenth of the power he possessed.

"I want you to envision that flower." She worked her hands higher up his chest, feeling his power unconsciously following, and his mind focusing on the night and her touch. "A tulip. It is a bulb, planted in your sternum. In the spring it crawls up through the dirt, which is what you are feeling now. The tulip is flowering right behind your eyes. What color is the stem?"

"Bright, healthy green," he whispered.

"What color is the closed bud?"

"Deep red."

"What color is the pollen on the inside?"

His power blossomed outward, shooting out in all directions. She kept her hands on his body so he had a point of solidity—she didn't need him grabbing her mind like a safety raft.

"Keep balanced," she cautioned quietly. "You have found the extra sense you spoke of. It is fragile, though. A life of its own. Don't try at it too hard or it will collapse. Have confidence it is there, and it will not fail you. Now let it go, and we'll try that again."

Cayan took a huge breath and opened his eyes. His power shriveled down into himself.

"Well, it seems you are really good at pushing it back down," Shanti surmised.

"I've worked on it all day. I didn't want a repeat of last night."

"In my bed..." she muttered sulkily.

“It smelled good. Like fresh, clean woman.” He didn’t sound repentant.

“Yeah, well, you should put in a request to have your women bathe more often. *Focus.*”

They went through the exercise three more times, Cayan able to easily cast his power outwards by the end. Unfortunately, soon after, he pulled it all back in tightly again, not letting it expand. He had a lot of work to do.

“Okay, I think that’s it for tonight.” Shanti sighed deeply, curling her legs back under her and getting ready to find her peace.

“Then what are you doing?”

“I want to let my mind wander, soak up the life around me. I can’t do that when I am focused on you.”

“Can I... Is there a way...”

“Hitch a ride? Possibly, but chances are you will retreat when I start to spread out. Which is normal. Sit next to me.”

He changed positions, closed his eyes, and reached out his hand. She grabbed it, then startled when his fingers threaded with hers. Electricity worked its way up her arm and into her middle, quickening her heart. Making her breath speed up. Melting the ice of her past and letting the memories trickle out.

“That is more of an intimate hand hold,” she uttered in choked voice. “Usually it is resting hands together, like your handshake, rather than entwining them.”

“I need more contact than palms.” His voice wasn’t shaking, per se, but he was nervous. It was as if the man hadn’t done it a million times on his own before she’d come. He just needed to get out of his own way.

Resigned, fighting the memories, Shanti said, “Open up your mind. After you do, I will connect with you and lead. You can just close your eyes and go for the ride. If you get...nervous, just let go of my hand. You can leave, then. I will continue on.”

He nodded. She waited for him to open up his power, needing only a couple prompts, then she connected gently, trying not to be distracted his hand squeezing hers. She expanded her mind with a heavy heart, unable to keep from thinking of her lost love. Thinking of the many times she had intertwined fingers with him. The warmth of his hands. The beauty of his face. Those deep brown, earth-colored eyes.

Her mind skipped, calling up her mother’s smiling face. So proud of

Shanti for opening up at such a young age. Nearly four. It had been a record. They'd worked together all afternoon in the soft sunshine, her mother holding both her hands and encouraging with jokes and laughter. Keeping it light. Fun.

Then to her father—she barely remembered the scratchy feel of his chin. His large hand taking hers. The sun shining in his green eyes. She'd inherited those eyes, before the power had singed the color away. She was the spitting image of her mother, except for the eyes. And now all she had was her father's ring.

As if thunderclouds had rolled through, sullen grey shadowed those happy times. The picture faded, and then bleached. Death showed up, ripping it all away.

Grief blurring the edges, Shanti pushed out past the city limits and out past the sentries. There was no effort to go this far anymore. She was well within her comfort zone, so she went farther still, seeing how far she could travel without strain. When she reached that limit, she drew back in and got more specific. She checked on the minds of the sentries, making sure each was alive and awake. One wasn't. She gave him a prod.

She found her Honor Guard, knowing their brain signatures. They were sleeping, except for Leilius, who was sneaking around the city trying to catch cats. It was a punishment he was actually enjoying. He hadn't caught one yet, but he was hopeful. She found Sterling and immediately bounded away—he was in an intimate moment. Hopefully Cayan would notice that that was a breach of privacy. She found Lucius next, who was worried. He probably wondered what kept her and Cayan. She hadn't told him where they were going.

She pulled everything back in slowly so Cayan would have time to adjust, then gently disengaged. When she opened her moist eyes he was looking at her.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I didn't realize."

"Oh, Lucius will get over it. I often disappear without telling him."

"No, about holding hands. I didn't realize...what it meant to you. Memories it must have called up."

That was the bad news about sharing a more in-depth mind space while touching. It was harder to keep things to yourself. She brushed it off. "It's to be expected."

His large hand squeezed hers gently. His soft gaze held hers. The

spicy feeling made her heart race.

“Okay, then. Practice, practice. Good luck.” Shanti jumped up, ripping her hand away from his. She didn’t know what had made her so uncomfortable, but she wasn’t in the mood to find out. Without a backward glance, she was trotting home, eager for her bed. And her fresh sheets.

Chapter 33

Sanders lay in a puddle of himself. They had come to question him again, asking the same ones as the day before. It meant they weren't getting answers, which meant the other men they'd captured weren't talking. It was a blessing. He had taken experienced men, but not the top tier, in case the city was attacked again. This crew hadn't seen the foreign woman fight or heard about her mental abilities, and for the first time, he was thankful for the Captain's foresight in keeping that information among only those who had seen it. That was just one juicy piece of info on their city, though. There were plenty others.

It was quiet as he lay. He could hear his own rasping breath, raking his burnt lungs. They'd brought in another torturer. Now they had four. He could hear the men screaming down the hall as the day wore on. Or night—he had no concept of time; how long it had been since he was brought in or how long the painful sessions lasted. He did know that each black-suited man didn't last as long as he used to. They only had one or two good punches before their energy gave out. It was a good sign. Or a terrible one—he would rather they just kill him already.

He counted four different screams. He had counted eight dead before they took him. That left two. It was a slim hope that they had survived to get help. And if they didn't, it would be too long before the Captain sent someone to look.

“How are you feeling?”

Sanders nearly growled. What a dumb fucking question. He had no strength to lift his head, let alone get up to his chair, and they asked how he was doing.

“I was hoping you would come by. I was beginning to miss our chats,” Sanders ground out.

“I came to inform you that we've gotten some information off of one your men. It won't be long now before we piece it all together.”

“Well whoop-dee-do for you.”

“I also regret to inform you that we have accidentally killed one of your

men. Casualties are an unfortunate practice in this sort of thing.”

Sanders showed his teeth in a silent laugh. “Don’t have perfect use of the language, huh?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Look, we aren’t friends. I am enjoying a little R&R. Go away.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll see you again in another sun’s turn.”

“I’ll try to fit it into my busy schedule.”

So one more man had lost his life. Sanders wondered what he’d said. He wondered how important it was. He wondered whose family had just lost a loved one. And most of all, he wondered how long it would be before Junice lost one, too.

Chapter 34

The morning after Shanti's training with Cayan, she and the Guard were gathered in the park for their daily training. She felt refreshed and alive, having had a deep sleep and a better overall grasp on this new well of power. She was still wary of the power she shared with Cayan, but working with him made her feel more secure with it.

"S'ally, something is going on." Leilius danced in front of her, hopping from foot to foot. Apparently her title was about to change again—which happened whenever Leilius' brain short-circuited in fear or excitement. When she got used to rarely knowing if he was addressing her, or someone else, it became quite funny. Even now everyone was smirking.

It apparently pissed Sanders off to no end, however, prompting more fear in Leilius. And then prompting weirder titles. And then prompting Leilius airborne as Sanders lost his patience... Apparently that was normal when dealing with Sanders, though Shanti had never seen it.

Shanti nodded for him to go on. The rest of the boys stopped what they were doing and watched. She could feel Sterling winding his way toward them. Just another day of training.

"I was in the bush waiting for Commandant Sterling when two of the Captain's men went rushing by. They were the guys on the gate. They were hurrying and flustered. Said something about one of them telling the Captain, the other getting aid. Medical aid. I heard Commodore Sanders' name."

Shanti's mind was already spread wide—keeping her feelers out was so easy now, it seemed silly not to—but now she honed in, looking for the emotions that would be associated with the news. Most of the city was as it usually was, but by the gate, just as Leilius had said, there was anxiety. Worry, fear, anger, denial—they were shifting and changing like a color changing fabric.

"Sanders wasn't with them? Coming along behind?" Shanti demanded of Leilius.

"No, s'am."

Shanti *searched*, looking for the bundle of intents and emotions she'd

come to recognize as Sanders. It was hard not to—pulses and flares of impatience and anger were always prominent, hiding a soft, tranquil bay of deep emotion and honor. The man played at being gruff, dominating, and callous, but you would find no man more loyal and ready to help.

That mind path was absent. He hadn't returned. He was probably captured, and the Inkna were an especially gruesome people with a fondness for torture. Based on what she had learned from the little mouse, they were also exceptionally good at it.

"Lucius, go find out what's going on," Shanti commanded. "Leilius, you go sneak closer. Spy. Find out whatever Lucius can't. Marc, go huddle near the doctor. If you find out it is Sanders, let your sorrow sink into you. I will find you, then."

"What about the rest of us?" Xavier was looking at her with a hard face. He wanted to be in the middle of the action, like a warrior should. So did Rachie and Gracas, judging by their equally intense looks. Unfortunately, they were far from ready.

"Continue with your day. I'll fill you in when I know more."

Sterling burst through the trees with sparkling eyes and a winning smile, which were short lived. As the men ignored him and ran from the trees, he looked around in confusion. "What is it?"

Shanti started toward the prison. No more stalling. No more questioning. Shanti wasn't good at torture, but she was great at pain. It might not last a long time, but it would last long enough to get what she needed to find Sanders. The Elders would not turn away for this, not when the innocent were at stake. Not when it was her duty to protect those who couldn't protect themselves.

"What is it?" Sterling asked.

As she passed, she said, "Someone has come into the city injured. The Captain will probably want you—"

A blast of power rocked the city. Shanti slammed down her shields as the rest of the men froze with wide eyes. They didn't know what it was—just that something had made the air freeze around them.

"—now," Shanti finished, not stopping in her stride.

Sterling fell in beside her. "How do you know?"

"Leilius was hiding from you and heard a conversation as gate guards rushed past. I don't know if it is Sanders, but I can think of no other thing."

Sterling immediately pivoted and headed off north. Cayan had picked

his officers well.

When Shanti finally got to the Captain's office, all the first and second tier commanding officers were there. Leilius had managed to sneak in and was hiding in the back like an unwanted rodent. It was a testimony to how distracted Cayan was that he didn't notice.

The door had been locked.

Now it was broken.

She took unhurried steps toward the desk as Cayan stood up, flexed from head to toe. "Get out!" he bellowed.

A blast of emotion rocked her shields. Embarrassingly, her body's first impulse was to flee. She smiled it away. "Sanders is caught. I am going to break him free."

His blue gaze blazed into her. Wrath and turmoil slapped against her shields. "You are going to stay here and stay alive. End of discussion."

"Let me take this opportunity to remind you that I am not under your command. He saved my life. I will save his. I am going."

"Get her out of here," the Captain yelled, looking down at his desk.

Oh, really?

Two gruff men peeled away from the others, marching toward her with grim faces. She *squeezed* them, dropping each to his knees. Shaking hands grabbed their heads with terrified eyes.

Cayan's head jerked upward. War lit up his features.

Shanti stood her ground. "What are you going to do if they come at you with mental warfare?" she asked before he exploded. "You can block it, yes, but what about your men? I used barely a fraction of power just now, and they sank to the ground, ready for slaughter. I am one person. They'll have many."

Cayan stared at her, his hands braced on the desk, his men itchy to move away from the battle in front of them.

"You cannot retaliate," she went on. "You can *search*, yes, but so what? You'll point out that men are coming...and then what? How will you disband them when they are a hundred paces away and your archers are crumpled at your feet?"

"With respect, my Lord," Daniels cut in. "She can fight, but outside that she is unimportant. Let her run to her death, if she wishes."

A vein in the Captain's clenched jaw started to throb.

Daniels didn't realize he was mostly ignorant concerning Shanti. He wasn't helping.

Cayan's eyes flickered. He'd just made a decision he didn't like. "If I allow you to go, you are under my command. You will do as I say. You are not a leader anymore—you no longer have an army. You will remember that."

Ouch. "Okay."

"You will follow orders or you will be outcast."

I'll be outcast anyway. "Yes."

She felt his mind brush hers, then linger. He wanted more confirmation than her verbal acknowledgement. Smart. He thought mind touch couldn't be fooled. Naïve.

Getting what he was after, he nodded and looked down at his desk, his shoulders tight with stress. "We have the trade location. Based on what the survivors said..." Cayan's words hitched imperceptibly, causing him to roll his massive shoulders, fighting down the rage. Shanti's stomach wiggled—she was interested to see him in battle. "They didn't make it that far. So then, based on their description, I would imagine they were taken somewhere along here..." He traced a groove in the map with his finger. Daniels leaned in to note the coordinates. "But we can only speculate where they were taken after capture."

"I have the exact location, should you need it," Shanti noted quietly, trying not to further ruffle his razor-like feathers.

All eyes found her. Lucius smirked.

"How?" Daniels asked with a pompous air, his voice as hard as his eyes. He still didn't trust her.

"I asked the prisoner. Unfortunately, even though I said 'pretty please,' he tried to keep it a secret. I had to pry the knowledge from him. He's no longer...much use."

"Point to it on the map," Cayan commanded.

She produced a hand drawn sketch made with a shaky hand. A boxy picture of a house or castle—not much was to scale—was on a bluff along a large river. Sterling took it and laid it in front of the Captain. He traced the areas that seemed to line up on both maps and put a big "X" to indicate the goal. They would have found it, but it would have taken a day or so. That one day could've made the difference in Sanders' life.

Because it was Sanders who had been taken. Him and a few others.

The half-dead man who made it back had said that in Leilius' earshot. And if Sanders had even a glimmer of a chance at being alive, he would be. Shanti had to believe that.

"We leave at dusk. Assemble the troops." Cayan straightened up.

"I would like to take Leilius," Shanti said quietly with bowed head. Now was not the time to poke at the Captain, so she kept her tone light and small. "And you probably want to take Marc." She cleared her throat into the thick silence.

Of all the incredulous staring, Cayan's blue stare was easily the hardest. "No."

"I think Leilius can be of great value. He can get to places where not many others can. He has a gift for it."

"He's too young. He's not ready."

"Well, he's sitting ten feet from you, and since no one has noticed, I would say he might be *close* to ready..."

Everyone looked toward the nearest window.

"Stand up Leilius," Shanti instructed, trying not to lounge in any way. Everyone else had such straight posture when the Captain was around, she thought it best to try and follow suit. At least until they were on the road.

The rustle behind Daniels had the older man jumping and whirling around, grabbing a big eyed Leilius. Cayan was still staring at Shanti.

"And Marc?" Cayan asked calmly, like an executioner sharpening his axe. All the men in the room stiffened.

"He is the most talented of all the medic trainees by far, and has been training for combat. He isn't great with weapons, but he knows to stay out of the way, and he doesn't balk when he is needed. Assuming the doctor is too old to go, of course. Obviously experience is better."

"And the others?"

"Are too young and not ready. Except for Lucius, who is under your command. So that's...uh, your choice. Obviously." She cleared her throat again, hoping to dislodge a stare or two. This was starting to get awkward.

Cayan nodded his head slightly, his eyes on fire. "Dusk. Meet at the front gate. Daniels, I'll hear your plan then, but you will be staying behind. If this goes sour someone has to take over, and Sterling stayed last time."

"Yes, sir," Daniels responded. The disappointment in his mind didn't convey in his tone. His warning look at Shanti wasn't missed, either.

Shanti stayed out of the arrangements as the day wore on. She wasn't even allowed to sit in to hear the strategy, which was actually fine because she'd always had people to do that for her anyway. She was a decision-maker, not a planner. And now she was a follower and nameless fighter. *Chosen*, indeed.

When dusk finally came, she and the two Guard members waited at the back of a long line, mostly overlooked or ignored.

"Why me, S'am?" Leilius asked in a tiny voice as he and Marc huddled close.

Since they learned they'd be going to rescue Sanders, the two boys had been following her around with wide, fear-crusted eyes.

"Because you are excellent at your craft," Shanti replied distractedly as she monitored Lucius. Her Chance was checking men in line, saying a few words, then nodding with responses. Though he wasn't a commander, he was the Captain's right-hand man. It twisted her stomach painfully, worry eating away like acid. She hoped he would be there for her if she needed him, but knew that if his Captain needed him more, his decision might leave her vulnerable.

"But why not Xavier? He actually *wanted* to go..."

"Don't whine, Leilius. It will be harder to fit in."

"We're the youngest here, hanging out with a woman wearing men's clothes. There isn't much hope of us fitting in," Marc reflected.

Shanti had to agree there.

A huge man with a ragged scar across his forehead stopped in front of Shanti. "You, woman—to the front."

Leilius jumped and clutched onto her, his wide eyes staring at the experienced fighter in front of them. She gently shrugged off the kid and stepped out of the line, sparing a wink for the boys.

"Kind of rude," Marc mumbled as he crossed his arms in front of his scrawny chest.

The grim warrior walked up the line at a measured pace, giving Shanti plenty of time to check out her comrades. Men waited by twos, swords on their belts and arrows on their backs. Hard, expectant eyes adorned eager faces. Their metal gleamed and their crisp blue uniforms identified their ranks.

Shanti couldn't help looking down at herself. She had a pair of faded brown pants of Marc's with three patched up holes. Her shirt hung loosely,

wrinkled and stained with dirt. And while her weapon did gleam with a high shine, the leather work looked poor and uncared for compared to their expertise.

Oh yeah, and she was a woman. There wasn't a chance in all Death's Playground that she would fit into this crowd.

As they reached the horses she inwardly sighed. She didn't have a great love of horses. They didn't have their own mind, and just when you thought you had a nice rapport, they freaked out and tried to run away. Granted, the only time she rode horses was right after she killed the owner and stole them, but none of her experiences had been good. Except she had never ridden one like she saw before her. Fierce eyed and large hoofed, these beasts had about as much gloss as her sword. As she walked around them, skittish and not afraid to show it, more than one stamped its foot.

"They are reacting to your fear," Lucius said from the second row of horses. His brown beast scowled down at her.

"It's not fear. I've just heard the horses in this land bite. I'm not in a hurry to lose my shoulder." Shanti continued following her guide past Sterling on a deep brown animal.

"Only the war horses with a bad attitude," Lucius responded.

"So, all of these, then..."

A crowd of people waited to see the heroes off, the beautiful women giving doe eyes at Cayan. And there he sat, atop the largest horse in the horde. Black as night and mean as Time, the beast stared at Shanti like he might her for dinner. Cayan was only slightly more agreeable as his cold blue gaze tracked her progress.

"Well? How do they look?" he asked. His hair was tied at the nape of his neck, ready for battle. His shoulders strained his uniform and his powerful legs gripped the moody beast below him.

"Like their bites would hurt," Shanti replied.

Cayan's brow furrowed. "The men, I meant."

"Oh." Shanti glanced back the way she'd come. "Ready. Eager. Vengeance walking. Keep them busy or the less experienced will pick fights because they don't know what to do with the anticipation of violence."

"Walk with me," he said. "I have some questions. Come here, you can ride with me for a while." He reached down a large palm.

Sterling's horse side-pranced, giving her room and making her uncomfortably jittery. Shanti had been on the receiving end of a couple of

hooves. That had hurt more than a little.

“I’m okay. I’ll walk. It hurts falling off of those things.”

Cayan’s laugh was loud and throaty. It hadn’t been a joke.

With no discernible movement, suddenly the large black warhorse was in action. It stepped forward, shaking its head proudly. Shanti jogged farther ahead, wanting to stay out of the way. Thankfully, Sterling fell behind so she wouldn’t be trampled. The crowd started yelling and waving, seeing their men off to the battle. It wasn’t until the roar of the crowd diminished that Cayan spoke again.

“Do you know how they fight?” he asked, looking down at her.

Shanti drifted a little closer so they didn’t have to yell. Unfortunately, Sterling and the others had the same idea. Before she knew it, she was walking among spindly legs and sharp chompers.

“This is not the safest of places for a walker,” Shanti acknowledged as she pushed Sterling’s horse with an outstretched hand. Its head bent around, eyeing her. She jerked her hand back into her chest as Cayan’s tree trunk arm reached down and snatched her. Before she could shake him off, she was being hoisted up the side of the shiny black animal, dangling until she was lobbed on the back, forcing her to scrabble up behind him.

“That wasn’t the solution I was going for,” Shanti huffed, clutching onto Cayan’s broad back.

“Would you rather be in front?” The way Cayan said it sounded like *on top*.

She ignored him. “Their fighters are small and quick, but not excellent. They aren’t ones for head-on combat. They’ll come from the sides, or descend in a horde over a hill. As you saw, they’ll sneak over walls or come in the back way, content to let some other nation get chopped down.”

“Do they all have the Gift? The ability for mental warfare?”

Shanti shook her head, clutching onto Cayan so she didn’t slip off the saddle. She had no idea how to properly ride one of these—a gaping hole in her education. “From what I’ve heard, one in forty has some sort of *Gift*, but not usually with any real strength. They are working on it, though. They push arranged marriages, which is usual with the top tier of a class system, but from what I’ve heard, they peel their eyes for any new talent, then work them into the arrangement system. Still, they are lacking as a whole, I believe.”

“In comparison to who?” Sterling asked.

That gave Shanti pause. She was used to thinking in terms of large

quantities of excellent fighters with strong *Gifts*. She looked behind her at the sea of solemn faces. She still traveled with excellent fighters, but none had the *Gift* save Cayan. Every one of them would be vulnerable to an attack, no matter the strength of the *Gift* used.

“Do you think any will match you? Or I?” Cayan asked through her worried fog.

“No. I am nearly a myth and you are completely unknown. But they are trained. You are not.”

“How many can you take?”

“Take, or kill?”

He didn’t even pause. “Kill.”

Shanti resisted the urge to lean her head against Cayan’s back. It seemed her life was only about killing these days. All hate, fear, and death—no family, no love. Some day she would have to answer for the things she’d done. She would have to face her ancestors and explain herself. It was a good reason to stay alive.

“With the new surge of power, or while linked to you, a great many I should think.”

“What are they after?” Sterling asked.

“Your city and its wealth. If they kill the Captain, they can move in while you are all in turmoil and take over the moneymaking operations. Their chief concern is wealth. Even before power. That’s why they are a Graygual favorite—keep them in riches and they won’t strive to steal their leader’s power.”

“And by the Captain going to them, we are giving these Inkna exactly what they are after,” Lucius said from behind them.

“Yes. If I were granted any sort of opinion, which I realize is doubtful in this company, I would say it is the least wise thing in this whole venture. I can handle mental warfare, the rest of this crew can handle the arms. The Captain should stay at a safe distance when his leadership is no longer needed. But I am just following orders; therefore, I have no opinion.”

“I cannot let my countrymen die for a decision I made,” Cayan stated.

“Then you will find war extremely difficult.”

“This isn’t war,” Cayan growled.

“Wrong. This is the beginning stages of it. You are choosing a side by going against the Inkna. By not turning me in. By not turning yourself in. You are choosing a side, and it will lead directly to war.”

“Shall we run, like you are doing?” he growled.

Shanti clenched her jaw. The man could get under her skin like no one she’d ever known. And right now, he was trying to. “I’m not running; I am uniting two halves into a whole. I’m seeking out our distant relations and hoping they’ll give aid. I’m hoping to bring the largest war this land has ever seen, which is what it will take to tear down the empire the Being Supreme has already created. You’re a stop on my journey. Your *Gift* is a new dimension to the overall situation. But I’m not running, because there is nowhere to run *to*.”

“But your half has been destroyed.” Cayan wasn’t trying to hurt her; he was trying to understand. He was just hurting her in the process. And being a jerk at the same time, something he could always do effectively.

“That’s right. None left save me. But I am quite a prize, am I right, boys?” Shanti swung down from the saddle and walked back to her boys.

Chapter 35

Sanders was half lucid. But only half. He was close to the end now. He didn't even understand half of the questions anymore. He was praying for death. There were two others save him, and they were close to cracking. Sanders could hear it in their screams. Death wasn't coming fast enough and there was only so much a mind could take.

Chapter 36

The fires were quiet as the troop ate their meal. The day had been eventful. Three different bands of Mugdock charged as Cayan passed through their lands. Shanti didn't have to warn Cayan of their approach; he was well aware. That part of the lesson he was close to mastering. Marc had to work on two people, but no one was lost. The Mugdock weren't so lucky, especially because they weren't allowed to retreat and they weren't captured. Their graves were the burnt land they had created and none of Cayan's people seemed bothered by it.

Beside those minor delays, the troop made great time. They had pushed hard and fast, covering a lot of ground, and now would rest for the night. It would take another half day to the destination. Hurrying hadn't been planned, but it was hard to resist. Sanders and the other survivors wouldn't have much time. They had been subject to pain for days by now, and Shanti doubted the Inkna were taking it any easier than she had after she found out Sanders had been captured.

"Shanti, right?"

She forced down a white-hot surge of violence at that last thought. It wouldn't help right now. She turned to regard the speaker, currently taking a seat by her fire. Marc and Leilius had both already wandered away to go to sleep, and no one else dared go near the strange foreign woman with glowing eyes who cleaved through the Mugdock as though wading through shallow water.

Jerrol was lowering himself to the ground next to her. She couldn't make out the brown of his eyes in the fire, but she could see the lines of his handsome, nearly pretty face. It was exactly what she needed, a distraction. Hopefully that was the reason he stopped by.

"Yes. Jerrol. Hello. I haven't seen you since you turned me down." She smiled and attempted a sultry pose. Being without practice she looked pitiful, so settled instead for sticking her chest out. This land greatly loved breasts. It was as good of enticement as any, even though she could've done with a bit more in that department.

A slow smile crept up his face. “I don’t think you are remembering that right. I didn’t turn you down; I clammed up and made a fool of myself. I came over to repair the damage.”

She had no idea what “clammed up” meant, but repairing damage she understood well enough. It matched the lust pouring off him. Then she matched the lust pouring off him.

“No damage to repair. I thought you had a woman, though?”

He crinkled his brow and lightly shook his head. Then his face cleared. “The ball, right?”

She nodded, leaning closer. They should probably get out of sight for what came next. She *searched* through the nearby bushes and trees to find a place not inhabited by a sleeping man.

“She is a...friend. We are not attached.”

They matched smiles, their mutual desire offered, and accepted. Jerrol’s gaze flicked to the side. “Well, do you—“

“Did you have a question, Jerrol?”

Shanti groaned at the familiar voice.

Jerrol’s eyes went wide and he stood immediately. “No, sir. I was just talking with Shanti, sir.”

“It’s time you caught some sleep, don’t you think?”

“Yes, sir.”

Shanti didn’t even get a chance to interject before Jerrol took off running like teeth were chomping at his backside.

“Was that necessary?” Shanti asked in a pout as she turned back to the fire. Even if she followed, Jerrol wouldn’t defy his Captain’s unspoken command to keep his dick in his pants.

Cayan sat down beside her, gaze glued to the flame. “He’s not your type.”

“Actually, he is very much my type. He is a man, he is warm, and he has nice eyes.”

Cayan’s gaze found her face. “Is that all you require? A warm body?”

Shanti swung her shoulders so she was facing him, matching his blank face and acute stare. The glow of the fire flickered against his cheek. The other half of him was lost to shadow, much like the other half of her soul. “I have lost all I hold dear, Cayan. I have been alone for over a year. I have no one to talk to that knows anything about me, no one I trust to lean on when things get tough, and no one that cares about me outside of what I can

do with my *Gift* or my body. I have no family, no friends, and no idea how my future will unravel from one day to the next. And now I barely have control over my present or my choices. So yes, a warm body that wants me, however superficial, is all that I require. I'm no longer a prime candidate for a mate, I can assure you. All that awaits my home fire is death."

His gaze held hers for a moment longer, his face softening but hiding his feelings. She didn't dare touch his mind; she didn't want to feel the pity she knew was there. She was designated the Chosen, and she had a job to do. She was alive and her people were dead. She would do her part so she could earn a place among her ancestors. Other than that she didn't care what people thought of her existence, least of all this mood spoiling, control assuming, stoic horse's ass.

"You should get some sleep," he said curtly.

She turned away, showing him her back, powerless to do anything else. She would follow his command in front of his people until Sanders was safe and his prisoners had paid, but after that the illustrious Captain could shove his dictatorship up his ass.

She heard him leave quietly and continued to stare at the fire, grateful when Lucius quietly sat down next to her a moment later. His quiet support helped.

Soon after she lay down where she was and went to sleep.

Chapter 37

As the sun crested the tree tops, the battle party was under way, everyone trying to hide anxiousness with stern faces. The upper tier of command looked at the maps often, delimitating, figuring out the land as it changed. Archers rode or walked around the outside of the ranks, ready to shoot anything they didn't trust. Sterling took the front, arrow already nocked. She had perceived correctly, he was an expert shot. At least, that's what she'd eavesdropped from the gossip around the campfire.

Shanti's mind was open, and stretched out over a league, but so far there wasn't much in the way of habitation. A fact she'd told those around her, trying to loosen the hands clutching their swords, or slow their darting eyes, but they didn't trust the strange foreign woman who spoke with a harsh tongue to their Captain. They probably figured that at any moment she would cut herself with her sword.

About midday everyone came to a halt. A young man came trotting down the line, young but self-important, until he stopped even with Shanti. "The Captain wants you."

"Oh well, I better hurry then, shouldn't I? I wouldn't want to offend his majesty."

Three men surrounding her sucked in a hasty breath. For a Captain that hardly ever punished anyone, she had no idea how he inspired this much fear. It was a thing she actually wanted to learn. Quite useful at times.

Antsy men shifted their stances as Shanti walked past, loose dust kicked up from a hundred men and twenty or so beasts. The midday sun baked down on the line, stifling the air, glistening the brow. Battle was near. They could all sense it. Expectation buzzed louder than a swarm of flies, battering her shields and pumping her blood. This was what she was born for. To lead men into battle.

Duty hummed through her bones as she rounded the horses and glanced up at the Captain, tall and strong atop his horse, shoulders and head high, a similar feeling coursing through his body. The only difference was,

these were his men, and the leadership was his duty. She was but a sword within his arsenal.

Chosen, my stubbed toe.

“We are getting close,” Cayan said without preamble, sparing her no more than a glance. “They will have sentries soon. We need to make a plan of entry now, in the event we meet the enemy.”

“You’re aware this isn’t their home land, right?” Shanti asked as she stopped beside Sterling’s horse.

“But they reside here now,” a stern man on a dapper horse said.

It was time for serious and hostile, was it? She hadn’t gotten the decree.

Pushing down an insane urge to stick a knife in his shoulder just for giggles, she said, “A faction of Inkna reside here, yes. But their people, as a whole, are spread across the land, trying to dip their fingers in everything profitable. This faction will be attached to a small city the same size as yours or less. They will be running things, but the work donkeys will not be theirs. They will have a few sentries to monitor trade routes, or crazed indigenous peoples wanting their land back, but they belong to a giant nation dominating the west, plus they have capable mental warfare that has probably so far been unimpeded. They are not overly concerned with the probability of assaults from a foreign nation.”

“But even though they aren’t the work *horses*...” A balding, stodgy character paused in his speech, giving her a weighty stare, before continuing, “Their forces will double ours in size.

Shanti pondered that statement. “Possibly. They are branching out, which means they have a stable horde here in which to sustain their leadership. Assuming they are torturing Sanders for information with which to spread their forces to your city, they probably have enough to cover both areas. Which means that, yes, they probably double this war party in size. At least.”

“Well, that’s terrible news,” a furry-browed man said, his lips in a thin line.

“Tobias,” the Captain barked, silencing the other man immediately. He squinted ahead, thinking. Grim blue stare met Shanti’s. “You think their sentries will be light?”

“I do.”

“They’ll be expecting us, though.”

Shanti blew out a breath, slowly shaking her head. “There are not many leaders that would send this kind of response if a few of their men were taken.”

Three horses started to prance, and Shanti, the only one on foot, backed away quickly. Getting trampled before the battle would be just her luck.

“I assume you imply that their leaders are wanting, and not a judgment on my leadership,” the Captain said with a warning in his tone.

“This isn’t the time to be prickly, but that is correct. As I’ve said—“

“I’m not interested in what you’ve said. Do you think they expect us?”

Shanti took another couple steps back, Cayan’s gaze nearly a physical push. “Not so soon, no. And not with your best men. We will have surprise on our side. And skilled fighters. The only thing of concern is mental warfare.”

“Regardless of whether or not they are expecting us, they will have some warning system in place,” Sterling stated mildly.

A baby-faced man spoke up. “Not if we kill them before they get the signal up.”

“Well, now, that is the question, isn’t it?” Shanti said. “What is their signal? Is it a light or sound device, like your city has? If that is the case, then yes, killing them will solve the problem.”

“You wonder if they are monitored mentally,” Cayan said with a grim voice. The men tried to hide masks of confusion at the mention of mental abilities.

She nodded. “I don’t know how powerful they are. If their power matched the little mouse I spoke with, then they can probably reach about two hundred spans, maybe less. But if they have a few powerful men, they can space themselves out and monitor each other, making the first sentry you come across as good as a siren for the rest.”

“Can you cut the link?” Lucius asked.

“I can disguise it, certainly, but that limits my power for when we go into their hold. If it were my call, I wouldn’t waste valuable power on the sentries, unless they try to attack us mentally. They will have their most valuable members behind the walls. I will need to attack them or shield you once we go in.”

“We kill them on sight,” Cayan decided. “If they are warned prior to

our coming, then all of their mental defenses will be lined up waiting. They will at least be all in one place. No surprises.”

Shanti nodded and shrugged at the same time. Battles always brought surprises, but she didn't want to rile him up further.

Cayan, Sterling, and a circling of other experienced men dismounted from their horses and gathered in a circle, dissecting the maps and making final arrangements. Each lieutenant had a group of men under his guidance, which then sectioned out again to a staff sergeant. They listened and nodded, the lower tiered men leaving much of the arrangements to the officers.

When they had finished, the circle broke up and they stowed their maps, walking determinedly back to their mounts with hard faces. As Shanti turned toward her spot in the middle of the line, Cayan said, “Shanti, I want you up front. I am led to believe you are a good shot with the bow. I also know you can use my power to search out the enemy from a great distance. Both are useful.”

“If the horses spook, I'll be trampled.”

“You'll be riding behind me.”

She was in the process of saying, “No,” when hard blue eyes rooted her to the spot. Her tongue got thick and melded to the roof of her mouth. She wanted to shrivel away, to look anywhere but at those eyes. But she'd be blasted if this man would intimidate her, so she held that stare, trying to ignore the shivers running up her back and weakening her legs.

“It was not a question,” he said, his eyes and bearing reinforcing his words.

She nodded indifferently, telling herself it was because she said she would follow his command for now, rather than admitting to being scared shitless to refuse. She waited for him to climb on and allowed herself to be hoisted up after him.

It appeared she had her answer for how he inspired fear...

“It won't be easy to shoot from behind your big body.” Her voice had only a hint of pout.

“Sterling will hit anything to the right. You to the left. I will hit anything in front. What we miss those behind us will hit.” After a pause he finished with: “I want you to connect with me. Use my power to reach.”

“Together our power is unpredictable.”

“I need you 100% for when we go in the hold. Use me. It wasn't a request.”

And the hits just kept on coming.

The progression continued with everyone on point. Shanti put her hand up the bottom of Cayan's shirt onto his smooth, muscled back. She tagged along as he opened his mind and spread it out, letting him use the brunt of power required, even though it was only a trickle. Being linked mentally, she couldn't help but feel his apprehension for the coming battle. He was worried of his decision, he was scared Sanders was dead, and the incredible burden of his position weighed on his mind.

"You made the right choice," she murmured for his ears alone. "Your people will make it through this. If you didn't act, they would've come for you in numbers, and you would've still had to fight."

"I know that. I just hate sentencing my people to death."

For a brief moment she leaned against him, supporting. She knew what he was going through from experience. Some decisions weren't easy, but they still needed to be made. Death was inevitable and so was this battle. It might as well happen now as later. It might as well happen far from home, rather than where innocents might get killed.

It was another hour before Shanti and Cayan felt the mind ahead and slightly to the right. They were traveling over hard dirt, making a large dust cloud that billowed out and above the trees. Only someone asleep wouldn't see them from a great distance. Then, when they got closer, the tromp of hooves and murmur of voices would surely wake the dead.

"We should send someone ahead," Cayan mumbled to himself. He had realized their predicament.

"Let me go," she responded quietly. "It will be an easy thing."

Fear of a different sort swirled through his thoughts. For her. For her safety. He thought of her as one of his, now. She had become his responsibility and he didn't want to see her hurt any more than Sterling or Lucius. Those fears were tempered with hard logic. He knew it was the best course of action, quick and efficient.

She had no idea why he hated that fact.

"Sterling," Cayan said in his commanding voice, "take Shanti, Lucius, and Tobias. Cut them down."

Lucius kicked his horse forward until he was even with Cayan.

"Lucius, I can't get down when you're—" Shanti's words were cut off by Lucius dragging her over to his saddle. "What am I, a sack of

cabbage?”

“You are much louder than a sack of cabbage,” Cayan drawled as Lucius kicked his horse into a trot.

Their small party rode ahead. Tobias, knowing nothing about Shanti, couldn't contain his displeasure at a woman tagging along. He kept his distaste to huffs, however, being a well versed fighter—he knew better than to piss off the Captain. Shanti, knowing better than to waste time, didn't punch him in the throat. All in all, they got along.

“Sterling, what is your range?” Shanti asked as they ate away the hard packed earth, closing the distance to the first sentry. It was a well-traversed road though not badly eaten away, indicating there was more foot traffic than heavy animals or carts.

“Dead on for three-hundred spans,” Sterling answered in a flat tone, eyes scouting the foliage and road ahead.

“Tobias?”

“Two-hundred at most, but that is while steady.”

“Then one-hundred on horseback?”

He nodded, eyes swiveling, trying to catch every movement, whether natural or otherwise.

Shanti leaned into Lucius and closed her eyes, drawing power off of Cayan even with the distance. She wasn't as interested in the sentries as what lay ahead. She wanted to know how hard it would be to get Sanders. She wanted to know what sort of mental capability they had. Even minimal power could still overcome her if there were enough of them.

“Are we close?” Sterling asked in a hush.

Shanti *searched*, dots of pulsing color laid out before her, sparse at first, then more dense, throbbing points of emotion that signified humans, and other subtler nuances signifying males. She could sense idleness and boredom, no prevailing worries of their troupe, or any other violent group, traversing the road.

“Okay, Sterling, there will be a man to your right. He is off the ground. I'll know more as we get closer. Behind him will be a man way off to the left. Based on the trees, I am thinking they can both see the road.”

“How do you know?” Tobias was skeptical.

“Because I get my menstrual cycle,” Shanti said in a flat tone.

“Trust her,” Lucius said fiercely. “She knows what she's saying.”

“How far can you see?” Sterling asked, arrow nocked.

“I can’t see far enough for my taste, even with Cayan feeding me power.”

In another couple minutes Shanti said, “To the right, up ten yards. Male. Bored. Not expecting us. In range.”

Sterling’s eyes followed her directions in perfect trust, waiting patiently for the man she said would be there. Not understanding the nature of her *Gift*, it was a little too trusting for her taste, but it was how Cayan’s men operated, and since she was correct, she said nothing.

A small wooden circle crouched at the top of a tree in plain view, a man leaning against the edge in utter dullness, asleep while standing up. With a practiced movement that gave Shanti pause, Sterling sighted, pulled, and loosed his arrow in one smooth, clean stroke. The arrow flew true, sticking into the mid-chest and dropping the man out of the tree.

“Lucius, you want the one on the left or shall I take him?”

“I’ll take him,” Lucius said, using his knees to steer the horse. The beasts were well trained. Probably still bit, though.

“Left, forty-five degrees. Male. Aroused—probably playing with himself. They must not see many people come through this way.”

“How the hell do you know—“

“*Silence* Tobias,” Sterling barked. “The Captain trusts her. That should be enough.”

Lucius spotted the man, but didn’t have the range Sterling did. They got closer, Lucius looking down the arrow as the distance closed.

“He’s spotted us,” Shanti whispered. She had her own bow nocked just in case Lucius missed.

The arrow pinged into the air. They watched it travel until it slid into the neck of a ducking sentry. Any later and it would’ve missed.

“Lucky. One on the right, Sterling. Close to the road. I’ll take the one way left. There must be another road off that way.”

Shanti leaned back from Lucius, nocked her arrow, sighted, waiting until the man came in range, and released, as Sterling did the same. A second later another arrow flew, traveling a similar path as Shanti’s.

“That was a waste of an arrow, Tobias,” Shanti said evenly. “And a bad shot. Make sure you can improve on me before you try to cover for me. Sterling, to the right. They are denser up ahead.”

Sterling was ready, and as good as everyone said. He made it look effortless as he pulled his mighty bow back and sighted his arrow; his form

perfect. He topped Shanti in range with the ability and strength to operate that giant bow. She thanked Cayan for sending him.

“Lucius, left. Two coming on the right, in the same tree. Sterling, I don’t know if you can take them both or split the victory with Tobias. We should stop after that. We’re approaching a busy area.”

Lucius drew; so did the other two. A second later, Shanti did too. There were men in trees and on the ground, all active. The area beyond was a sort of hub. Probably an outcropping of the city where people traded or conversed, away from the castle or city walls. They would be citizens, and she had the feeling the Captain wouldn’t want them killed.

“Hold up, here,” Shanti said softly, patting Lucius on the back.

Sterling looked at Shanti. “Should we take the rest on foot?”

She shook her head and relayed what she thought was coming up. Sterling nodded. “We should wait for the others, then. No one else will see their approach?”

“Not at present, no.”

“And beyond the hub, as you called it?”

“My range wavers. There are a few people and a few large mammals. Probably cows or oxen or something like that. A couple dogs. A horse or donkey. I would imagine farmers are on the road leading to the city. There are men and women and children. All mundane types.”

“What are you, a witch?”

Shanti lazily glanced at Tobias. His eyes were hard as he sneered. Before Sterling could react, she shrugged him off. “I am the one who will keep you alive if someone decides to mind-fuck you, Tobias. If you keep talking like an ignorant simpleton, I won’t bother.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“Fair enough.” To Sterling she said, “Should we ride back to the Captain or wait out of sight?”

“No sense riding back and wearing out the horses. Let’s duck off to the side.”

They did, waiting quietly, Shanti coating Cayan’s anxiety with tranquility so he knew they were okay. His turmoil dwindled but didn’t disappear. He probably looked calm and relaxed, but his mind whirled and his nerves were strung out. She selfishly hadn’t taught him how to hide his inner emotions. A woman in her position needed a failsafe. Hopefully there’d be no hard feelings if he ever figured that out.

With a slight tremor in the ground, the horses and men following came into sight slowly, the pace slightly picked up since Shanti and crew had left. As they thundered closer, Shanti slid off her horse and stepped closer to Sterling. “Was it discussed to sneak in and ferret Sanders out without raising the alarm?”

Sterling glanced to Lucius and Tobias, watching the approaching mass draw nearer. “The idea was presented, yes.”

“And discarded how quickly?”

A brief smile flashed across Sterling’s lips. “Almost immediately.”

“You don’t take one of ours and get away with it?”

Sterling answered with a small nod. “It was thought that they would come for us anyway. The Inkna raised the question. The Captain is answering.”

“So Cayan—the Captain—is sending a message. And yet, he is still facing tough odds. Interesting.”

Sterling’s intense, flat stare turned down to Shanti. “The Captain is doing what’s right. Taking our men, as they did, under the guise of trade, must needs an answer. A brutal answer.”

Shanti glanced at him briefly, then returned to mentally checking on the men to come. “Oh yes, I agree. If I were in his shoes, I would’ve planned to devastate this People as well. But then, I know what they are capable of. I know how they operate. I am just surprised by the Captain’s foresight. He is a capable leader.”

“Did you doubt before now?”

Shanti shrugged. When you were near death half the time, and getting into trouble the other half, it was hard to properly assess the leader of a prosperous city. But now, in a time of peril, away from protective walls and early morning raids, she had a chance to take notice.

As Cayan came to rest beside their small party his gaze scanned Shanti’s body, probably looking for wounds. Not seeing any he turned his attention to Sterling. “Report.”

“Shanti thinks there are citizens—“

“He knows what I do,” Shanti interrupted in the interest of time.

The Captain turned to the young man on his right. “Bring up Leilius.” To Shanti he said, “Any reason to believe these people have your coloring?”

“Leilius would stick out like a tree among bushes if so,” she said with a smile. “But no. The Inkna are from near my neck of the woods, but their

people wouldn't be farming out here. They probably moved in and took over, similar to what they are trying to do with you. Whoever was here first still works the land. So..."

The Captain nodded. Apparently the coloring was bronze skin and dark hair, like him. It was a hot climate, so that made sense. Natural sunblock prevented constant sunburns. She should know, she had to be covered most of the time.

Leilius skulked up a few minutes later, looking sheepish and happy to see Shanti. He didn't feel like he belonged in this battle-hardened crew twice his age. Shanti understood where he was coming from, but he was just about to earn a reputation, whereas she never would. She didn't know if that was a blessing or a curse.

"Leilius, I need you to change into poor man's clothes and travel up the road," the Captain said without preamble. "Blend in. Find out everything you can. If you get into trouble I will know. Go."

Leilius got changed with a fearful glower and took off at an easy walk, seemingly an average boy going to market. Shanti got caught in a moment of panic as his slouch carried him down the road, away from her protection. His thin body bent like a reed in a gale as he trudged, fearful but observant. He was ready for this—he needed to learn to operate on his own—but he was so young. Shanti still owed him for her life, but more than that, he and her Honor Guard were as close to friends as she had in this strange land. They were shining lights in a year of solitary darkness. Even Sanders, as much as he raged and bickered, was someone she cared for. Was someone she wanted to see safe behind his large stone walls. She was so afraid she'd lose someone else she cared about it choked her, closed her throat until sweat beaded her forehead. She pushed the feelings down, trying to get control, and felt a pulse of relief ping through her body.

It was Cayan trying to ease her mind. He was about as deft as a deaf man learning to sing, but the thought of it did help. She wasn't a mother bird, and she needed to remember that this was a war. There would be casualties. She needed to stay focused.

If they killed Cayan, though, she would tear that city down around their knees without mercy. If they had killed Sanders, same result. Then she'd beat them bloody with their own limbs.

"Easy *mesasha*," Cayan murmured.

Shanti took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Hope and wait.

It was two hours before Leilius came back up the road, a dead bird clutched by the feet hanging at his side. As he approached, his slouch more prominent, he handed up the large fowl in embarrassment. “I was offered this by a woman trying to marry me off to her daughter.” He shrugged. “She was pretty but older.”

Cayan’s gaze was calculating as he motioned for someone to take the wedding bribe. “What did you find out?”

“The Inkna aren’t well liked. I was told to think twice before moving closer. They killed the old government and started making changes right away.” Leilius dug his hands into his pockets. “The farmers are nearly starving, the working man is little more than a slave, and the foreign people are rich. Those that are beautiful, or gifted in a necessary craft, are doing well, though, so no one has tried to kick the Inkna out.”

Cayan ignored the young man’s hands. “Could you see the city walls?”

“I went in. That’s what took me so long. There is a large metal gate. Inside—“

“The gate is up?” Sterling asked.

“Um, yeah. A couple guys are—“

“Details, please,” Shanti said in a low tone.

Leilius straightened and took his hands out of his pockets. He probably thought Shanti was going to kick him. Cayan gave her a brief glance before Leilius focused once again. “Two men on each side, but lazy. Inkna—they are light and small—but they are bored. I don’t think they get much action. And inside there is a large area with traders stalls. If that gate were to close, there are a few places to sneak in, but only for a few at a time. That gate has to be open for us to get through with enough to pose a problem for their guards. They all have wicked looking swords and beady eyes.”

“Are the guards inside our coloring or Shanti’s?” Sterling asked.

“They are all Inkna. Small but maybe fast. Just like the ones that came into our city. A few loiter around the trading stalls, making trouble for the younger girls.” Leilius’s jaw clenched briefly before he went on. “A few dot the walls, and others wander around the inside of the city.”

“Are any outside?” Lucius asked with a focused stare, leaning forward on his mount.

Leilius shook his head. “Only those originally from this land are

outside. They would scatter if we came through. Or take up arms with us. They really aren't happy. Desperate, too. That girl's mother wanted me to take her daughter away back to my land. I look poor, but she still wanted me to take her."

"You only look poor for your country. Those rags are made from new fabric with holes cut in them," Shanti muttered. "Someone actually poor can tell the difference."

Cayan looked at the sun, deciding.

"Sanders doesn't have much time," Leilius said quietly. The Captain let slip a blast of power. When Leilius stopped cowering, he said, "I heard rumors that four soldiers were originally taken, but one died. One captured soldier in particular was giving the guards a hard time, and the guards were giving them all they had. It sounded like Commander Sanders. He doesn't have long, though. The local people are shaken. There's screaming."

The Captain's blue eyes glowed slightly. Power wrapped around him in tight bands, flirting with Shanti's power, gathering might. "Then we go now. It means we will be running home in the dark, but if we wait until morning, my men might be dead."

"We won't need to run home. There won't be anyone left to chase us," Shanti said in a voice she hardly recognized.

A few men looked at her with wide eyes. They'd just remembered the girl who laid waste to a tide of Mugdock. She was brimming with power and anger, ready to unleash her wrath and give a town back to the people that rightfully owned it.

At the Captain's command everyone mounted. He reached a hand down for Shanti.

"No," she said, meeting his sky blue eyes, hopefully not for the last time. "I need to be first and on foot. When they see us coming they are going to come at us with every *Warring* mind they have. Or whatever they have that's similar. I need to be on foot for that. Plus, I am going to inspire some townspeople to take up arms."

The Captain looked at her a long time before he said, "Stay alive."

She winked, excitement bubbling. With a manic grin that would make Sanders proud, she turned and started running.

The Inkna had stolen her home and killed those she loved. It was time for revenge.

Chapter 38

Leilius saw S'am starting to walk and fell in beside her, caught up in her presence like a small ship in a giant wave. He didn't want to file back in with everyone else; they snickered at him constantly, wondering if they would have to play nursemaid to the boy in soldier's clothes.

It must have looked odd, a young man and a woman, walking in front of a team of horses, a small army at their backs. But if she worried, she didn't show it. Head held high, long braid the color of wheat swinging behind her, S'am drew her sword in one clean, practiced movement. A thrill coursed through Leilius, ending in a tingle at the base of his balls. The adrenaline was kicking in. Soon he would have to fight. Kill people probably. It was necessary, though—he couldn't have the Inkna ruin his home and turn his friends into slaves—but he hated killing. Even in revenge for what they were doing to Sanders.

The busy intersection lay ahead, teeming with farmers and their livestock, desperate mothers and fathers trying to trade for enough food to feed their families. The road they were on intersected another, each corner replete with stands of fruit, grains, or merchandise, all gathered in the hard packed dirt. Faces looked up in alarm and surprise, eyes taking in the approaching war men with their rich clothes and furnishings.

Leilius had never been so embarrassed in all his life, even in the rags he wore. He hadn't realized he had so much. He'd never known what it was like to go a day without food, or to wear the same slips of fabric for months on end. These people had nothing, and here he walked, the richest man alive in their opinions, with nothing to show for it.

It had taken a trip into the city to realize exactly what S'am had always grumbled about. He had been instantly humbled.

S'am swung her long, curved blade. The people standing by the sides of the roads caught that gleam, entranced by the wicked beauty of it. Their gaze rose slowly to hers, fear and hope warring on their countenance.

“My people were killed by the Inkna,” Shanti boomed as she slowed, standing in the center of the small square. Cayan halted the progression

behind her, drawing notice, strong and straight on his purebred steed. Leilius felt absurd standing close to these two, but he straightened his back nonetheless, S'am infusing his body with the buoyancy of certain victory.

"They were murdered in cold blood while protecting children. While protecting the elderly. Because we would not surrender our way of life to their schemes. And now they have captured and tortured my friends."

Her voice trailed away, gathering the silence to her, captivating those standing and staring. No one dared move.

"You, townspeople, are safe," she went on, as a strange feeling crept into Leilius's body. "You will not be hurt. You can go back to your homes now without worry. Or...you can fight back. You can reclaim your freedom by your own hands, with your own blades. Fight with us, or run to safety. Either way, we are friends."

Leilius raised his head and looked around in wonder. He felt... exhilarated. Like he could rule the world. Like he could take up his blade, like she said, and reclaim what was his! It wasn't even his, aside from Sanders, but he felt like he should fight for it anyway! And he *would!*

"Fight!"

It took a second to realize that the ecstatic voice was his own. Gazes turned to him now, matching his euphoria. Wanting a piece for themselves. Shedding uncertainty, he put his sword in the air, pumping it high as he said again, "Fight!"

Men started to smile. Women stood, clutching their children, the hard light of hope kindling in their eyes.

"Fight!" The crowd started to chant with him. "Fight!"

Swords appeared from behind stands, knives from under bags of grain.

"Fight!"

"We go!" Shanti yelled, stepping forward, Cayan immediately behind. Her eyes were glowing a soft violet; the Captain's shone a pale blue.

"Fight!"

She was walking through them now, staring straight ahead, a fierce battle Captain at her back.

"To war!" the Captain boomed in his deep, commanding voice.

"FIGHT!"

Chapter 39

Shanti projected a feeling of *security* as she walked, only enough to entice the most ardent in their vengeance. It was delicate and well laid. Eyes were bright as they looked at her, but then gazes shifted upward. Eyes went wide.

Shanti didn't have to turn around to know what they were looking at. Cayan, with his hair pulled back and secured at the nape of his neck, sat atop his horse like a bronze statue of power. He embodied his position and the power that went with it. He was just and right, a sword of death in his hand, heading into battle.

He was upstaging her and it was slightly irritating.

Leilius yelled again, pumping his sword, looking around the crowd, their ringleader. She'd accidentally caught him up in her net, but it was the exact thing these people needed. Someone on their side, looking nearly like themselves, ready to reclaim what was their right.

Shanti *searched* ahead of them, but without knowing these people well, and across the great distance, she couldn't tell minds apart, whether Inkna or not, and she couldn't feel Sanders. But then, Sanders was probably way underground. She would have to be nearly right on top of him to feel him through that much earth.

That was no problem, though; she could get that information when she got her hands on one of the disgusting, money-grubbing bastards who held this land prisoner.

A hundred yards from the black, gleaming gate she could make out faces. Two men stood to either side, in addition to the uniformed guards, waiting with hands at their sides, crisp black shirts and black pants hanging still in the windless afternoon. Another black clad man stood atop the wall to either side, also wearing black. No arrows. No swords. Mental warfare. Bring it on.

“Cayan, shield yourself,” she yelled. “When they hit us I am going to take them down screaming. I want them to panic, knowing someone stronger is knocking on their door. Scare those that fight with them.”

“Understood,” came the graveled reply, thick with confidence. “Give ‘em hell.”

Chapter 40

The pain snapped off like a light going out, dousing him in pitch black. Through the haze Sanders realized something was happening. Shapes moved, shouts. Maybe they were finally going to kill him.

Thank God. He was done. He only hoped they'd use a knife. He couldn't handle any more pain to his eyes, skull, hair follicles, face, or chest. He knew that each black shirt had a different way to inflict pain, and he knew how hard they could push before they had to switch. Usually by the third one he was blacking out. He couldn't even answer questions if he tried. He couldn't think or understand after the first two slaps of pain. It was his city's saving grace in the end.

"What is happening?" Betty asked, spraying spittle in irritation.

Ah Betty, that ol' bitch. He was patient and seemingly pleasant. Sanders' severe hatred for him was the only thing keeping him sane. The desire to give some back was the only thing waking Sanders up into the fog of agony, keeping his mind from drifting into the soft embrace of death.

One of the Black Shirts answered in gibberish, which meant they had switched to their own language. Well, they weren't going to finally kill him. Joy. He would live to hurt another day.

All the Black Shirts ran out of the dungeon, followed by anyone else standing around. Weapons were pulled out and yells and shouts filled the halls. Something was indeed happening. Dare he hope the Captain was coming?

"What are you smiling about?" Betty asked in his crisp tones. He was standing close to the bars, looking into the gloomy cell, trying to make out Sanders' face.

"You better hope *she* isn't here. She has a mean temper."

Chapter 41

A blast hit Shanti, the combined power of six men equaling three-fourths of her own power. These men had to be their best, designed to bring an enemy to their knees so the gates could be lowered. Cayan's power pumped into her, making her stronger, making the scrape against her shields nothing more than an irritating distraction.

"Bring them down, *mesasha*—the men are wilting!" Cayan roared.

The gate shook violently, metal creaking, then began to lower slowly. Shanti picked up her pace, grabbing six minds as she broke into a run, clutching them with her and Cayan's combined might, and then *crushing*, slow but complete, the city drenched in their screams before they dropped.

A wave of fear engulfed her, the chain of the gate now rattling frantically while the guards struggled to get it down.

"Forward!" Cayan yelled behind her, hooves picking up the pace.

Shanti burst through the lowering gate and speared the man operating the crank. He slid off her sword in a boneless heap.

Horses streamed past her, the Captain with his giant sword cleaving the enemy in his way. His horse knocked down and trampled anyone directly in front. Lucius was off his horse and by her side, sword out, watching her back as she turned to the city, mind spread out, scouring for a mental attack while hunting for Sanders.

"S'am!" Leilius stepped beside her, out of breath. He was sweating and his eyes were wide. He had a bloodied knife clutched in a white knuckled grip. "What do I do?"

"Hide that knife. Blend in. Act—continue to be scared. Find Sanders. I will follow your progress and meet you there."

"Yes S'am."

Lucius' sword whipped out in front of him to make short work of a screaming Inkna in a red cloak running for the gate.

"Those wearing black have mental abilities," Shanti warned. "Those

in red or yellow are safe to approach on sight. Get someone to man this gate, then we find Sanders.”

“Yes, S’am. Following your lead.”

Shanti *searched*, huddling next to a stone wall, using her *Gift* more precisely. Cayan’s men couldn’t shield. They would be useless if even one Black Shirt lurked. And the Inkna were great at lurking, hiding their presence so as to use their *Gift* in secrecy. It was cowardly, but much more effective.

“Ready.” Lucius stood poised, balanced, coiled for action.

She and Lucius headed further into the city, trying to stay central until they either knew where Sanders was, or Shanti could identify more Black Shirts. Amazingly, the city didn’t hold as many troops as she expected. When the villagers and traders scrambled away or took up arms, it was a little less than two to Cayan’s one. The Inkna were vastly outmatched, however. The Spurna, Cayan’s people, were larger, stronger, and fiercer. They feinted and stabbed, or cleaved, or picked a body up and broke its back. It was vicious and nasty, utterly brutal. No one would be spared.

Shanti worked her blade, staying in the shadows of traders’ stalls or animal housing as much as possible, jumping out to surprise an Inkna and slice him through. Until suddenly there was a concussion of silence. The air got as thick as molasses, drifting between clashing swords and sweating men.

Cayan’s men screamed, scrubbing at their eyes, or chests, or other parts of their body. Cayan, sword bloody, standing amid a circling of dead enemy bodies, turned around in helplessness, knowing what was happening, but not knowing how to stop it. His gaze found and locked on Shanti, his mind dragging her focus toward him in desperation.

She swatted away his scrabbling, their deeper link still prevalent, and fell to her knees, eyes closed, trusting in Lucius’ blade. Her mind registered the pain and suffering of Cayan’s men at the north end of the open compound. The Black Shirts’ reach wasn’t far, but it was potent, the *Gifts* more like torturing devices than weapons. It was lucky, it meant they took longer to kill.

Shanti honed in until she could feel cold malevolence, a professional detachment with edges of pleasure radiating out of weak minds. Fire welled up in her from this horrible use of their *Gifts*. Of the joy they took in torture and killing. Their minds were twisted with it. Corrupted.

Wasted.

Cayan riding her, she took a pause of two more heartbeats; she

monitored the way their minds connected, ten in all, a link boosting their power similar to Cayan and hers. But not boosting it overly much. Probably only a couple like-*Gifts*. It hurt their effectiveness.

As if delicately picking apart a spider web, she dissected this link and followed the trail into their heads. *Hello, vermin.*

She lingered, gathering her strength. With one massive outpouring, she *speared*, flashing through the weak minds in one stroke. Screams ripped from throats before bodies dropped to the ground in crumpled heaps.

When she opened her eyes, she found Lucius in front of her, his body grimy and sweaty, blood splashed across his rippled arms. A pile of bodies lay around them, blood oozing on the dirt floor, reaching for her knees. To her astonishment, Sterling was behind her, protecting her back, heading off a rush of men.

The Inkna had realized she had the *Gift*. She had just made herself the number one target.

A moment later Shanti was up on her feet, sword whirling, working through the men trying to get a piece of her. The eyes of fighters in red shirts balked, not expecting a *Gifted* to also know how to fight.

She almost yelled *surprise!*

Ten paces to the left an Inkna raised his sword with the intent of putting it in Tobias' back. Shanti snatched a knife from her belt and threw, sticking him in the neck before the blade swung down. Tobias whirled around, seeing the dead man slide before looking up with wide eyes, but Shanti was already focused on the next.

"Beware the black shirts!" she yelled as loudly as possible between slashes of her swords.

Chapter 42

“They have a *Sarsher*,” a Black Shirt yelled at Betty. “He is powerful.”

“We have many! Bring him down!” Betty screamed back.

Sanders had never actually seen the man ruffled. He must be nervous.

“He took down a *Cospe*.” Black Shirt stared at Betty through the haze, his voice wavering, trying to hide fear.

“Then they must have more than one, you idiot! Send out more of our *Sarshers*. Bring him down! *Why do you laugh?!*” Betty screamed at Sanders.

“It is not a he, and you are all gonna die.”

Chapter 43

Shanti felt invigorated. Her body thoroughly warmed up, she laid into the enemy, punishing them for taking Sanders and his men. She was covered in blood and working her way toward a large building at the south end of the compound. Leilius had disappeared into the building, closing in on Sanders' whereabouts. Attackers came at her in a steady stream, those closer to the outcropping of buildings more skilled and experienced than those in the outer parts of the city. They were protecting their leader. Who must be with Sanders.

She longed to meet him.

Sterling was still with her, protecting her as Lucius was doing, probably staying in case more Black Shirts arrived. Just when she was about to head into the building through a large archway, a large throb of stinging power slapped at her shields. Lucius and Sterling sank to their knees, eyes closed up in pain, swords clattering to the ground as their bodies bowed.

A swarm of red assaulted her, swords flicking by her head so fast she could barely get out of the way. The pulsing power pounded at her shields, distracting her, trying to break through.

Through her power-mated connection with Cayan she dumped a fervent plea, needing help. She couldn't even spare enough attention to look around for his location, such was the press of enemy.

She blocked a strike, kicking out, crunching a knee and slashing at an arm. Another sword barely missed her head. Yet another made a shallow slice down her arm. She whirled, gearing up for a widespread mental assault, lacking the time to *search* for just the Black Shirts. It would severely reduce her energy level, making her less able to confront whoever had Sanders. But it would save her life.

Power gurgled up and blossomed out, at the edges of her command, ready to lash out.

And then Cayan was there, slashing through a wall of enemy to reach her, a pump of power boosting her, swirling their strength to the brink. His blade spun so fast it was hard to see, his strength and skill easily dominating

four to his one. He slashed through a red shirt, then turned, knocking another with an elbow while he sliced through a third's face. Turning back, he stabbed a man in the eye with a magically appearing dagger before turning to Shanti's back and taking out someone else.

Together they cleared their attackers in minutes, cleaving and slashing and stabbing through eyes or hearts or guts, all the while feeling the steady pressure of a cluster of minds focused on theirs, beating down, pounding and pulling and pushing, trying to work past their defenses.

In between strikes and slices, swords glinting as they swished by her head or narrowly missing her body, Shanti pinpointed a cluster of twenty or so men, hiding off to their right, focusing all their energy on Shanti's location. They still did not know about Cayan.

"To the right, Cayan!" Shanti shouted, thrusting her sword through the gut of a red faced man, then stepping back as the body fell to the ground. "Cover me while I ta—"

Pain blossomed in her leg, cutting off her speech and momentarily causing her to stumble. She ducked under her sword as a downward strike threatened to cleave her head in two, metal clashing. Ignoring the throbbing pain from the gash, she forced herself back up, realizing that time was running out. There were too many for just her and Cayan, and no one else could get close without the radiating pain from the cluster of Black Shirts dropping them to their knees.

A thick surge of gooley fear shot through the link from Cayan. He turned to the right, rage now taking over logic. His eyes glowed like a beacon in the failing light. He put his hand on the back of Shanti's neck, sweeping her mind and power toward him like dust toward a broom. He mentally wrapped around her, cushioning her in a protective embrace, threading into her, sinking deep, becoming one, power swirling in wide, broad bands, billowing out, arching up, and waiting for his command.

Then, unthinking, just reacting, he gave it.

A pure pulse of energy rocketed out from their two bodies, powers matched and equal, one specializing in finesse, the other now realizing he had something else. A raw, uncompromising punch of knock-down strength. He didn't *crunch* or *twist* or *stab*. He *DESTROYED*.

The cluster of minds couldn't even scream out the pain. They were trapped in it. It thundered into their bodies, shaking and twisting them into gnarled things that could no longer be recognized as human. Other Inkna,

standing with swords or knives, trying to bring them down while they were caught in the mental bombardment sank, screaming. Those on the outskirts yelled until they were hoarse, bashing their heads into walls to escape it. Wave after wave of teeth chattering power surged out, pounding the Black Shirts and anyone unlucky enough to be in the way.

Shanti could imagine what people saw: Cayan standing in the wake, a strong man clutching to him a fierce looking woman, pillars amid the destruction they wrought. The ground was littered with bodies in red uniforms, blood oozing from eyes or ears, faces screwed up in agony as their life blinked out, eyes staring blindly at the sky. Behind a screen twenty spans away lay a pile of bodies wearing black uniforms, their minds dead.

It was then that Leilius stopped. His mind registered sorrow and hurt and panicked impatience. He had found Sanders—or at least learned the location. Shanti still couldn't get a reading on Sanders' mind, which worried her.

“To me!” Cayan boomed.

Shanti stepped away but turned to him, a question in her eyes, her hand on Lucius's shoulder, helping her Chance up.

“Go. I need to give direction, then I am right behind you,” Cayan said with a nod.

And she was gone.

Chapter 44

“What was that?” Betty’s voice had a slight tremor to it.

The metal door to the cell was open. They had propped Sanders up on a chair, tied in so he didn’t fall off. Three Black Shirts stood around Betty. Littered on the ground were Steaphen and Jasan. They looked dead but their chests were rising and falling. They were breathing but it was shallow. Barely hanging on. Like him.

“There are two,” someone answered. “They can *Join*.”

“*We can Join!*” Betty shouted. “Take them down!”

“They took down all eighteen of the *Sarsher*. At one time. They are too powerful!”

“Eighteen... No one has that kind of power! There must be more. Where are the archers?”

“You sound worried,” Sanders mumbled. He couldn’t feel his body.

“How many?” Betty was in his face, pushing at his chest with a knife. It pricked his skin. He knew this because his chest was bare and small dots of blood welled up where the knife touched.

“Well, there’s the girl. And it seems she has trained the boy. So—” His body wracked in a cough. When he regained his breath he finished with: “So you’re fucked.”

“Stop laughing!” Betty screamed.

Chapter 45

Shanti descended the stairs two at a time. She could feel Sanders now. Pain, misery, he was flirting with death, barely hanging on.

Anger so hot she couldn't control it welled up from deep within her. All the pain from the last year was resurfacing, and she was about to put a face on the man responsible for killing her love. Not the same man, surely, but it didn't matter. They were all the same as far as she was concerned, and he would pay.

"Two running up. Kill them!" she hollered.

Sterling was in front, Lucius behind. She had inherited another Chance. Sterling was thoroughly on her side because he trusted she was thoroughly on his. His loyalty now encompassed her, and it was a deep well of loyalty indeed. Cayan had picked some good officers. Not that that was a surprise.

"Lucius, three running after. Let me know if you can't handle them. At the end of the stairs we go right."

"Yes, S'am," Lucius said.

Sterling didn't understand the title so he just grunted.

They turned the corner; Shanti didn't have to do anything with her Chances on the scene. Cayan was making his way down with five others. Sanders was dwindling further still. Two others were dying at his feet. Four enemy surrounded him that were the walking dead, they just didn't know it yet. Sometimes she loved breaking the bad news.

"Sterling, two more headed your way. They will appear around the corner in three...two...one—"

The first got an arrow, the second a knife punched through the gut and ripped upwards.

"Turn left."

The tunnels were well kept and scrubbed, but dark. It was below ground, so there were no windows. No natural light. Hopefully Sanders wasn't half mad already.

Rage bubbled. She still had to make it out of here, so she couldn't

expend all her power. But oh Elders, she wanted to. She wanted to take the enemy's sanity apart by threads and light each one on fire.

"Right," she barked. "Now peel away."

Sterling did exactly that as she walked into the large room. There was a row of cells, the low light getting trapped in the crannies of the stone walls. The smell of sweat and urine accosted her. She stopped in front of the first cell and felt a piercing in her shoulder, something glancing off bone. If she wasn't so enraged it probably would've hurt.

Sanders was on a chair, completely naked, blood oozing down his chest from four different points. It looked fresh. He was filthy and covered in his own waste. His eyes were half open and unfocused, his mouth was turned up in a laughing grimace, and a wheeze that could have been soft laughter bubbled out of his mouth.

A man in a white shirt and gray slacks stood behind him holding a knife. To the left, a line of three men in black shirts battered up against her shields.

"Well, well, what have we here?" Shanti's voice was a sharpened blade, rage so white-hot it turned her stomach to fire. Her eyes devoured the cold eyes of the man in the white shirt. "A Master Executioner. I wondered if I would find one of you here."

His eyes went wide. "You lived."

"Sanders, how are you doing?" Shanti asked seriously.

"Oh, swimmingly." His voice was a thick, hoarse moan. "Thanks for coming. The party was just getting going."

"Lovely, you still have your wit. That's nice. Did you scream for them?"

"Not yet."

"Would you like them to scream for you? Or is quicker better?"

"Black Shirts can die quick, but I would love to hear Betty's singing voice before I die."

Sterling stepped to her right, doing something to her shoulder. She couldn't feel it. The rest of her arm was going numb.

The guy who Sanders called Betty stepped forward to stick the knife in his neck. Shanti grabbed his brain in a claw-like grip and held him, paralyzing him. He made a surprised gurgle. She tsk'ed. "Now, now. Don't you want to see who is the better man? You or him? You couldn't make him scream. Do you think you can hold out as well?"

She turned to the Black Shirts, all with white, fear-drenched faces. They were still working at her shield. “There is no point in that.” Her voice was soft. Melodic. “Your power is nothing.”

She *stabbed*, ending them quickly, per Sanders’ request. They each gave a shriek before falling to the earth. Lucius stepped in and grabbed onto Sanders, laying him on his back and checking him over.

Shanti stepped in as well, careful not to step on the men lying at her feet, unconscious. She slid a chair from the wall, its feet screeching against the stone floor. Her focus glued to her new little mouse.

“So,” she said, trying to force her anger back so she could focus. She opened her shields for a taste of his unique power. What she felt rocked her.

He wasn’t strong by any means. Not even a quarter of her power. To be effective, he had to be extremely close or touching. But it was the nature of the *Gift* that was startling. It was why he held the position he did. He could feed a person their worst nightmare through emotion. It was an imprint of emotion from a memory. Regardless of whether the memory came from him, her, or someone else, it felt so real. But this horrible maggot had a real memory with which to torture her. He was replaying the intense joy at someone under his command slowly sticking a knife into Romie’s gut, and drawing it upwards as two people held him down. She felt the life crushing pain of that knife blade slowly working up his sternum, and incredible loss, knowing he’d never see the love of his life again.

He had been thinking of her as he died.

Grief so fresh it bled washed over her, threatened to drown her reason. “You were there.”

It was so quiet she could barely hear her own voice. “You must be Sturgane. I wondered if I’d ever meet you. How unlucky for you that our paths should cross. And what a truly remarkable *Gift* you have. I am almost speechless with the pain. But you see, I have lived through a great deal of agony in my life, much caused by you, it is true, but I am excellent at tucking it away. Your disgusting little *Gift* will not cause insanity in me. At least, not before I end your life in the most painful way humanly possible.”

“He died whispering your name.”

“Pouring salt in the wound, as Xavier would say.” Shanti took a ragged breath, her mind trying to shut down. But not yet. She still had work to do. She had Sanders to avenge. She had to tend to the living before she could join the dead. “In order for your power to be effective, you need real

memories. Otherwise, it is a generalized tool that weakens the spirit instead of crushing it. Interesting. You aren't a little mouse at all, are you? You are a filthy rat. I wonder if I will hold up. I certainly don't want to; I will be honest about it. That is very, very unlucky for you."

She felt Cayan's hand on the back of her bare neck. His voice was soft and full of shared sadness, his presence still deeply entwined in her head, as he said, "We haven't much time, *mesasha*."

"Do you hear that, filthy rat? You will get a quick job. It seems your circle of gods partially feel sorry for you. Or maybe they wish to punish you themselves. So, where shall we start?"

Chapter 46

Sanders felt his body gently dabbed. Well, it might've been stabbed for all he could feel, but he liked to think Lucius was being careful. He saw the Captain above him, his hand on the girl's neck, his body bent over her protectively. He was yelling at someone about a knife in her shoulder or some such thing.

Sterling was leaning over him, his eyes a worried mask. "What ails you, Commander? I see no serious wounds."

Only Shanti would know how to fix him. If it were possible. So why ruin the moment? "Sssshhh, I've been praying for this. Let me hear her revenge on him. I want to hear him scream. Don't let the Captain restrain her."

At that the Captain looked down at him, worry and grief in his eyes. When those glowing blue orbs met his, he saw a nod through the haze, then the Captain was looking straight ahead again.

"You see, filthy rat," Shanti said from somewhere close, "I am unimpressed with your brand of power, though I think I will use it on the Being Supreme before I kill him."

"You won't see that day," Betty spat.

"No? Hmmm. Cayan, you might disengage. This is about to get... nasty."

"I'm a part of this, *mesasha*. I will continue to be."

"You'll think less of me, but since we don't have time to argue, so be it."

The room stilled into a pregnant silence. Sanders felt the stress of those around him as if it was a palpable thing, but no one moved. No one walked forward to grab Betty or even tended to the wounded, including Shanti.

A sharp intake of breath had Sanders trying to look in Betty's direction. A harsh groan, then shallow breaths, panting like a dog in the sun. The foreign woman was starting her revenge.

"No screams, yet, huh Sturgane? You see, I learned your name. I

wanted to know who killed my future. The whole way here I had a feeling I would see you—strange, isn't it? If I believed in Fate, I would think this meeting was destined. Instead, I see it for what it is—you were always the most ambitious of the Inkna when it came to scouring for new wealth. Of course I would find you chasing the wealthy nations. But enough about that now; you must scream for me or Sanders will never be happy. How about this?"

The Captain shifted his stance, his palm spread along the back of her neck. A high-pitched keening crowded the space, chasing away all silence. Nails scrabbled on stone, clawing, screeching where they scraped.

"He just tore two of his nails off on the floor," someone said in a terrified whisper. He looked like a swirling mockup of Tobias hovering over Sanders' head. Good fighter. Great in a pinch. Wise choice to bring along.

"You have to scream, filthy rat, otherwise I won't have done Sanders justice," Shanti said with fierce tears in her voice. "I owe him my life. My destiny. You will pay him with yours. Let's increase the pressure."

"How did you escape?" Sturgane shrieked. "They said you were dead!"

"No, no. I prayed for death, oh yes I did. You and your filthy brethren stole my life from me. But alas, I am not dead. Some days that is the biggest travesty of all. No, I am not dead," she said softly. "But you are about to be."

"He will claim you and rape you over and over until you beg for death! You will bear his children in chains like the dog you are!" Sturgane screamed.

The Captain shifted again, his body leaning farther over Shanti. Suddenly the air was solid, everyone in the dungeon struggling to breath, backing to the walls, looking for the exit.

"Cayan, no. He is mine," Shanti said urgently. "I have to finish this. I have to finish what he started. For Romie. For Sanders."

"There are..." Sturgane's voice cut off in a whine.

"Two of us, yes," Shanti answered, her attention never far from Betty's face. "It seems I found another one before the Being Supreme could. It will be a wonderful joke when he finds out, don't you think?"

"Impossible."

"*Improbable*, not impossible, as you see."

"Two swine that will be chained and tortured! You are nothing!"

"Well, Sanders, your friend is very rude," Shanti said simply. "No

more stalling.”

“Their eyes are glowing,” someone uttered in a hushed whisper.

The fast breathing was back. Then the keening, animalistic sound. Primal. Agonized.

“No, no,” Shanti said in a hush. Her voice quivered. “You are just like the little mouse, trying to end your own life. I can’t let you do that.”

Clothes rustled in the darkness. Sanders struggled to hear, needing this revenge even if administered by another. Betty started to howl, out of control. Deep, wells of pain, both emotional and physical, saturated his voice, split his vocal chords.

“I hate your *Gift*.” It sounded like Shanti was fully crying now, her own voice laced with life-consuming pain long endured. “But I can see how effective it is. You must have no soul to use it.”

“Naaahhhh! Hhhaaaaaaa! Aaaahhhhhh!” It was a collection of wails. Eternal suffering. Anguish beyond reckoning. Sanders almost felt guilty Betty had to endure it.

Almost, but not quite.

Everyone was shifting now, uncomfortable, scared even. The Captain huddled closer, nearly smothering the sobbing foreign girl with his body. Clothes ripped, hands slapped skin, Betty rolled and stamped his body. Then screaming. Wild, shrill shrieks, echoing off the walls and drowning out all thought.

Men were turning away. One vomited. Still Betty screamed. Louder and louder, his voice nothing but a guttural scraping. His vocal chords sounded like they had been burned away. His back was arching as he lay, his stomach extended, his legs twisting in on themselves.

Finally the Captain said softly, “Enough, *mesasha*. Let him die.”

“Why, when I cannot?” Shanti sobbed.

But the sound cut off as if ripped away. The woman wavered.

“What did you do to him?” Tobias said in a fearful whisper.

“Punished him for killing my love and helping destroy everything in the world I hold dear. Sanders, please know that your suffering, while longer in duration, was nothing compared to his. I used his *Gift* on him along with the pain. It is...an effective way to torture. A soul-killing way to torture. For me. My debt to you has been fulfilled. We are even.”

“That’s all well and good, but I still feel like shit,” Sanders rasped. It was true. Why lie?

He was loaded onto a stretcher as a cooling mist enveloped his mind. The voice of the foreigner, soft and feminine, whispered in the din, "Sleep, Sanders, I will help heal you. Not everything I learned from these nasty rats was awful."

Sanders barely held onto consciousness as his stretcher carriers followed the Captain out of the dungeon. The Captain carried a limp Shanti, who, shortly after putting him in a wonderful, numbing kind of fog, sank against the disgusting stone wall and hung her head, grief etched in every line on her face. Whatever Betty had showed her had worked its way deep into her being and eaten away at her core.

When the Captain informed her it was time to go, she didn't even look up. Apparently she wasn't even planning to bother continuing on. Despite all that Sanders had been through, somehow that knowledge was the worst. Her quitting seemed the end of all things. Even though he couldn't say why, some part of him registered that for her to give up would mean great peril to them all.

The Captain bent and scooped Shanti up easily, waving everyone away, including Marc, who was trying to look after her shoulder where Betty had pierced her with a throwing knife. Good thing the weasel was a terrible shot.

It seemed the Captain had developed some kind of kindred spirit with her, and from what Tobias had told Sanders when the tight-lipped Sterling wasn't hovering close by, whatever the foreign girl could do, the Captain could do, too, and they could do it better when they were together.

Wasn't that some shit. Sanders felt bad for the Captain. She would be a helluva woman to have to share a kindred spirit with. Though, he had to admit, a good one to have in your corner.

Chapter 47

The day after the battle Marc sat beside the woman who was responsible for his success thus far. She had believed in him when everyone else had given up. She had given him patience when others showed him frustration. She had literally kicked him in the butt when others had walked away. There was just something about her to look up to. She always had a reason for what she did, and she knew how to work with each guy, no matter how different, to bring out the best in him. Leilius was living proof. And now Leilius was a celebrity. He couldn't walk two steps without someone giving him a nod, or a pat on the back, or a job well done. On the way there, those same guys had shunned, or ignored, or sneered at the younger soldier.

"C'mon My'pol, you need to eat." Marc urged the bowl of gruel into Shanti's hands. It had always been a running joke, the things Leilius came up with when his brain was short circuiting, thinking about something else. They had always loved that she didn't care what she was called. It set her apart. It made everything seem lighter, more fun and less tedious. She usually smiled when they used the titles, in eyes if not in mouth, but now it didn't help.

"I'm okay, Marc. Thank you. And job well done. I hear you are excelling."

"Don't worry about me. You need to eat. I made this special for you. Just one bowl. Please." The gruel was full of nutrients, remedial herbs, electrolytes, and immunity building properties. The best part was that it tasted similar to broth. One bowl went a long way. So far the three sick men, including Commander Sanders, were doing excellently on it.

"I'm not hungry, Marc, but I thank you. Why don't you leave it beside me and I'll eat in a while."

Shanti was sitting at the base of a tree, her body resting against the rough bark, nearly limp. Her eyes were lackluster and her speech came out nearly monotone. She was agonized. Anyone could see it. Whatever she had found inside the mind of that guy in the white shirt was eating away at her, and she wasn't doing anything to revive herself. She was giving up.

Marc looked around for help. They were removed from the city

somewhat, the group of men hanging around the wounded taking a break and getting some rest. The three mind-wounded, which is what they were calling Sanders and the other two, dozed in the soft grass. The physically wounded were spread out, wherever they were comfortable, healing. Marc had seen to everyone. They had lost nearly two dozen men, and five more probably wouldn't last the night. But based on the fact that they demolished the enemy, their numbers were excellent. At least, that's what all the veterans were saying.

Mark looked at Sanders, lying on his back with a grimace aimed at the sky, knowing the vicious battle commander could sometimes give the woman pause. But while he was healing quickly, which had something to do with Shanti, he was in no shape to talk sense into her, let alone get her to eat. Lucius was the next best option, but he was in the city, trying to reestablish their government and a sense of order. He had a mind for business and the Captain trusted him more than anyone else, so that made sense. But it didn't help Marc at the moment.

The only other person who would make a difference was the Captain himself, and Marc would rather chew his arm off before approaching that man. When the Captain looked at a guy it made him want to hide, or pee himself. It wasn't that the looks were overly aggressive, either. Sometimes he was even half smiling—at least when Shanti or Lucius was around and not pissing him off—but he always had that alpha thing going on that made a guy realize he was nowhere near as tough and confident as he had originally thought. That really, he should just fall in line like everyone else. And Marc wasn't even one of the tough and confident ones, so he just got scared straight away.

But Shanti was wasting away. She was spending all her energy healing the mind-wounded and none on herself.

“How is she?” Leilius asked as he walked up. He looked like a peacock dressed in rumpled clothes.

Marc shook his head. “She won't eat.”

“I am sitting right here, and I am fine. Leilius, this was one easy battle. If you get over-confident, you will get dead. Popularity goes farther when you are modest. Women will come calling regardless, but the good ones will leave soon after. Get wise, keep your discipline, and stay alive.”

“Yes, s'am.”

“Oh, we are back to that title, are we? Well good, that one made the

most sense.” Shanti leaned her head against the tree trunk and closed her eyes. A tear slid out of the corner of her left eye.

Leilius jumped as if he’d been poked in the backside with a fire stirrer. He looked at Marc with wide eyes.

“I am sad. Therefore, I cry,” Shanti said unabashedly. “I realize big strong men are trained not to show emotion in this land. It is a shame. It makes you brittle. But I am not from this land. And I am a woman, which your people have decided can shed a few tears in public. So...there you go.”

“S’cam, it weirds me out that you can read my thoughts,” Leilius mumbled.

“I cannot read your thoughts, Leilius, I can read your emotions. You are now embarrassed, but you were shocked and...freaked out, I think you say, a second ago. If you projected less, I wouldn’t be accosted by that information.”

“Can you teach me to do that? Stop projecting, I mean?”

Shanti sighed. “I have never heard of teaching anything to someone without the *Gift*. I don’t know that it can be done. But until I met the Inkna, I didn’t know of a few other things that can be done. It is worth a try, I suppose. We don’t have much time, however. I will be moving on as soon as my shoulder heals.”

Marc said, “What do you mean?” at the same time as Leilius said, “Wha—err?”

“I need to be on my way.” It was unclear if she was answering them, or just continuing with her monologue. “This battle will draw attention. The Inkna will wonder how someone beat their *Sarshers*. They will wonder if it was in-house. From what I heard over the last year, Sturgane was more ambitious than the rest. People might think the Graygual removed him, which will keep the Inkna quiet for a time. They will figure it out eventually, though. Then they will raise the alarm and the Graygual will be drawn here. They will search harder for me. That will lead them to you. Then to the discovery of Cayan. Then to war.

“I need to get help. I also need to be on my own. It is better. For me. I have lost most of my people already, and the others will stay lost unless I can get help. I do not want to make friends just to lose them. I will never again have the one I loved. He didn’t go with them. And my Chance died. So I’m a nomad until I get help. Or I am dead. I feel dead already. I’m not sure which I dread more—alive with this pain, or dead and answering for my sins. It’s all

the same, maybe. I will eternally get no rest. What a terrible job, this Chosen.”

“Does the Captain know?” Marc asked, not sure what to say about the rambling. She was, without a doubt, spilling secrets. Marc knew that. But he didn’t know how they were important. Or why.

She shrugged. “Not from my mouth, but I’m sure he suspects I must go. Or maybe that I will go. Who’s to say what goes on in that head of bricks?”

Marc got up slowly. He didn’t know much, but he knew that if she died or left, they were sunk. That Inkna army would have taken them down without her battling with her mind. She needed to train the Captain to do it. If there were more people that used that type of fighting, which it sounded like there were, she had to stay on their side. She had to. Or they would end up like the people here—poor, distraught, or used for unspeakable things. Marc wouldn’t see his sister handed over, or his father starving. He wouldn’t!

“Leilius, watch her. I’ll be back,” Marc said as he turned.

“But—“

With her eyes still closed and her head leaning back against the tree, the sun sprinkling her face through the leaves, a smile soaked up Shanti’s face. “I only bite during sex, Leilius, and you are too young for that.”

Marc paused when he finally found the Captain. The man was sweat-stained and exhausted, but he wasn’t giving up. He was helping the townsfolk with the manual labor, right alongside his men, cleaning up the destruction that the battle caused. The strength of the man was awe-inspiring. He could lift twice what the man next to him could manage, and could work for longer. That fact didn’t help Marc’s desire to be somewhere else besides where he was, stiffly walking up to the large man with a plea on behalf of a foreign woman that the Captain probably didn’t care about in the least—other than to laugh at her clumsy execution of their language and confusion of their customs. Marc had never understood his leader’s humor where it concerned S’am, but then, he had never understood the Captain, full stop. It was best to just steer clear.

But here he was, tremors from head to foot, wringing his hands like a maid caught stealing, shuffling up and clearing his throat. “Sir?” he said weakly.

After a moment, watching the Captain wrestle a giant beam to the

side, Marc tried again. “Captain, sir?”

The large man turned and looked down at him. He wasn’t that much taller, but it certainly seemed that way now, or any time Marc had been stupid enough to get a dose of the Captain’s full attention.

He felt like a worm watching a giant boot descend.

“Cadet, yes. How are the wounded?”

“Um, okay, I guess. Sir. Five are dying. Shanti—uh, S’am, the foreign woman—is easing their troubles somehow. She doesn’t say how, but it seems to help. They look peaceful.”

“And you can do nothing for them?”

“No, sir. I tried. They have wounds that cannot be sewn or otherwise healed. Too deep or internal, with too much blood loss. If we had a full hospital it would only make a difference to one of them, and that would probably still be a losing battle.”

“I see. And what of Sanders and the two others?”

“Sh—the foreign woman, um—“

“Calling her by her name is acceptable, Cadet.” The Captain’s voice softened, if a steel sieve could be called soft.

“Yes, sir. Well, she is doing something with them, too. It is sapping her energy, though, sir. She is fading. Visibly fading.”

The Captain’s eyes glowed faintly for a quick moment. It was eerie and a little scary. The man didn’t need any more ways to freak Marc out, but he kept finding them. “Yes, I see. I will monitor that, Cadet. Thank you for bringing it to my attention.”

The Captain went to turn away but Marc didn’t leave. It was not why he had come. Not the only reason, anyway. Sometimes he truly hated his life. “Uh, sir?”

He was met with that stare again. He wasn’t being rushed; the Captain always had time for everyone, but a guy didn’t have to be prodded to want to walk away. Not with those hard eyes trapping him. “Yes, Cadet?”

“Um, well, two things. One, she won’t eat. She just keeps saying she’s not hungry. She’s only had a small amount since the end of the battle yesterday. Lucius is busy, and I know you are too, but Commander Sanders can’t help because—well, he’s...you know—and no one else will probably be any good. Her body is trying to heal, she is trying to heal others as well... she needs to eat or she’ll get sick. Or worse.”

The Captain was walking before Marc had finished. Since he hadn’t

gotten to the second problem, and he hadn't been told he was excused, he jogged to catch up.

“And the second thing?”

Oh good, following had been the right decision.

He cut off a sigh as the impatient blue gaze swept his way. “And, uh, maybe you don't care, or are glad, but she said she's leaving after her shoulder heals. It's not a bad wound—it won't take long to heal. Not with her accelerated rate, anyway. She says she is better off alone. She also made a comment that she would have no people unless she got help—“

The Captain stopped abruptly and turned to him. “Tell me exactly what she said.”

Marc's legs started to tremble. Oh God, he should have written it down. He relayed as much as he could remember and did broad strokes for the rest. He tried not to stammer, but his brain was having a hard time refraining from telling his legs to run. When he was done the Captain was silent for a beat.

“Who else heard?” he finally said.

“Leilius. That's it.”

“Do you know what it means? What she meant?”

“Uh-mm, I assume it meant that some of her people made it to safety and are awaiting her return with help. She must have stashed the best and the brightest if they hope to have a chance, right? And that she had thought this man that she loved was going to safety with them, but he didn't. And even though she just killed the man who killed him, then well, if that's true, it's bringing the grief right back up to the surface, I would guess. And someone who was paired with her, to protect her, like Lieutenant Lucius does, died. So probably for her, right? Probably to help her escape? She's obviously as powerful as everyone seems to think she is, so she's the jewel that everyone wants to claim to win the war, right? And now there is you...um...”

Something had changed in the Captain's face. His eyes turned hard and intense. Marc lowered his eyes and tried to shrink out of the way, hoping the Captain left him standing there and moved on.

“Insightful.” No such luck. “Do you have reason to believe Leilius put any of that together?”

“Uh, n-no, sir. He was too worried about the tears.”

“Whose? Shanti's?”

“Yes, sir.”

Marc heard a deep breath and a slow exhale. Then, “I’m sure I don’t have to impress upon you that that is information you are not to share?”

“N-no, sir. You are the one I thought should have that, uh, knowledge. Sir.”

“Correct. Well done.” His feet didn’t move, and since that was all Marc could see of him, he didn’t really know what was going on, and he didn’t want to look up to find out. So he waited quietly.

“So she does have people.” The Captain sounded like he was half talking to himself. “They must have saved some, knowing they couldn’t win. What a decision to have to make. She had to send her people to their death, hide those that gave them the best chance for their future, and save herself. She had to play God with those she had known all her life—deciding who lived and who died. Even had to track down the captured and kill them in an act of mercy. Could I have done that?”

Rhetorical? Probably. Marc continued to stare at the ground and pretend like he couldn’t hear the conversation spoken to the top of his head.

“This man she speaks of was not a soldier,” the Captain went on. “Lucius has heard that from her nightmares. He was good with children. He stayed behind, which means the children were taken to safety. He was probably trying to buy them time so they could escape. Noble. So they saved children, caretakers, and their best soldiers. Interesting. I wonder where they were hidden...”

“They saved those with fighting skills and the mental part, too, sir.” Marc flinched. Why did he have to speak? And now he’d caused silence. That couldn’t be good.

“And they followed her ruling. They valued her leadership. They had faith that she should go alone to get this thing done. They thought a young woman was the best choice to walk across the land in search of an ancestor a hundred or more years removed with nothing but weapons and her father’s ring. And she almost made it.”

“She thought our forest was still intact. If not for that, she would be long gone,” Marc said in resignation. If the Captain was determined to make him a sounding board, he might as well move the thoughts along.

“We are not alone in this, either, Cadet.”

Marc didn’t know what he was talking about, so he said nothing.

“But she has to go—I see that now.”

“But sir, you can’t let her leave!” Marc said in desperation. “We

cannot withstand those *Starchars*, or whatever they are. You have power, I hear, but you can't heal with your mind. Or cause pain. Or whatever else she does that helps the army. You can't—“

“That is enough, Cadet.” The Captain's deep, graveled voice set Marc's bones to vibrating. Marc could feel a warning tingle in his ball sack that said he was probably about to be bodily thrown somewhere. He was prepared for flight and was not ashamed to admit it.

“She has to leave,” the Captain went on, walking now, “but you are right, she has valuable skills we need to harness. For right now, though, she needs to stay alive, and her spirit needs to heal. You are in charge of monitoring that, and reporting to me whenever she suffers a blow. The rest of what she said you will not speak of to her or anyone else, save me. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Suck your emotions deep within you. She does not seek them unless it is dire, so if you keep your thoughts close to your chest, she should glean nothing of this conversation.”

Mark had no idea what that meant, either, but it was always wise to agree with the Captain. “Yes, sir.”

As they walked up, Shanti grimaced, eyes still closed. “Marc, you are a tattletale.”

“See, that's weird,” Leilius mumbled, scooting around the tree.

“It's not weird. Marc's brain is all soft and squishy and caring. The other one's brain looks like the ugly rugs he is so fond of. I am not reading his thoughts, just that he is unhappy about something. As usual.”

“You two boys can leave now,” the Captain said, his gaze trained on Shanti.

Neither Marc or Leilius wasted any time.

Chapter 48

Shanti waited for the probing mental contact she knew would come. When it did, she gave it a *tug*, then gave him the mental equivalent of a kick. “You need to ask before you try to look in on someone’s thoughts.”

“You seem to have no qualms about it,” Cayan replied, sitting down beside her.

She still hadn’t opened her eyes, but he smelled dirty. And sweaty. “I don’t look. I maintain a connection with my head like people do with their eyes. I monitor to make sure everyone is alive, is okay, and is not in need of help. I cannot help, and really do not appreciate, that your people seem to constantly advertise their every damn emotional feeling.”

“Do you even know what *damn* means?”

“No, but I know how it is used, and how people respond to its use, which is really all slang is anyway.”

“I see.”

“I’m glad.”

“You need to eat.”

“You need to butt-out. And no, besides its use, I don’t understand that one, either. I know what a butt is, of course, and what ‘out’ is, but I don’t see how a naked butt, or a protruding butt, or a butt hanging out of something, makes sense in language. But yet, it makes the boys close their mouths or go away. Often times both.”

“Why won’t you eat? Or look at me?” Cayan was getting impatient.

“Jerrol won’t talk to me, you know. He stares often enough, and nearly vomits lust when he passes, but he won’t say two words. Was that your doing?”

“No. Not directly.”

“Undo it.”

“Why?”

A hot tear ran down Shanti’s cheek. “Because...I need him.”

“Him, or a man?”

“Him.” Another tear followed the first. She felt a deft finger wipe

them away.

“Why him?” the Captain whispered.

“Because he has the same eyes. Earth brown. Deep, rich, gravitating earth brown. I want to make love to him, Cayan. One last time. I want those eyes looking into me while I hold him in my body.”

“Jerrol isn’t...your lost love. He doesn’t look at you the same way. The eyes are the same color, that’s all.”

“Romie.”

“Sorry?”

“Romie was his name. He was the sweetest person you could ever meet. He didn’t care about my status. Or my duties. Or my future before we heard of the armies coming. He would have stayed away if I’d asked. He would have loved me from a distance—let me choose one with a similar *Gift*. We had planned to mate. Before I left my homeland, he was the only one I had ever been with. By choice. It wasn’t really our custom—before mating we all, especially the fighters, experimented. We needed to be sure of what we wanted before we pledged ourselves. But I never wanted anyone but him. He gave me the same courtesy. Not many others, especially men, would do that.”

Cayan sat quietly, not moving. Listening. Letting her purge.

“I’ve defied his trust several times along the road,” she continued sadly. “Most times out of loneliness. Sometimes for sport or fun. Sometimes because I hated him for what he did. For telling me he would be safe when really he had put himself up as a *Sacrifice*, knowing I couldn’t follow. And sometimes...I did it for information. Everything else can be forgiven, even hating him, but I whored myself out for information. I no longer deserve him. I am no longer the woman he loved.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“How can I be? I am destined to live. You keep saving me. Tending to me, feeding me, carrying me unconscious to aid. You should scorn me. Outcast me. Send me away for what you witnessed in that dungeon. Yet here you are, trying to get me to eat. Do you hate me, Cayan?”

“No, *mesasha*.”

“Will you tell me what that term means, now?” She’d asked him a few times since she’d heard it first, never hearing it from anyone else, but he had declined to answer. Said if she couldn’t figure it out by stealing his thoughts, then she was half dense. Though his tone was always light and

joking, he hadn't been smiling.

His eyes delving into hers, he slowly shook his head.

She sighed. "Well, I don't want your help, anymore. I will not be returning with you. I will continue on toward the sea. I will probably have to whore myself out to get a boat, but I will. That is what I am, now."

"You are being over-dramatic. You are not what you fear—with your *Gift* you wouldn't need to use...anything else. Even still, you will make no more of your journey alone."

"No? You are, what, going to hire a guide? Or you have realized my value, like that swine Xandre, the Being Supreme, and now you will keep me close so I can be your weapon? Or breed for you instead of him?"

"I know you need to make that trip. You will not do it alone."

Shanti opened her wet eyes and looked at him. He was dirt stained and sweaty. His arms were bared, the great muscle, bronzed, shiny where the sun hit it. His eyes were deep and so, so blue. "What has given you the change of heart?"

"I have allies, Shanti. Many. Some will not head down the hard road, as I must, but many will. They will follow my lead. They will fight by our side. I need you. I need the people you hope to claim and bring back. I admit that, freely. But you need me. If we stay together we have a chance. If you leave, my people will surely die. The Inkna will probably come for us, first. Their masters are sure to follow if we aren't destroyed. You need men and my power. I need the same of you. It can only work if we join forces."

"I sure hope you aren't going to talk about fate and divinity and all that crap. I've had enough of that with Sterling."

"Sterling?"

"Yes, he's pledged his sword, whatever that means. And his God, and the fates, and other things I didn't understand."

"It means he has vowed to protect you when you cannot protect yourself."

"Oh. A second Chance. Well, my Chances tend to die, so thankfully he is more your man than he'll ever be mine. But it would've been nice if he'd cut to the wick of it, instead of carrying on and on about the-Elders-can-only-be-sure."

"Back to the subject at hand. In order to use you, I need you living. You need to eat and let Marc baby you." Cayan was smiling. He had a lovely smile that always seemed to touch his eyes, making them twinkle like the

surface of a rippling lake in the noon sun.

Shanti couldn't find the humor, though. "I hurt, Cayan. A part of me died with Romie."

"You need to heal. He died for a cause. You were forced to live for one. Don't fail him or insult his memory with these thoughts. I don't know much about love, but I think anyone would give you the same advice. If he truly loved you, he would have wanted you to regain your happiness. I'm sure he loved when you smiled."

Shanti choked on a sob. Her chest felt like it was filled with rocks. "How did you know?"

"Because you have a beautiful smile." Cayan looked deeply into her soul as he sat immobile, his heavy arms resting on his knees. "Rest. Eat. When you're ready, we'll spar. You can beat on me to ease your pain."

"Let me have Jerrol. Please, Cayan. I'll be discrete."

"No. It's not in me to allow it, and it would only torture you, anyway. Please do not ask again."

He got up and moved away. He checked on a few of the men who were awake, laughing with one who had to get an arrow extracted from his leg. He knelt beside Sanders and put his hand on a bare arm. He moved to the other two and did the same. He probably determined that they were healing. Their brains were mending. The process would be quicker if Shanti were healthy. She hated to admit it, but Cayan had made a lot of sense. She needed to keep going. She had a job to do. If she did not see this thing to the end, her people would have died in vain. She could not let that happen.

Chapter 49

“Are you sure you’re up to it?”

Cayan was looking at her with a twinkle in his eyes. He wanted to laugh at her but kept himself from indulging.

They had been stationary for a week, putting together the crippled city of Tonnicka. The Inkna had all been killed and burned in a great pyre, the townspeople celebrating their demise and worshipping Cayan as their savior, but there were still months of destruction that had to be undone. Lucius had reestablished the local government, and they were already reshaping their community. Half of Cayan’s men returned to their homes, taking word of their victory, the bodies of those that did not make it, and the sick that could sit on a horse for the trip back. The rest remained to finish rebuilding the city with their sweat and hard work, or to recover.

With the trees at Shanti’s back, and nightly visits from Cayan to give her energy through the healing process, plus what she had learned from the little mouse they had captured in Cayan’s city, she was quickly mending. She gave that same benefit to Sanders and the other two that suffered mentally, and they were awake more often, their bodies filling out after being half starved, and their nightmares becoming less frequent.

She decided that since Cayan had sent Jerrol back to the city, and no one else had caught her interest, she would take Cayan up on his offer and beat some sense into him. Except for that nightly energy transfer, in which he insisted on holding her hand with fingers entwined, they rarely spoke or were in each other’s company. She was usually hovering on the outskirts of the fires, eyes closed, feeling the night, and he was with his men, talking and laughing and sharing a roasted something or other that the hunters had returned with or the townspeople had brought. He had his place, his world, and she didn’t belong in it. She *couldn’t* belong in it—she still freaked most of his men out.

The day of the challenge, the sun was streaming down, losing some of its heat as the season drew to a close and winter loomed. The men were all gathered around, creating a large circle, wanting to watch the woman fight

without any other distractions. Legend had it she was pretty good. Marc and Leilius swore up and down that she was better than Lucius or Sterling, but it was said Marc and Leilius had a crush on the exotic woman and couldn't be trusted.

Those that bet for her had seen a snippet of her in battle, though they hadn't gotten long to gawk. Those that bet against had a bias, largely based off fear. They had heard what she had done with her mind, not believed the Captain was capable of it, and didn't trust what they didn't understand. They knew she was necessary, but didn't want to get close to something so unpredictable as a woman who killed men with her mind, and worst of all, cried. Right in the middle of them sometimes!

Those were the men who learned that fear and arousal could sometimes go hand-in-hand.

Shanti was swinging her arm, warming up her weakened shoulder. It had been a shallow stab wound that was currently a scar, and would soon be smooth skin. The *Gift* wasn't just for violence, especially when Cayan worked his version of healing. "Marc says no, I'm not ready, but you know him."

"Doesn't have a clue how to doctor," Cayan said with a laugh, winking at an outraged Cadet.

"Weapons?" Shanti asked, motioning toward wooden practice swords.

"Nah. Mental?"

She stopped swinging her arm. "You want to go up against my *Gift*?"

He smiled so big it took up his whole face. His dimples were deeper than she had ever seen them. Too bad she was about to bloody that handsome face.

"I have a good block," he said, pacing across the clearing like a jungle cat.

"I have a great attack."

"Well, then..."

"Tobias, does that change the odds?" Shanti called.

"Yes, s'am. You are the underdog right now, but using the ol' noggin will definitely change things."

"Did you bet for me or against?"

"I appreciate you saving my life 'n all, but he's bigger, stronger, and faster. I'm against. Although, now I'm not sure. Even match with the noggin, maybe."

“Noggin is head, then?” Shanti asked a still smiling Cayan.

He nodded and feinted at her. She didn't bother to react. Instead, she opened and released her power, flexed, spread it out, then condensed it down. She took hold of his mind and found his block.

“Ready, then?” she asked.

He must have known what she found because he smiled bigger. “I've learned a thing or two.”

“I don't care, I'm getting bored. Let's do this.”

She barely had time to react, he came at her so fast. Giant spans of arms and legs speeding toward her body with incredible strength behind them. She didn't want to take a solid hit from him and she couldn't block without risking damage. For him it meant deflecting and returning the attack when he compensated.

His arm arched toward her face. She stepped into him instead of ducking away, caught his thick arm with her raised elbow to stop it and then hammered her fists into the valleys of his muscle. His breath went out in a whoosh but he was moving again, grabbing for her body to fling her over his shoulder in a throw. She swiveled and kicked up, connecting with the side of his face. He took the blow and turned, leg out, sweeping her leg out from under her. She turned it into a roll, dodged a kick, and came up on the other side of him.

That was when he started the mental warfare. He advanced on her, a solid *Push* from his mind jarring her bones and sparking her power. Power turned to heat within her body. She almost stopped where she was, but if she did she would have been flat on her back from his fist in the next second. Instead, she backed up and half ran to the edge of the clearing, her back to Tobias.

“Running away?” Cayan asked with hungry eyes. Power made his irises glow. The answering power within her nearly roared in response.

“Are you sure you want to play with this much power?” she asked, trying to hide her shaky voice. “Can you control it?”

“Can you?”

“Yes?”

He laughed. “Bring it on little girl. I'm not afraid of you.”

“Yeah, but I am a little afraid of me,” she muttered, gingerly walking back toward him.

She faced him like she would've faced any of her opponents so long

ago when she was on the sparring pad. She took in a deep breath and drew in her power, wearing it about her person like a cloak. His eyes glowed in response, feeling it calling him, reaching out to her in return. She wanted to join it and play. It felt exciting. Invigorating. Extremely dangerous. Just like him.

“You better have your shield on as tight as you can make it, or else this might hurt a little.” She grinned wickedly.

She attacked, her power unleashing like a splinter, hurled into the center of his forehead as she advanced with hands moving constantly. Kick, punch, wipe away his answering punch, poke to the neck, elbow to the face, then back out, rolling under a kick and turning back with a slap of power. He couldn't keep up physically, not with her mental bombardment. He was taking punch after kick, staggering, grunting, and straightening for more.

She couldn't get through his muscle, couldn't do any real damage. He was fast enough to move that little bit to where she was less effective and block her mental prowess. After about ten minutes he stopped with a hand up. She backed off.

He was breathing heavy and his eyes were contemplative. “You win round one.”

“That's it?” she asked, working her shoulder. “We can use weapons if you want. No more mental stuff.”

“No, I'm not done. I need to regroup. You've done this before. I haven't.”

“You're bigger and stronger. Tobias says that gives you an edge.”

“Tobias doesn't know how lethal a woman's mind can be when she's pissed off.”

“Yes I do,” Tobias called from amid the crowd. “But Captain, you are now the underdog. You aren't making us men folk look all that great right now.”

Cayan nodded. “Again.”

Shanti went at him again, whirling, attacking his mind and body. When she got within his reach she bombarded him with punches, hitting the same places as before, trying to work the bruises through the layers of muscle. As she worked, evading his grabs and answering attacks, a feeling started working up from her inner thighs. It wasn't unpleasant—in fact...it was only pleasant.

Finishing her punches and ducking out, it felt like a giant, wet,

slightly coarse tongue licked between her legs. When it got to the top of her slit it went in lazy circles, and tingles spiraled up her body. Shanti froze, unable to tear her mind away from the sensation. An instant later she was airborne, landing ten feet away flat on her back. Where she stayed for a second, shivering.

“Remind me to apologize to Sanders. Then say you’re welcome,” she said to the air. Cayan started laughing.

“What happened?” Tobias called out.

“The Captain seems to know his way around the female anatomy, and is coloring outside the lines,” Shanti explained, getting up slowly.

“I win round two,” Cayan said with a delighted smile.

“You were paying attention that day...” Shanti said, circling him.

“Not really. But I’m a man. I have an active imagination. It seems visualization is the key.”

“Atta boy, Captain. Way to pull ahead by thinking with your dick,” Tobias called, taking another bet.

“Language,” Cayan said firmly.

“Sorry, sir.”

“Way to give her a taste of her own medicine!” Sanders yelled from off field somewhere.

Shanti continued to circle, a firm hand on his mind. She kneaded his head, pushing at his block, poking it, trying to move it to the side, feathering it. Then, with one swift spike of power, she struck at it, focusing all on one tiny point as she moved in, hands and feet moving. The power speared him, his shield unable to handle such a concentrated attack as her kick landed on his solar plexus.

He wasn’t used to two tiers of fighting, not yet, so he wasn’t organized enough to choose which to block. He took the hit in both places, staggering back, bent, unable to counter. Shanti merely watched, not pursuing, as he dropped down to one knee.

“Ouch,” he said, running a hand over his head.

She reached out immediately, brushing away the hurt with a soft caress, lessening the residual pain. He looked up with that blue gaze and lingered in her eyes. In her mind.

“Want to just stick to physical sparring for a while?” she asked by way of apology.

“Can you hit harder than that? Can you make it more potent?”

“Yes.”

“Do it.”

“No.”

He climbed to his feet. “I want to see it happen. I want to know what it feels like.”

“I know you can hit really hard. I don’t ask you to prove it.”

“That’s because you already know how to hit.”

Shanti put her fists on her hips. “You know how to do what I just did; all you have to do is apply more power. And then it hurts more.”

“An ape knows that much.” It sounded like Sanders.

Cayan ignored him. “Show me.”

“No.”

“Would it kill me?”

She stared at him. He stared back. The field was dead quiet. “If you were unprepared, like you just were, and didn’t fight back, then yes, it would kill you.”

“And the lady just took the lead,” Tobias muttered off to the side.

Cayan let a hard breath tumble out of his mouth. “Then, for now, let’s just spar. I will need to practice before you do any real harm.”

“So the girl wins mentally, but we still have the physical battle. At your leisure, my lord,” Tobias mediated.

Cayan was no longer in a laughing mood. She’d shaken him. He had just learned how ill trained he really was. The next time he showed up to spar, she had a feeling she would be back-pedaling before she could fight him off.

The purely physical sparring lasted for the next hour. They were well matched, but Tobias had been right; Cayan was bigger and stronger, although not faster. At least not enough for it to count. His reach was what killed her. She had to duck in and out of his long arms, and a few times she got tangled inside. On those instances he grabbed her, gave whatever part of her body he had hold of a quick, though playful fondle, always laughing, then threw her across the field.

The first time it happened, the guys watching had sucked in a breath. Cayan had given her butt a hard pinch and a sound slap. They didn’t realize the extent of what she had done to him and to Sanders—she knew that she had started it, and also deserved it. Still, a swift though light kick to his balls had been justified. The guys had sucked in another breath at that one.

The last time, when Shanti was starting to get tired and sloppy, she had tripped over Cayan's big boot and went head first into his chest. Before she could get her hands in gear to punch him in the gut, he had her face tilted and found her lips with his own. Startled, she froze, suffering his tongue to drift along her bottom lip, tasting her, daring her to open her mouth and taste him in return. Instead, she punched him in the balls as hard as she could, sending him back down to one knee.

In the quiet that followed he had smiled hugely and announced that it had been worth it. All the men cheered. Then all the men felt what it was like to have their brains lightly *squeezed*. It cut short the celebration, but not Cayan's triumphant smile.

To Cayan, women were a game, and while it was funny, and to some extent also fun, she wasn't in the mood to play for long. Not when he had denied her Jerrol. It was all a one-sided joke, in which he was in control, and she did not plan to forget it.

At the end Tobias ruled that the Captain had won the sparring and everyone collected their winnings. It was the first time Shanti had gotten nods and pats on the back. She was still the scary foreign woman, but she was less mysterious. Not that it really mattered to her, but she'd play along if it helped them sleep at night.

"Can I speak with you?" Cayan asked when the groups of men broke up.

She shrugged, finding a fire at the edge of the group and sitting down. The guy who had been there, a squeaky-voiced kid who was good with a bow and had just made it past Cadet, made himself scarce in a hurry.

"I know you have mostly healed," Cayan started, sitting next to her. "I know that you don't plan to come back with us. But I wondered...can you forestall your trip until after winter?"

She shook her head while he continued. "Winter gets very cold here. It has been known to snow. You don't have provisions for that. You are newly healed after the last injury, and you were just newly healed before that. Another couple months won't matter—no one can travel far in the winter. We are not in danger until then. In that time, you can represent your people as we draw others to our side."

"I am in danger all the time, Cayan. I am forever in danger. If one of your people was to sell me out, or someone caught wind of me, the Graygual would not wait until the snows melt. They would come immediately to claim

me.”

“But now my people know your value. And they know that I am like you. They cannot sell you out without also exploiting me.”

“Your army might adhere to that, but your citizens will not. They won’t understand me, or your *Gift*.”

“A couple months. The word cannot get out before then. We don’t trade in the winter, no one visits—it is like the world halts for the cold. In that time you can train me. You can work with your Honor Guard and the other young members of the army. You would have a home, a warm place to celebrate your holidays, a time to rest and rejuvenate.”

“You wish me to stay for *you*, then, is that it? To train you and your army? For your benefit?”

Cayan hesitated, his gaze boring into hers. “Yes. For me. For my benefit and your own.”

“What makes you different from the Being Supreme?” Shanti asked quietly.

Cayan’s blank mask melted in anger. “For one, my goal is not to rape and breed you. And two, I have wanted you within my walls from the beginning. My reasons constantly change, I will grant you that, but they have always been in your best interest.”

Shanti shook her head. “I’m not in the game of trusting strangers, Cayan, especially not those who are interested in their own gain. I need to continue on my way. We need to part.”

“But what of my *Gift*? Our mating *Gifts*?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have all the answers.”

“You don’t have any answers.”

“Fine, I don’t have any answers. It doesn’t change my duty.”

“I had planned to go with you,” Cayan said so quietly she almost didn’t hear him. “I wanted a couple months to prime Sterling and Daniels to handle the city while we were gone. I wanted to use the winter to get my allies lined up. Then I planned to go with you. I think we need to stick together, or else why are there two of us? Why did my mother’s long lineage of daughters suddenly end in a son?”

“Fate again, is it? Fate doesn’t exist, Cayan. I do not play the dutiful soldier well. If I had any family left alive to swear to that fact, they would tell you many a story. I travel best alone. It was how it was meant to be. I can reconnect with you if I can make it back.”

“That’s the point everyone understands but you, Shanti. You won’t make it back. Half of you wants to die in the next few months. More than half, now, I think. I think you’re eager for it. You can’t handle the burden anymore. What else is it but Fate? You, near death, were saved by the city that held the one person with your mating *Gift*. That’s more than coincidence. When you were ready to die, why did you suddenly find someone who wanted to help? Who wanted to keep you alive. Who watches over you, religiously, because you seem to look for battles that will end badly, or use you until you won’t get back up. Tell me that.”

“Unlucky, maybe. You don’t need me, Cayan. Actually, it sounds like you’d find much more peace without me. As you did before me. You can learn your *Gift* now that you understand the nature of it. You have what you need.”

“No, I don’t.” Eyes on fire, he grabbed her, capturing her face in his hands. He kissed her hard, his lips glued to hers, his mouth opening and willing her to do the same.

She resisted, pushing at him slightly, not understanding why her body was tingling, why his hands and mouth seared her face, why the smell and feel of spices overwhelmed her until she was leaning in helplessly, rubbing her hands up his chest and twining them around his neck. Or why she finally opened her mouth to his probing tongue.

He filled it in a rush, tilting his head for more contact, stroking her tongue with his, licking her lips and backing off to nibble. When he lifted his head, his eyes were smoldering, soft but aflame, his eyes glowing slightly, his mind wrapped within hers.

He was bloody attractive. All the girls thought so. He got whatever and whomever he wanted, even within his modest society. She was alone, and lonely, and grieving. He knew she needed intimacy—it was why she wanted Jerrol—and knew that capturing a girl’s heart was a way to override her logic. If he got her to believe in his love, she would fall in line. He was a master and she was a sucker.

She closed her mind and *pushed*. His eyes went wide before his face dropped into a scowl. “You keep running.”

“That is my duty. But let me guess; now you are going to throw in something about how Romie would disapprove of me leaving like this. Or how I couldn’t be the woman he fell in love with, what with my lack of foresight. Or how my parents would be ashamed of me. Or how my

grandfather would be disappointed. Or how Rohnan, my Chance, saved the cause, and now I am just waiting for it to finally kill me and succumb to failure? You tried lust, and now you will try guilt, right? If so, don't bother."

He shook his head. "I was going to say you are as afraid of succeeding as you are of loving, whether it be family, friends, or anything else. And then I was going to wish you goodnight. You have noticed, I'm sure, that you have no guards. I have left you to the edges of the encampment to give you space. You could have left at any time. Still can. I do not hold you here under lock and key, nor was I doing it in the city after you proved I could trust you. I urge you to think on what I have said. I know you were trained to be a leader, and those that relied on you trusted you a great deal. Since I know something of leadership, I can say that the woman in front of me is not thinking with her experience, but instead, with her fear."

With that, Master All-Knowing got up and walked toward the center of the encampment, leaving Shanti to feel hollow and alone. Leaving to her to think on her options. To mull over what he had said. It would be really irritating if he was right.

Chapter 50

Marc was in a panic. She was gone. She wasn't there anywhere. He had searched every tent, every shrub, accounted for every man...she was gone. She had left in the night sometime when everyone was sleeping. Leilius might have a lot of talent for sneaking around unnoticed, but she had trained him. If she had wanted to get out soundless, undetected, she would have had no problem.

Without thinking, half in disbelief, he sprinted up to the Captain. "She's gone! Sir, she's gone. She left us. Sir."

The Captain looked at him out of the corner of his eye. "I know, Cadet. She left last night. We leave for home today. Without her. She made her decision and we will respect it."

"But sir—"

Sanders walked up briskly, his body looking like it ached, but the man ignoring it. "I just overheard. Should I go after her?"

"I've already tried," Sterling said as he rolled his sleeping mat. "Her tracks go to the brush line. I lose them after that. It is like she climbed the tree and jumped from branch to branch—without breaking any branches in the process. I've searched a wide circle and can't find a trace."

"She's had a lot of experience hiding," the Captain said with indifference. "If she doesn't want to be found, she won't be."

"Can't you search with your head, or whatever it is you do?" Sanders asked quietly. "I remember her mentioning that a time or two."

"I've tried. I can get so far comfortably, but when I push the power gets slippery and implodes. She's gone. We move on." He walked away, ending the conversation.

Sanders looked at the ground a long time. He didn't like it, that was obvious, but when he looked back up at Marc, he was resigned. "She has made her choices and there isn't much we can do about it except not like it."

Marc nodded. "But the others would've wanted to say goodbye."

"So would we all, but it's not in the cards. C'mon, pack your gear. We're moving out."

It was a long walk back. Leilius was constantly looking in the trees,

disbelieving that s'am was really gone. He said he had a feeling. She wouldn't have left them. He *knew* she hadn't left—not for good. But when the Mugdock attacked on the way back, they had to fend for themselves. She didn't pop out of the trees to help, and she didn't look to be saved. Not that she ever did, but the fantasy of saving the lady in distress was always in their thoughts. Why else would a man want to be a hero, except for the rewarding kiss?

As they walked into the gate, they were greeted with cheers and smiles. The Captain was the big hero, as always, and he and a few of the other older, more handsome Commanders and Lieutenants were swarmed with pretty girls batting their eyes and throwing their scarves. Leilius puffed up his chest, trying to be noticed, but they were in the back and too young for any real attention. Not that Marc cared; he hated being the center of attention.

He went to his house where his family fawned over him. His stupid sister picked a fight, like she always did, and his stupid brother had used all his stuff while he'd been gone. But even though he settled in that night without his own swarm of girls, and even though he had his family close, and even though it was like every other night, something was missing and the effect was like a hole in his chest.

He wondered where she was. And if she'd ever come back.

Chapter 51

Shanti sat in the shade of a Cypress Tree, looking out at the valley below. Rolling hills covered in golden grass rose and fell around the sleepy town below. She could just make out a small horse carriage full of green vegetation, plodding toward the town's gate on shaky wheels.

She'd walked away from Cayan and his people two days ago, cutting cross-country the fastest way possible. Left in the middle of the night like a coward. Like the coward he refused to call her.

She scoffed to herself as she brought her elbow up to her knee, squinting into the morning sun.

Thinking with her fear, he'd said. Well, he'd been right. Problem was, she didn't even know what she was afraid of, anymore. Or, more aptly, what she was afraid of most. Was it going on and proving she was actually the Chosen? That this burden she carried would only get heavier and more intense, finally crushing her under the weight? Or maybe her fear was of succeeding and learning that her people were found by the Graygual. That they were dead, or worse, slaves. Or what if she wasn't the Chosen, like she suspected? If she was going all the way to the Shadow Land only to be killed at the hands of strangers?

All those fears she'd carried throughout her entire journey. From one town to the next, those fears had kept her company. Through the pain, and the loneliness—through the doubt, and the famine—she'd relied on what she knew. Fear, and loss.

Yes, she was ruled by fear. He was right. But no more now than she'd ever been. It didn't change her duty.

A ghost of a remembered kiss pressed her lips. Her palms tingled, remembering the feel of Cayan's hard body. Remembering the flutter of her stomach as his gaze delved into her. The spices from his Gift tickling hers. Her power's mate, wanting to mix and swirl, surging...

Shanti batted at the grass and pulled herself to her feet.

Fine. Yes. He was right, the meddling ass-- she was afraid of more loss. Of watching her Honor Guard, boys she was helping shape into men,

sliced alive by the Graygual. Of watching the city that brought her back from the dead crushed by a flood of the Graygual army. Of staying and letting that handsome bastard try and convince her she could love again, and then having him ripped away. The pain of Romie was diminishing with the final stages of loss—she couldn't go through something like that again. It was best to freeze the part of her that could feel, and focus solely on her duty.

Shanti started down the hillside to the town below. She was doing him a favor—all of them a favor. Tomorrow she'd release a large blast of power, making sure she raised eyebrows and created rumor, in order to draw Xandre's focus to her location. With just a release of power from one person, traveling alone, the rumors of a second power, if there were, would be quelled. Cayan and his city would be in the same danger they were before her, and she and him would be even.

But that was for tomorrow.

Tonight she wanted a hot meal, a bath, and a bed.

She jiggled her satchel. The sound of coins rang out, bringing a smile to her face.

“Thank you, Cayan, for sleeping much too soundly.”

She might've been a coward operating on multiple layers of fear, but she could still sneak and steal with the best of them. And now he knew.

Shanti kept her head down as she neared the Inn in the center of the town. Dusk was just starting to settle. She would've preferred staying closer to the outskirts, in case she had to leave in a hurry, but without options, she'd settled for keeping her head down with dirty, somewhat matted hair. With pretty bar maids and hopefully dancing girls around the common area of the Inn, she doubted anyone would grow interest in a slightly stinky stranger—she'd just have to wait to bathe before bed.

The smell of baking bread greeted her as she pushed through the rustic door, seeing the common room open up before her. It was somewhat large for the size of the town, with wiped down tables dotting the dining area. To the left sat a small stage, perfectly equipped for a juggler or performer of some kind. A small and empty dance floor was in front of that. The bar hugged the back wall, occupied by a large man making lazy circles on the countertop with a grayish rag.

She weaved in and out of the tables until she got to the back, tucking

herself into a darker corner, giving her visibility of the room, but hopefully masking her somewhat from others. She left on her cloak despite the heat of the room, and kept the hood over her light hair. Her coloring would stand out in this town—she didn't need trouble tonight. Or questions.

“Hello miss.” A busty maid with wide hips walked up, a cheery expression on her face.

“I'll need a hot meal and a bed and bath for the night. Can you arrange this?” Shanti dusted the table with three silver pennies.

“Oh, O' course Miss, yes O' course. Wouldn't you be needin' the bath first, though, Miss? I can bring the meal to your room...”

Shanti almost agreed—it was a good idea to remain unseen. The problem was, she needed to know what she was potentially walking into on her continued journey. She needed to hear news of the Graygual advancement and any other important gossip, no matter how farfetched. Common rooms were excellent sources of information since men would gossip about even the most absurd things. If she left, she'd continue to be walking blind.

“No, a meal first is fine. Thank you,” Shanti answered.

“Sure thing, Miss.” The woman bobbed in a sort of curtsy, and then bounded away.

Shanti watched the woman head back toward the kitchen, stopping by the bar. The bartender, a rugged, aged man with grizzled eyebrows and graying hair looked her way. A shot of adrenaline pierced Shanti's stomach at his prolonged stare. Assessing stare.

She shifted her gaze, trying to show lack of concern, and looked out over the tables. Two were occupied, one with three heavy-set men all wearing travel stained garb, and the other with two similarly travel stained men, the one closest with a sword peeking out of his tunic. The door swung open, emitting a grim man with a balanced walk and his hand on a bag at his side.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed the bartender glance toward the man walking in, but his gaze didn't linger. Instead, it swung to her again before turning to his left—the same area the bar maid had exited the room. The kitchen, probably.

A moment later, as the new man was settling down to a table one away from hers, the bartender lumbered over with a plate of food and a cup, his large stomach covered with a dirty apron. He set down her food on the edge of the table and stood back some, surveying her.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, gaze flicking up to his stomach before back down to her plate, indicating she was comfortable and he could move on.

He didn’t budge. Concern drifted away from his body, showering her. “We don’t get much women through these parts,” he began.

“I’m just passing through. I’ll keep to myself.”

He shifted, resting his weight over his right leg. The gray rag dangled down his thigh from where it was looped through his apron string at his waist. “You got some finery on you. That cloak weren’t made from no scraps. The thing is, it’s gotten a bit rough through here. It’s no place for someone without protection—‘specially a woman. I’m not telling you your business, but it might be wise to stay in your room ‘n find someone to travel with.”

“I don’t remember this area being so rough...” Shanti let the statement trail away, really hoping that was true, and also hoping for a little more information.

The bartender glanced at the man occupying the nearest table. He leaned in to her a little, lowering his tone. “Got trouble passing through this way pretty often of late. Army men, though they seem a little scruffy for any sort of organized outfit, causing trouble. Word is, they’re looking for a woman. Fair haired, violet eyed woman...”

Cold washed through Shanti as the man paused. He lowered his voice as he continued with, “Word is, she was rumored to be with some rich folk a while ago. She was a part of a big battle not that far East of here—a few guys got out. Ridin’ through here like the Devil was herding them. Spreadin’ stories. Tall tales, I reckon. A woman and man with some sort of power. I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout that. I’m an honest man—I ain’t got no time for tall tales. But people talk. Army men are askin’ around. Women wandering around by themselves get picked up. Disappear. Now, I ain’t trying to tell you your business, but whatever color your eyes, you’re a woman, and these guys ain’t no good. Best to steer clear.”

Shanti stared at her food, her stomach churning. “And these stories—they involve a man?”

The bartender looked around again, shuffling closer until he was right up at the edge of the table. His tone was low and words nearly a whisper. “The man that woman was traveling with, yes, ma’am. Not sure if she still is—haven’t heard. But this man--word is, he attracted the attention of that army

I hear all kinds of stories about. Wiped out one of them cities those Inkna took over. Like I said—a couple people got out. Rode through here—nearly killed the horse with exhaustion. Way I hear it, Inkna were interested in his city—and you know what happens, then...they move in. No one stands in their way. Well. It's said someone did. He held his ground, then he shows up at the Inkna city and wipes them out? Him and a violet eyed woman?" The man tilted his head in a telling sort of way. "That kinda thing calls attention, make no mistake. I reckon the Inkna'll have more interest now. And they have backing. The Inkna don't like to lose. People are saying that man might be able to stand in the way of that ol' Being Supreme..."

The man's voice hitched and he glanced around hurriedly, as if saying the name would call attention to himself. Not able to help spreading gossip, though, and probably happy to have a listening ear who hadn't already heard the information, he continued on in the same deathly quiet voice. "They say if anyone, you know...could stand in the way, it'd probably be that man. Him and that violet-eyed girl. Word is, they tore through that Inkna town. Tore right through it. Took down all that mind-power. Now, I don't know—this is all tall tales. But I do know that no one has done that before. No one I've heard of, anyway. Got them all nervous."

The bartender backed off a bit and grabbed his rag. "Now, like I said, I don't know. These are just things I heard. I only know what comes through these doors. Tall tales, usually, like I said. But a lone woman is the worst kinda thing, regardless. She'll get nabbed, sure as I'm standing here. You best stick to your room, and then find someone to travel with."

Shanti tilted her head in thanks, her throat closed up with suppressed emotion. Of course, it had been silly to think they'd killed everyone in that battle. Stupid to think no witnesses could've escaped. Inkna were cowards. Most of the people the Graygual commanded were—that was the thing about fighting because you were forced to; you didn't stick around if you didn't have to. And glowing eyes were the telltale sign of the Gift, no matter the potency. Cayan would've been noticed before he even made it into the stronghold. Plus, no one person could've held her own against that many Sarshers. Not even her.

Shanti's heart sank as the bartender moved away quietly. A release of power here would paint a big target on her location, and it still wouldn't help Cayan. If the Graygual didn't move in for his power, the Inkna would move in for his riches. It was only a matter of time.

But to help him, she had to get the Shadow People to her side.

Guilt settled into her stomach as she pulled her plate to her. She should've better trained him when she had the time. She'd been afraid of his might. Of what he could become. Also, she'd been wary of how her power acted with his, and how she felt when it did. She'd backed away, ever the coward, and now it left him vulnerable.

The roast mutton tasted like sand in her mouth. She forced the food down, needing to keep her strength up. Regardless of her failings to Cayan, tomorrow she would have to continue her journey, hoping Cayan started building his forces; hoping that would buy him time. Buy her time. The prophecies said that the true Chosen needed to lead the Shadow People out of the Land of Mists. That only the true Chosen could grant the world's salvation. She needed to fulfill her duty.

She needed to continue her journey as planned.

Refusing to sigh, or to feel the pang of discomfort from her decision, she pushed the haze away and honed back in on her surroundings. It wasn't a time for remorse—she was without protection again. Without Cayan at her side and his men at her back. Alone meant surviving.

A group of three men entered the common room together, having a glance around. Travel stained like everyone else, these men had hard bodies and shifty eyes. One with a beard glanced at her, his brow furrowing. He did a sweep of the rest of the room, before following his mates in her general direction. Another of the men, a barrel chested man with dirt on his cheek and killing in his eyes, sighted her before glancing to the table next to her. The third man glanced at her as well and then to the empty tables in her area.

She must've been in their usual seat, and though she felt wariness from them as another person might scream-sing their favorite song, they didn't count her as a threat. In fact, they took the table next to hers along the wall, probably happy to be next to the dirty woman hunkering in the shadows instead of any of the other rough looking individuals carrying an array of weapons.

“Oh, I didn't tell you. They saw him again,” the man with a beard was saying in a low tone as he took the seat closest to Shanti. He didn't bother sparing her a second glance. None of his party did, in fact. Which was a good sign. They were worried about their own troubles, and didn't want anyone else's.

“Who? That fella calling himself the Chosen?” the barrel chested man

asked.

All other noise in the room ceased to exist as Shanti honed in.

“No,” the bearded man answered. “He’s headed to the Shadow Lands, I hear. The Chosen, I mean.”

“What is that damn thing, anyhow?” the third said, a wiry man with quick hands, by the look of him. “All I hear anymore is about how they finally found the true Chosen. These are the same people who got some idiot calling himself the Being Supreme or some damn thing—“

“Shut up!” the man with the beard hissed, glancing at the next closest table. The solitary man didn’t even raise his eyes from his plate. “You’ll get strung up for saying a thing like that.”

“All’s I’m saying is, they got some war lord, right? What do they need with this Chosen person?” the wiry man said in a loud whisper.

“He’s supposed to be able to control the Shadow Land.” The man with the beard didn’t hide his shiver. “Why any man would want to mess with those people, I don’t know.”

“I hear they eat their dead,” the robust man whispered in a disgusted tone.

“No, they eat those they find wandering on their island. The Chosen is supposed to tame that. The Being Supreme wants that army for his mercenaries, it’s said.”

“Don’t know why,” the robust man leaned on the table. “They’re a bunch of savages. They’d just go wild and kill the army they were supposed to fight for.”

“Instead of desert it, like you?” the wiry man smirked, earning a loaded warning delivered in an icy stare. The wiry man put up his arms in surrender. “Not that I blame you, I’m just sayin’ is all—“

“Well don’t say nothin’, you hear me? If they find me, I’m as good as dead. Torture, too. They’ll slice me up in front of a cheering audience. I’ve seen it. And you, too, for being with me. Best to steer clear from that whole lot.” The robust man hunched a little more, dipping his face.

“Which is why we’re going south. But that’s what I’ve been saying about the Shadow People—the Chosen is supposed to tame that,” the bearded man growled.

“How do they know he’s the real deal? I’ve heard of some of them before.” The robust man motioned for the bar maid, currently delivering ale to another table.

“Passed a bunch of tests or something. He’s an Inkna--has a ton of that mind-power stuff. More than anyone ever—that’s what they’re sayin’.” The bearded man let out a huff and flicked something off the table. “Load of bollocks if you ask me. Anyway, he’s on his way to get those Shadow People, but he’s waiting in Mirasoma for some scrolls or something.”

“Mirasoma...sounds familiar.” The wiry man squinted his eyes, apparently trying to picture that place on his mental map. Shanti did likewise, but without the visual contortion.

“By the ocean. Anyway, doesn’t matter,” the bearded man continued. “That ghost is back.”

All three men hushed as the bar maid bustled over, a smile in place, ready to take their orders.

Shanti’s mind was whirling. Another Chosen! One with a bunch of power. And he’d passed the milestones...

It was a he. The scrolls the Shamas had had always spoke of the Chosen as a male. It was thought the ancient Seers couldn’t predict sex and just went with a male default, but...if the man proclaiming himself the Chosen passed the tests, it meant he was truly the Chosen. A he.

Something in her chest constricted, and then sank, confusion soaking up her thoughts. She didn’t really know how she felt. She’d lived with that burden for so long... All her people had sacrificed themselves so that she might live. For all of that to be a lie... For her whole life to have been a lie...

Rushing filled her ears and her head got light. A strange disappointment settled deep into the pit of her stomach.

“Miss?” she heard, having her looking up distractedly.

The bar maid’s eyes went wide as she met Shanti’s gaze. Shock and fear radiated from her, a reaction to the violet eyes, no doubt.

Bloody—

Shanti stayed deadly still, gripping each mind within that room. Wondering which way the winds would blow.

“Do you want more water, Miss?” the woman asked in a wispy voice, taking out a charcoal and paper from the pockets of her apron. She angled her body and brought her hands in close, hiding her activity under the shelf of her large bosom. “Or shall I call the bath for you?”

The charcoal worked for a moment before the woman dropped the paper to the table. On it was written, “Not safe. U brin truble. Go room.”

“A bath will be fine. Please get me when it’s ready,” Shanti said in an

even voice.

“Course, Miss.” The bar maid bobbed and hurried away, anxiety shedding from her mind in sheets.

“Yeah, he took out another Commander last night. A hundred spans from here. They say he’s fair, like that violet eyed girl,” the bearded man was saying.

Shanti furrowed her eyebrows with that description, the disappointment from a moment ago turning into shock. There would only be one person matching her description who would travel across the land after her.

“There ain’t no such thing as a violet eyed girl.” The wiry man shifted with a wave of his hand.

“Yes there is!” the robust deserter said adamantly. “Yes there is. They tried to keep that hushed up, but I know a guy that saw her. Chased her, too. She’s this huge woman, though. Massive. The strength of two men. It’s no wonder she always got away, you know what I’m saying? And she’s got that mind mumbo-jumbo, too, so...”

“Yeah, right. No woman’s that big,” the wiry guy said in a dry voice.

“Well, they say that ghost is related to her. Sneaks in, kills, sneaks back out—looks like her. She must be real if the ghost looks like her,” the robust deserter said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Yeah, he—“

The bearded man was cut off as the door swung open with a thud, someone having kicked the door to gain entrance. With a heart trying to rip out of her chest, wondering if what the men said was true, wondering if Rohnan, her Chance, was really still alive, the worst thing happened. Four men wearing the unmistakable black with the red circle on their chest walked in the door.

Shanti’s bones went cold right before heat flared. Fear and rage pumped in her blood.

Graygual.

The robust deserter next to her dropped his head, trying to hide his face as best he could. The other people in the common area hunched down on themselves, the classic sign of trying not to be noticed. And even though she wanted to kill them right now, wanted to get up and physically put her knife through their hearts, Shanti hunched like everyone else, trying to melt into the shadows as best she could.

Through her lashes, Shanti could see the men swagger in, looking everyone over with self-importance smeared on their dirty faces. Their uniforms were wrinkled and filthy, their smell preceding them as they sauntered up through the tables.

“What’s this?” one rasped, his body pointed toward Shanti. “Well, well, what have we here...”

Shanti clutched his mind as her hand dropped to her side, easing a knife out of her leg brace from under the table.

“Lookie here, Race,” the Graygual rasped, sauntering closer. “I do believe we’ll get some kudos with this find.”

Shanti coiled. Her body surged with power.

“It’s Gagna the Deserter.”

Shanti froze as the table next to her jumped to life. A sword swung free from a sheath, Gagna rushing forward with metal at the ready. He caught the Graygual by surprise, sticking him through the stomach before Race could free his own sword and join the fray. The men by the deserter’s side had their weapons out, too, running at the Graygual with rusty swords.

Everyone else cleared to the sides or left the room altogether, not wanting to be in the deadly battle. It was a good idea.

Shanti bolted upright, sprinting along the bar and into that kitchen. There, as she hoped, she found the bar maid and the bartender, hiding out of sight.

“We don’t want no trouble,” the bartender said as she stood over them, panting.

“If the Graygual win this war, all you’ll have is trouble. If you live that long. The ghost—where is the ghost they speak of?” Shanti asked in desperation.

“Wh-what?” the man asked with wide eyes.

“The ghost,” Shanti urged as the sound of something heavy crashing through wood in the outer room. Someone dead having fallen on a table, most likely.

“Last I heard, he was north-west. Them’s just tales, though,” the man pleaded as though asking for his life.

“How long ago did you hear that?” Shanti asked, leaning closer.

“A week, I think,” the bartender shuddered. “They’re looking for you. The violet-eyed girl. You shoulda stayed with that man. They say you and him can stand up to that Being Supreme, on a-count of you took out the

Inkna... You can't do much on your own--"

Ignoring the continued dialogue, Shanti snatched up whatever food she could carry and headed for the back door. Before she left the kitchen, she turned back to the owner and the bar maid, the only two people left in the kitchen. "Fight the Being Supreme in any way you can. Any way you can, you hear me? Or this type of thing will get a whole lot worse."

She was out the door at their nods, skirting into the shadows and out of sight. She really should've gone for that bath first—now she'd have to bath in the first stream she found. It'd be cold.

Running from one shadow to the next on light feet, she moved with the experience and grace of someone having spent a year being hunted. Leilius was good, but Shanti was the master. As she ran, her new plan rolled through her head.

First thing, she needed to see if that ghost was Rohnan. If he lived, he belonged by her side. Family took priority.

After that, she needed to deal with this new Chosen. There was no way Shanti could allow the disgusting Inkna, and through them, the destructive Graygual, to gain more force. Her new task was to take this Chosen down, and to do that, she needed power. She needed might. She needed someone as strong as she to unite against the Being Supreme.

The bartender had been right--she needed Cayan.

The day for duty was over. Now it was time for vengeance.

The End

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

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[Into the Darkness \(Darkness Series\)](#)

Sasha has grown up with one surety: she's not normal.

She sees things in the darkness that no one else can see. Mysterious men cloaked in shadow, moving through the night. The problem is, pointing out invisible people is a fast track to a padded cell. Orphaned at age five, Sasha quickly learns an important survival tip: keep her mouth shut and stay out of the spotlight.

Until one night, everything changes. She and her boyfriend, Jared, find themselves stranded on the wrong side of town. Suddenly, the men she was convinced were hallucinations, are very real. And very dangerous.

As a new world opens up around her, she meets him. The Boss. An alpha leader who entrances her mind and tugs on her body. Primal and sexual, his people have a different set of rules. And they don't always play nice.

As danger rises up around her, her differences may be the only thing that saves her life. She must embrace what she's tried so hard to hide, while resisting the person her body craves most. Sasha has finally found her shadow men, and they will change her life forever.

Excerpt:

As I met his black eyes, his puzzled expression deepened. "You're human..."

"We established that, yes. What I want to know is, if I am human, what does that make you? And why do I notice you when others usually don't?"

His head cocked to the side. His easy balance, his lethal edge; he was like a blade resting on billowing silk. "Very few humans are able to withstand our pheromones. Fewer still to break a *Kolma* once it has been

placed. You've not been trained, that's obvious; so how is this possible when you're definitely human? Do you possess the blood of another species?"

I could barely think past the pounding ache of my body, begging to touch him. I needed to get a grip! He was revealing some very interesting factoids I needed to jot down in my mental notebook.

His nostrils flared. "Charles was right; your arousal is a unique scent. Like a spicy, warm drink on a mid-winter's night. It rises above other smells, entrancing the mind."

"Umm," charged with questions, determination, anger, and demands, I thrust forward, "Listen, what did you mean about withstanding the...pher-thing? Or breaking the other thing? How can you trap someone's head with pleasure? Because I'm pretty sure—not positive, but pretty sure—that Jared is straight. And also, I really think we should circle back to what the hell you are, and why nobody knows that you exist? Because this whole people scattering thing is not normal, and I think an explanation is probably in order."

He stepped closer, not hearing me, or not caring that I spoke. His eyes looked at me like I was a life-sized riddle. They delved, searching. He took another step, forcing me to retreat two steps to keep distance between our bodies. Another step back had my back to the wall.

A small smile curved his lips. "I exude pleasure, you run. I exude fear, you come calling. You want me, I can smell it. I can feel it, almost like a palpable thing. Give in to it. Yield to me."

Oh God I wanted to. His body was mere inches from mine, his intense eyes looking down into my soul from a face out of a Renaissance painting. The power of him, the sheer strength, had strange, primal fantasies running amok through my head. My core tingled, my chest surged, and my nipples were so hard they could cut this stone wall.

Why had I come here, again?

[Into the Darkness \(Darkness Series\)](#)
