

Unbound

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Content Warning

This erotic fantasy novel contains adult content. If you are offended by adult language, themes of bondage/submission, or group sex, then you probably shouldn't read this book. Consider yourself warned!



Chapter One

Slowly, seductively, I swung my leg across Master Kristoff's waist. His fingers tickled their way down my sides, and I moaned in delight as I felt the tip of his cock press against my smoldering entrance. He was already rock hard; he had been ever since I'd slipped into his bedchamber and undressed for him. I didn't know whether or not he'd taken any of his other servants during my week-long absence, and frankly I didn't really care. What mattered was that right now we were back together, and as I reached down and eased him into me I knew that at long last I had finally come home.

"Am I still tight enough for you?" I asked.

"Always, my dear," he breathed as his fingernails raked across my back. "Always beautiful, always perfect."

I smiled and leaned down until our noses touched. His dark eyes glinted with raw, animalistic lust, and I brought my hands to his cheeks as I kissed him. The air between us sizzled, but for the first time in months there was no magic involved. No sparks of energy, no mental manipulations, no channeling whatsoever—just flesh and heat and sex. A shiver of delight cascaded through me at the thought.

"Fuck me," I whispered into his ear. "Please. Fuck your little elf slave."

He did. Gripping me tightly around the waist, he slammed into me harshly, deeply, and my hips met him thrust-for-thrust. My back arched, I cried out in passion, and for a single, perfect moment everything had returned to the way it was supposed to be.

It felt like an age had passed since Master had been inside me. Ever since the fall of Balagarde he had been passing me around Sanctum to secure the support of any nobles who had something he wanted, whether it be soldiers, supplies, or even just gold. With my body and my magic I had helped him cobble together a small army of mercenaries and slaves, and I was proud of everything I'd been able to accomplish in such a short amount of time. The nobles might have seen me as just another *avenari*, but I knew I was more than a mere pleasure slave. I was more than just a renegade Unbound sorceress. I was one of the most powerful weapons in the Empire, and if everything went as planned we'd soon be able to challenge Emperor Lucian's rule and put an end to this destructive war with the vaeyn once and for all.

But right now none of that mattered. All I cared about was bringing Master some much-deserved release before spending the night curled up in his arms. And tonight, at long last, it seemed like I was once again going to have that chance.

"Harder," I begged him as his grip tightened. I could feel his pulse quickening even as another shudder of delight rippled through me and curled my toes. "Please..."

He obliged with a feral grunt, and for a moment I thought—and hoped—that he might flip me onto my back so he could take full control. But instead he continued his rhythm, thrusting up deeper and deeper into me, and a hot sheen of sweat soon glistened off my belly and thighs. My eyes closed and my breath caught in my throat, and I felt him tense in preparation for climax...

But instead he slipped out of me. I blinked and reached down to help him slide back in... and realized he was almost flaccid.

"Master?" I gasped between breaths. "Have I done something wrong?"

Sighing, he shook his head and pushed me off of him. I collapsed back on the mattress in bewilderment as he hobbled over to the nightstand to retrieve a drink.

“No, I’m just...distracted,” he managed after a long gulp. He hadn’t even bothered with a glass. “You’ve done well, Elara. Better than I ever could have hoped.”

“I can use my magic,” I suggested as I swung my legs off the bed. “I’ve been practicing a new technique that should—”

“No, it’s all right,” he interrupted with a dismissive wave. “I’d rather you save your energy for tomorrow.”

I frowned. The Quorum was scheduled to meet in the estate tomorrow, but Master had told me several times that their visit would be all business. So then why did it matter whether I was rested or not? It made no sense.

“I promise it won’t take long, my lord,” I said as I dropped to the floor and crawled over to him on my knees. I curled my fingers around his cock and then channeled the Aether through my palm—

“I said no!” he growled as he slapped my hand away. His eyes flashed with anger, and for a moment I thought he might actually strike me. But when I sank back on my haunches and cowered, the worst of his fury seemed to fade and he merely sighed instead. “Return to your chambers. I want you well-rested in the morning when the other dukes arrive.”

I wanted to argue. I wanted to fight and claw for the opportunity to stay and soothe him. But I knew I couldn’t. With the Aether still coursing through me, I could sense the brooding tempest gathering in his thoughts as clearly as if there had been black clouds on the horizon. The storm was coming, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. The best I could hope for was not to be here when it hit.

“Y...yes, Master,” I stammered, struggling as best I could to hide my tears. I retrieved my dress from the floor and bolted out of the room.

My chambers were as cold and empty as I remembered them, and I collapsed onto the bed in a tight ball. I didn’t understand what had gone wrong. Was Master not interested in me anymore now that I’d been with so many other men and women? He had never seemed to care before today; if anything, it had made our infrequent couplings that much more intense. Perhaps I should have ignored him and used my magic from the start. I had learned so many new tricks over the past month—tricks even *he* probably didn’t know—that I couldn’t imagine how he or anyone else could possibly resist me. But I had wanted this time to be different; I had wanted it to be *natural*. And now I would spend the night alone.

It was only later, after I had drifted in and out of consciousness several times, that I realized there was another, much simpler explanation: Master had changed. If the loss of Stormcrest had hardened him, then the loss of Balagarde might have broken him. He was more obsessed now than ever before. I wasn’t even sure at this point if he really cared about stopping the war anymore. His revenge against the Emperor seemed more and more important.

Regardless, I suspected that if we couldn’t find a solution soon, this conflict would destroy him and everyone around him—likely starting with me, the slave-turned-sorceress whose mere existence was heresy in the eyes of the Covenant. But maybe there was still something I could do to keep that from happening. Maybe my powers would eventually grow strong enough that I could get him exactly what he wanted. And maybe then, once we finally had peace, he would take me back into his arms and everything would return to the way it used to be.

Sighing softly to myself, I rubbed the tears from eyes and fell asleep.

Chapter Two

“A month ago you assured us that all you wanted was to convince Emperor Lucian to end the war,” Duke Arland said as he set his empty wine glass back down on the table. “Now you’re telling us we’re supposed to convince him to divert *more* troops to the front lines?”

“A month ago he hadn’t lost three-quarters of his lands,” his wife, Luriel, commented with a sneer. “Now he realizes peace will cost him even more than war.”

Master Kristoff forced a smile and leaned against the back of his chair. He was already well past the point of irritation with his guests—that much was obvious from the subtle twitching of his cheeks and the tightness along his jawline. Fortunately, the others probably didn’t know him well enough to pick up on such nuances...not that they particularly seemed to care whether or not they offended him at this point. The magical suggestion I’d implanted in Duchess Luriel’s mind last month might have convinced the Arlands to join the Quorum, but that didn’t mean they had instantly become allies. They had largely ignored or dismissed every proposal Master had made since, and unfortunately I hadn’t been given another opportunity to pry into her mind. Both she and her husband had been home in Sorthaal and out of my reach for the last several weeks.

Duchess Farrow, for her part, hadn’t even officially agreed to be a part of the Quorum yet. She still doubted Master’s ability to get Aemond Darkstone, the Grand Duke of Korvale, to join with the rest of them, and without the armies of the Vale the chances of pressuring the Emperor or the Legion into anything was quite small. Farrow’s son, Bolvir, seemed more amenable to Master’s suggestions, but as a result she had effectively banished him back to their castle in Abenwreath where he couldn’t interfere.

So here we were, caught in a perpetual political stalemate while the Emperor and his generals watched the Empire burn. And no one but Master Kristoff seemed willing to acknowledge it.

“It’s true: the situation has changed,” Master said as he swept his eyes back forth between the Arlands and the Farrowes on opposite ends of the massive, semi-circular conference table. “A negotiated peace is no longer an option. The vaeyn captured Stormcrest in retaliation for the Emperor’s unprovoked invasion of their homeland, nothing more. With proper pressure and a few concessions they probably would have been willing to return to Sulinor and accept the pre-war borders...but now that they’ve captured Balagarde this is no longer about mere revenge. They believe they can win, and if we don’t find a way to stop them they’ll be storming the walls of Abenhold and pushing into the Wreath by the end of spring.”

“You really expect us to believe this wasn’t your intention all along?” Duchess Farrow asked. “This is a meager attempt at a coup, nothing more.”

Master’s brow furrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s quite simple, really,” she said. “First you suggest we summon the Quorum and place diplomatic pressure on Lucian—an imminently reasonable suggestion. Then once you have our attention, you start nudging half the nobles in the city to loan you their personal armies in case the Emperor won’t listen. Now you want us to wrestle control of the Legion for ourselves so that we can escalate the war and liberate your lands. In a few more weeks you’ll be insisting we replace Lucian entirely and put you on the throne instead.” She scoffed and waved her hand in annoyance. “You might have inherited your father’s ambition, Gabriel, but you lack his subtlety.”

Master sighed and paced over to the enormous glass window on the far side of the chamber, and I had to fight the urge to rush over and soothe him. Instead I remained motionless

alongside the other slaves standing on the opposite wall behind the dukes. We were essentially glorified decorations, but even though I wasn't expected to work I was thankful Master had allowed me to listen. He wanted me to understand the politics of the situation for when he inevitably sent me to secure—or possibly re-secure—the support of the other Grand Dukes.

“This isn't about Glorinfel, and it's certainly not about me,” Master said into the awkward silence. “This is about the future of the Empire. Between the Emperor's brashness and General Torelius's incompetence, we are on the brink of a losing a war for the first time in history.”

“Hyperbole won't help your cause,” Luriel scolded him. “We've all read the reports from the Legion and from our own commanders. The dark elves lack the troops to extend their supply lines much past their current basecamps. They might risk a few raids across the border in the Wreath or in Korvale, and it's possible they'll attempt to take Mavarinth sooner or later...but after that their forces will be spent. We'll be able to negotiate a truce while the Legion regroups, and then, a few years down the road, we'll be able to sweep in and drive the gray-skinned savages back into their caves.”

Master grunted and turned back around. “The vaeyn may be heretics, but they aren't fools. Lucian underestimated them, and look where his folly has gotten us.”

“Overestimating an enemy is every bit as dangerous as underestimating them,” Farrow countered. “Luriel is right: they lack the soldiers to press much beyond the current lines. Torelius may be a fat, useless tit, but he's done as much damage as he can at this point.”

“So we're just going to ignore the people trapped in Glorinfel?” Arland asked. His wife glared daggers at him, and he visibly shrunk in his seat. “I mean...I don't wish to abandon them to the barbarians.”

“Regrettable but necessary,” Farrow said. “For what it's worth, I fully support reinforcing Mavarinth with every legionnaire we can spare, but otherwise the best we can hope for is a truce. With so many soldiers being deployed to the front, Faedari rebel attacks have already tripled in Rivani and the Wreath. The local barons will be far more interested in licking their wounds and protecting their villages than in organizing a new offensive, and without their cooperation we won't have sufficient supplies or auxiliary soldiers to—”

“They will cooperate,” another voice interrupted from the back of the room. Calm and collected, it was like a stream of cool water dousing the Quorum's flames. “Hierophant Vexius will not accept a truce, not as long as the heretics remain upon sanctified soil. Once she makes a formal decree the barons will fall into line. They always have, and they always will.”

Everyone in the room glanced over their shoulder to the new speaker. Standing in the corner was Larric Aresi, the captain of Master's guard and a former Inquisitor. I still didn't know the story behind his departure from the Covenant, and I was far too terrified of him to ask him anything directly. But from his miscellaneous behaviors over the past month I had gathered that he still shared most if not all of the church's convictions, particularly their hatred of all elvenkind.

“Emperor Lucian might have started this war out of reckless ambition, but he is not a fool,” Larric went on. “He secured the support of the church first knowing that once the priesthood tasted the heretics' blood, there would be no going back.”

“Exactly,” Master Kristoff said. While his other guests were facing the opposite direction I saw him give the slightest appreciative nod to his bodyguard for the well-timed intervention. “As I said, we might have been able to negotiate something earlier if the vaeyn had been willing to pull out of Stormcrest, but now that they have captured Balagarde they have no reason to cede

anything. And if they won't cede anything, then the Covenant will not accept a truce. This war will rage on until the bitter end whether we like it or not."

"How convenient for you," Luriel grumbled.

"*Convenient?*" Master snapped back. "Thousands of my soldiers are dead. Tens of thousands of my people are at the mercy of demon-worshipping savages! This isn't about ambition or power—it's about turning the tide of a losing war before it consumes us all."

The rest of the Quorum leaned back and exchanged meaningful glances with one another, and I could see the doubt finally starting to seep into their faces. Master had known all along that getting them to stand against Lucian wouldn't be easy—that was the entire reason he had trained me to become his *avenari* spy, a seemingly helpless slave who could seduce and manipulate them into going along with his plans. But for better or worse, the fall of Balagade really had changed everything. The war that many in the nobility had seemed content to ignore had suddenly grown very real and very close...and even the Grand Dukes and their vast armies and piles of riches couldn't afford to sit back and do nothing.

"I trust you have a specific plan," Luriel said after a moment, her voice caught somewhere between disgust and resignation. "Hopefully something that doesn't involve emptying all of our coffers."

"The plan is to proceed as we have been for the next few weeks. Continue shifting your auxiliary troops closer to Sanctum under whatever guise you see fit—there's still a chance we will have to take the reins from Torelius and Lucian by force. But other than that..." Master smiled, and with a single deep breath he seemed to regain his momentum. "Duke Darkstone's allegiance still remains vital. With the fall of Balagarde he might finally recognize that even his precious Korvale is no longer safe. I'm still planning on making a trip to Skyfall at the end of the week to discuss the situation in person. With a little luck, when I return we'll have his forces at our disposal."

"And we'll be plunging the Empire into civil war even while an enemy ravages our border," Farrow grumbled. "You play a dangerous game, Gabriel. Lucian is a fool; none of us will contest that. But there's a difference between pushing him for a truce and actively attempting to sabotage the war effort."

Master Kristoff cocked an eyebrow. "Weren't you the one who told Torelius he was incompetent straight to his face? There has never been any love lost between you and the Legion, Kathryn. Or have you changed your mind because the Wreath will be their next target?"

Farrow's cheek twitched, and she abruptly stood from her chair. "I don't have to listen to this. If you want to try to try and convince Darkstone to play your game, I won't stop you. But until then, there's nothing we can do that won't make the situation even worse."

With that, she stormed out of the room, her servants and guards close on her heel. A grim silence settled across the chamber for several moments before Duke Arland finally grunted and gulped down another glass of brandy.

"Always such a charming woman," he mumbled. "It's truly a wonder her husband died so young."

"Shut up, Darian," Luriel growled.

"Er...yes, darling."

The duchess stood and glared at Master. "We've shifted our forces as close as they can get to the border without arousing suspicion, but Farrow is right: we can't do anything more without Darkstone's support. We need a large enough force that Lucian can't realistically hope to fight back. I won't bathe Sanctum in blood while the vaeyn stand on our doorstep."

“Darkstone will join us,” Master assured her. “Don’t worry. Just keep your men ready. We’ll need to make our move by the end of the month.”

“So be it,” Luriel whispered. She glared at Master Kristoff for a moment longer before nodding to her husband. “Let’s go.”

The Arlands and their servants left, and once the chamber was empty I finally abandoned my perch along the wall and slipped in behind Master. Larric didn’t even acknowledge my presence; his eyes remained fixed on the doorway.

“Farrow will come around eventually,” he said, his voice as carefully measured as ever. “Once she realizes that no one else actually wants peace, she’ll have no choice but to support us.”

“Except by then it may be too late,” Master grumbled. “I guarantee the Vaeyn will launch a new offensive by summer, possibly before. And if Mavarinth falls...” He shook his head and balled his hand into a fist. “Gods know what they’ll do to our people. The city’s already filled with refugees; they won’t have anywhere else to go.”

Larric calmly folded his hands behind his back and paced over towards the middle of the room. “Then perhaps we need a change of tactics.”

“There’s nothing to change,” Master said flatly. “Uniting the Quorum is our only chance.”

“In the long-term, yes. But in the short-term...” The bodyguard turned back around, one eyebrow cocked. “We both agree that the Legion can’t defend Mavarinth on its own. The First Army remains shattered, and the Third was rerouted to Abenhold after Balagarde. Torelius has tried to cobble the scraps together into a patchwork force, but it won’t be enough. We need to get the city aid in other ways.”

“If you’re suggesting we send them troops, we don’t have any to spare. Every soldier I’ve secured from the nobles in the city will be needed when we make our push against Lucian.”

“I’m not talking about soldiers,” Larric said. His eyes flicked over to me for a fraction of a second before returning to Master Kristoff. “We have other allies who would never risk themselves politically by throwing their resources directly at the Emperor, but they might be able to help in more...*discreet* ways.”

Master’s brow furrowed in thought. “You’re talking about the Black Lions, aren’t you?”

“They are one option, certainly. They have access to all the resources Mavarinth could possibly need.”

“They’re also criminals.”

“Yes, but in this situation that could be a significant advantage,” Larric said. “They’re the only organization in Sanctum with access to enchanted equipment that isn’t directly sponsored by the Covenant. Employing them will allow us to maneuver without interference or oversight.”

Master hissed softly as he paced over towards the wall-length window at the back of the chamber. He clearly had no interest in contacting the Lions, and it was obvious why: they were the most notorious gang of smugglers in Sanctum, possibly in the entire Empire. They bought, scavenged, or outright stole any Aether-infused items they could get their hands on and then sold them to the highest bidder. I had heard rumors about their exploits even back when I had been living in Mavarinth; they were probably the Covenant’s third most-hated faction in Calhara, right beyond the Faedari and the vaeyn.

“No,” Master said after a moment. “It’s too risky. Even if I could trust them to provide what we needed, their price would be too high.”

“At first probably, but I’m sure we could talk them down with promises of concessions after the war is over,” Larric replied. “Free access to the ports in Mavarinth, an ‘understanding’ with the guards in Stormcrest...whatever it takes.”

Master Kristoff glanced back over his shoulder, his brow furrowed. “I can’t believe you of all people are seriously suggesting opening Glorinfel to the Black Lions.”

Larric shrugged. “You wanted suggestions and I’m giving you one. We don’t have many options.”

“Couldn’t you ask the Artificers directly?” I suggested. Both men turned to look at me in surprise, and I resisted the urge to cower. “Some of the nobles in the city seem to believe they’re on the edge of the revolt from the Covenant. Perhaps we could take advantage of that.”

“Perhaps you should keep your mouth shut when you’re not down on your knees,” Larric growled with surprising force. “You have you no idea what—”

“She’s right,” Master interrupted. His fingers tapped against his chin in thought, and he waved me over to him as he sank down into the couch by the window. I dutifully shuffled over and nestled into his lap, thankful to be as far away from his glowering bodyguard as possible. “I had almost forgotten about the near crisis at the Infintium. The Artificers were on the verge of open revolt, but the Covenant managed to buy them off with a few concessions. I doubt the truce will last, though...and we could exploit that.”

It took several uncomfortable moments, but eventually Larric’s cold blue eyes left me and fastened onto Master instead. “I still think working with the Lions is a safer bet. They’re more predictable.”

“Maybe, but if we play this correctly...” Master trailed off in thought and squeezed appreciatively at my thigh. I had brought him a library’s worth of secrets and information over this last month, all plundered from the minds of the various nobles I’d serviced. He had been able to use much of it to blackmail them into supporting his cause, but in this case we might have found something even more valuable than soldiers or gold.

The Artificers were the lowest social caste of Bound channelers in the Empire, beneath even the Tel Bator—the “spellswords” who served in the Legion—and far below the Inquisitors and the priests. I had never really understood why, given that the Artificers were responsible for crafting all of the arms, armor, and other Aether-infused items used by the imperial war machine. Their job was every bit as important as the soldiers fighting on the front lines. But then, social respect in the Empire was only rarely based on merit or accomplishment. The Covenant treated the Artificers like common laborers because that was exactly where most of them came from—they were drawn from the general population after being screened for channeling aptitude. And in many ways they were treated as much like slaves as the orcs or the faeyn.

The Inquisitors had put down several labor uprisings over the years, but with the war going on, the Artificers working in the Infintium—the largest and most productive manufactory in the Empire—had become bolder and bolder with their demands. They knew that the Legion couldn’t afford to take the time to replace them, not with the vaeyn advancing so rapidly, and so they had begun to use that fact as leverage to secure better working conditions and higher wages. I wasn’t sure how much if any progress they’d made recently, but if we could gain them as an ally...

“The Infintium keeps a massive storehouse of supplies,” Master went on after a moment. “Healing salves, enchanted ammunition, siege devices...exactly the supplies Mavarinth will need.”

“Supplies the Covenant will notice have gone missing,” Larric pointed out. “If the Artificers sell you anything, they’ll be charged with treason. The Inquisitors would string them all up the moment they found out about it.”

“They can’t—that’s the whole point. As long as the war goes on, the Artificers are basically untouchable.”

Larric grumbled under his breath and crossed his arms. “And what about when the war is over? You really want to be allied with them?”

“Right now my focus is on the present,” Master told him. “We can deal with the future if and when it comes.”

“I don’t think we need to worry about that anyway,” I said, immediately drawing another baleful glare from Larric. “The Artificers have been stockpiling supplies for months—supplies they haven’t even told the Covenant about. Perhaps we could convince them to send along those extra supplies instead.”

“The Covenant can’t miss what they don’t know about,” Master mused with an ever-widening smirk. His eyes twinkled devilishly, and he squeezed at my thigh again. “It’s almost too perfect.”

“It *is* too perfect,” Larric growled. “Where did you even hear this ‘rumor’?”

I opened my mouth but nothing came out. He had no idea that I was Unbound; he had no idea that I’d been systematically rummaging through the thoughts of half the city’s nobility. So what could I possibly tell him?

“From me, probably,” Master lied with a dismissive wave. “I was mentioning a meeting I’d had with Lord Calaris a few days ago. He was the one who brought it up. In any event, it’s a possibility we can’t ignore. We should be able to buy off those supplies easily enough, and no one will be the wiser.”

Larric’s brow furrowed. “If you say so. I still think it’s a waste of time at best and a serious risk at worst.”

“Your opinion is noted. Regardless, I want you to make a trip to the Infintium and see what you can arrange.”

The bodyguard blinked. “Me?”

“Yes,” Master confirmed. “I can’t afford to be seen speaking with the Artificers directly. A visit from a Grand Duke would draw far too much attention to the situation.”

“But a visit from your guard-captain wouldn’t?” Larric countered.

“Not even close to the same degree, no. You are relatively unknown, and here that will work to our advantage.” Master grinned as he rubbed at the bare skin on my arms. “Besides, your service has been impressive enough that I think it’s time I granted you some new responsibilities.”

For a moment, I thought Larric might actually refuse. He was a paid employee and not a slave, after all; he was not compelled to obey Master’s wishes. But over the last few months I had noticed that the two men seemed to have a much closer relationship than I’d first thought. Perhaps it had something to do with Larric’s still-unexplained exile from the ranks of the Inquisitors...or perhaps it was something else entirely. Either way, the man eventually just sighed and pinched at his nose.

“You realize there will be an entire squad of Inquisitors guarding the facility,” Larric murmured after another few seconds. “If any of them recognize me, it might compromise the mission.”

“They can hate you all they want, but as the representative of a Grand Duke they can’t deny you access. You’ll be fine.”

Larric’s cheek twitched. The movement was faint and almost imperceptible, but I saw it as clearly as if he’d been scowling. “I see.”

“We’ll discuss the details over the next few days,” Master said as he gently lifted me off his knee so he could stand. “I’ll submit a visitation request with the prelacy, and that should handle any potential bureaucratic problems. You’ll also be taking Elara with you as another bargaining chip.”

The bodyguard glanced over to me yet again, and even though his face remained stolid I could see the disgust in his pale blue eyes. “Are you certain that’s wise?”

“*Avenari* are harder to come by than healing salves and Aether-infused swords,” Master replied. “For laborers, anyway. Besides, everything I’ve heard about the First Artificer suggests that he’s something of a glutton, especially after winning a few victories over his employers. Trust me: he won’t be able to resist her.”

“If you say so,” Larric said quietly.

“I do. Now go ahead and figure which of the men you wish to bring with you. I’ll fill you in on any additional details later.”

The younger man nodded curtly. “Very well, Your Excellency.”

He half-marched, half-tromped out the door, and a few seconds later Master and I were alone.

“I’m so proud of you,” he said with a smile. “You’ve performed just as perfectly as I knew you would.”

“Master is most kind,” I replied, my cheeks warming. “I’m not sure what to expect with the Artificers. I’ve never attempted to pierce the mind of another channeler before.”

“You’ve pierced mine,” he reminded me, “and trust me, their training is minimal. The priests don’t trust them with any potentially threatening spells.”

“As you say.”

He smiled and touched my shoulders. “Don’t worry, my dear. Larric will be there to protect you as usual, and I’ll get you as much information as I can on the First Artificer before you leave. By the time you head out you’ll know exactly how to break him.”

I forced a tight smile in return. “Of course, Master. I will try to make you proud.”

“You always do. Especially today.” He leaned forward and kissed me softly, and a shudder of delight rippled through me. “Now return to your chambers and keep practicing. I may stop by later to check on you.”

“Yes, Master,” I said, nodding. I was halfway across the room before he called out to me again.

“On second thought, why don’t you visit me in my bedchambers after dusk this evening?” he asked. “We can pick up where we left off last night.”

I smiled again, and this time it was genuine. Maybe there was something of the old Master left inside him after all. Maybe his mad scheming and thirst for revenge hadn’t destroyed him completely.

“I will be there,” I promised, then turned and left the room.

Chapter Three

We set out for the Infintium at dawn three days later, and for once Master didn't tuck me away inside a carriage. He gave me my own horse, in fact, which I found both exciting and a little terrifying. I was a passable enough rider—my original owner back in Mavarinth had generously taught me the basics—but I was amazed at how incredibly *exposed* I felt riding through the streets of Sanctum without a sheet of wood to hide behind.

It was silly, of course, considering that Larric and five of the other house guards were escorting me. I was as well-protected as any caravan, and we were only traveling a few miles outside the city. But eventually I realized my discomfort had nothing to do with a fear of being ambushed. The truth was much simpler: I was scared of being *seen*.

Over these last few months, I had grown accustomed to being a ghost. I was invisible within my room until Master had need of me, and I was invisible in the carriage as I rode to and from the estates of the other nobles. I was even invisible inside their homes until they decided they had a use for me. But as degrading as that treatment might have been, I had learned to use it as a shield—and a weapon. No one considered a lone *avenari* to be a threat, and that misconception had proven to be every bit as powerful as my Unbound blood. The thought of losing my protective veil was harrowing, to say the least.

But as the war continued to deteriorate, Master would invariably grant me more and more responsibilities in the days ahead. I needed to get used to the attention. I needed to get as comfortable in the spotlight as I was in the shadows. I had done it before with Duke Arland at the Winter Gala and again for a time at his estate, and it would have been a lie to claim that I hadn't enjoyed it. The control, the power, the knowledge that even in servitude I was not a victim...

I could embrace the role if I had to. And perhaps the first step was learning not to be afraid the moment I left the safety of the mansion.

I managed to settle my nerves by the time we passed through the northern gates and onto the White Road. The path was clean and well-kept this close to Sanctum, and merchant caravans from Abenwreath and even Sorthaal poured into and out of the city. It wasn't until late morning when we veered off the main road that the Infintium itself became visible on the horizon. Even shrouded in the distance, the tower was impressive. It was easily the height of any of the grand spires in Sanctum, and the base was almost as wide as Master Kristoff's entire estate. All in all it was more like a small castle than a mere tower, and I wondered distantly how much remained of the original structure from the days of Sanctus Veshar.

According to official Imperial history, the Infintium marked the site of one of Veshar's earliest victories during the Great War. His small army had clashed with the forces of a powerful faeyn sorceress, and his triumph had been a seminal moment in convincing the orcs to rebel against their elven masters. Just six months later the Clan Lords had agreed to join with Veshar's forces, and the orcs had actually led the charge against the last faeyn stronghold in Sorthaal years later.

The story had never set well with me for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the simple fact that the vast majority of orcs currently living inside Imperial territory were slaves. Why would the Clan Lords have forsaken one set of masters only to kneel before another? I also couldn't understand how Sanctus Veshar's army, supposed only two-hundred strong, had possibly overwhelmed an Unbound sorceress and her "legions of defenders." But at this point the details of the war didn't seem to matter as much as the result, and for the past several hundred years the Infintium had served as the unofficial home of the Artificers.

I braced myself as we drew close enough that I could make out the dozen or so legionnaires standing guard outside the walls, but my stomach didn't twist into knots until I spotted the red-armored Inquisitor standing directly in front of the main gate. His presence shouldn't have been surprising, of course; the Covenant monitored the use of all magic in Imperial territory, and when highly valuable Aether-infused weapons and armor were involved, they paid extra attention. If anything, I should have been shocked that there wasn't an entire *army* of Inquisitors waiting for us.

Once we reached the main gate Larric signaled for the other men to wait by the horses, and he tugged on my leash and led me towards the front steps. Taking a deep breath, I ran through some of the mental exercises I'd learned to help calm my nerves, and they mostly worked. Not that it seemed to matter; the Inquisitor barely even acknowledged my presence. His eyes remained fastened upon my companion the entire time we approached.

"Honor to the Triad; glory to the Empire," Larric greeted once we drew close. "I approach on behalf of His Excellency, Grand Duke Kristoff of Glorinfel. I have come to meet with First Artificer Tacitus Verne—"

"Prelate Agarius has received and accepted your visitation request," the Inquisitor interrupted. "Though he why was willing to admit an *aeynshok* remains a mystery."

Larric smiled. It was thin and cold, like a sheen of ice had spread across his face. "Perhaps that is why His Grace is a prelate and you are not."

The two men glared at each other, and were it not for the leash holding me in place I might have retreated a few steps. In the elven tongue, *aeynshok* had been used to denote the coupling of a human and an elf, but in modern parlance it had become a denigrating slur roughly analogous to calling someone an "elf lover." I had heard it used many times in the Imperial Court between nobles attempting to disparage one another, but why anyone would use it in reference to Larric was a complete mystery. He despised my kind to his core.

Did it have something to do with why he had left the Inquisitors in the first place? Or had been banished instead? It was impossible to know, but by the way the two men were scowling at each other it was obvious that Larric's concerns about coming here had been perfectly justified. Would the guards turn us away outright? And why had Master Kristoff sent him knowing the problems it would cause?

"You may enter," the Inquisitor murmured after few more seconds. He nudged a lever behind him, and with a screech of grinding metal the gate slowly slid open. Larric nodded once more before tugging on my leash and dragging me along behind him. The moment I set foot inside the tower all the anxiety fluttering in my stomach vanished...and was replaced by a wave of pure awe.

The entry foyer was as large as the Grand Vestibule in the Imperial Palace, possibly larger, and the decorations were every bit as impressive. Wall-spanning tapestries, ancient sculptures, enough enchanted baubles that the air practically thrummed with Aetheric energy—the tower looked more like a museum than one of the largest production facilities in the Empire. I was also immediately stricken by the lack of people. Two hulking sentinel golems stood vigil in either corner, but otherwise the only living thing in the entire foyer was the surprisingly well-dressed servant rushing over to greet us.

"Welcome to the Infintium," the man said with an abbreviated bow. He was a human and not a slave, which presumably meant he was one of the Artificers...but he certainly didn't match up with my preconceptions. Based on the mental images I'd stolen from the minds of the various Sanctum nobles, I had expected the Artificers to be greasy, soot-stained drudges who reeked of

ash and sulfur. But this man was dressed well enough to attend the Winter Gala. “First Artificer Verne has asked me to see you to his chambers.”

“Thank you,” Larric replied. If he was at all surprised by the greeter’s appearance, his face didn’t show it. “Lead on.”

We traveled up the winding staircase along the opposite wall, and a half a dozen floors and innumerable twists later we reached what I assumed was the top of the tower. The area was only slightly narrower than the foyer below, but it was divided into various smaller sections surrounding a larger, more open conference-style chamber. Standing inside was a middle-aged man, probably in his early forties, dressed in a blue and silver robe that was every bit as ostentatious as the outfits favored by high-ranking Covenant priests. But Tacitus Verne wasn’t a priest; he and the other Artificers were glorified slaves, at least according to the Sanctum elite. Were their perceptions really that far off base? Or had the Artificers won far more in their recent negotiations than anyone had let on?

If so, they might not be as eager to jump at Master Kristoff’s offer of gold and amnesty. And that meant my task was going to be much more complicated...

“At long last, the prodigal champion returns,” Verne said with a throaty voice that didn’t fit his outfit in the slightest. He had the pale skin of a man who’d hardly ever seen daylight, and I felt a subtle tingle in the Aether when he drew closer—not unlike the ripples I felt when I stood next to a powerful enchanted item. Years of working here in the Infintium must have quite literally rubbed off on him. “I suppose we should be grateful that you’re willing to grace us with your presence again.”

“Yes, you should be,” Larric replied as he slowly turned around, his expression unreadable. “But I’ve never known you to be reasonable before, and I don’t know why you’d start now.”

For a long, heated moment, the two men exchanged spiteful glares...but then finally Verne’s mouth cracked into a wry smirk and he slapped Larric on the arm. “It’s good to see you again, old friend,” the artificer said. “When I heard Duke Kristoff was sending an emissary, I assumed it would be some useless sycophant from the Court.”

“But then you did you a little digging around, and you learned he’d be sending me instead.”

Verne’s grin widened. “Something like that. When I first heard you were working for one of the Grand Dukes I couldn’t believe it. After the Covenant threw you to the wolves I half-assumed you’d board the next ship to Torsia.”

“The thought did cross my mind,” Larric admitted, and the left corner of mouth might have even curled into a genuine smile for a whole half a second. “But the Empire still has many enemies, and my best chance to fight them is still right here.”

“Ever the patriot,” Verne murmured. “Other men would have grown bitter after what they did to you. Some might have even joined the other side.” He shook his head. “But not you.”

“Speaking of joining the other side, I’ve heard a number of interesting rumors about what’s been happening here over the past few months.” Larric glanced back over the railing to the forge. “Not a single Inquisitor or priest in sight.”

“The prelates and I have come to an...*understanding*. We can head up to the dining hall and I’ll tell you all about it.” His eyes finally flicked over to me, and another grin tugged at his lips. “So this must be the *avenari* your employer has been whoring out to half the nobles in Sanctum these past few weeks.”

“Only to his friends and close allies.”

“Who just so happen to have something he wants, of course.”

Larric shrugged. “Politics are politics. You know that as well as anyone.”

“Naturally,” Verne murmured as he brought his hand to my chin. I was so used to the routine now that it was practically automatic; I lowered my eyes as a sign of submission and waited patiently as he inspected me like I was a prime cut of roast. “I assume he sent her here expecting that my men and I are desperate for attention, and he hoped that the mere sight of a noble’s pet cunt would make us more agreeable.”

“He thought you might appreciate a gift, especially considering how over-worked and under-compensated your people are,” Larric replied calmly. “But he isn’t asking for much, and he’s willing to pay quite handsomely.”

The artificer grunted as he traced his fingers across my bare belly. “I’m sure he is. With how badly things are going in Glorinfel right now, I imagine he needs all the allies he can get. But he might be surprised at how different things are here than they used to be. We’re not quite as desperate as the Court likes to think.” Verne squeezed my buttocks and smiled again. “Still, she’s pretty enough. I assume she’s well trained?”

“Of course.”

Verne’s grin widened. “You know this first hand, I take it?”

Larric returned the smile, though it was faint and clearly forced. “I trust Master Kristoff’s judgment.”

“I knew it. Men like him always think they’re too good to share their toys. A pity.” He slapped my ass and grunted. “Well, I’m sure some of my boys would be interested. But in the meantime, follow me. I can catch you up on exactly where we stand...and show you a bit of local hospitality.”

Tugging roughly on my leash, he escorted us up a nearby walkway and into a completely different section of the tower. Where the forge was a smoldering, soot-stained pit, this area had clearly been designed for personal chambers, luxury suites, and conference halls—probably for the priesthood. But I didn’t see a single priest or Inquisitor the entire time we wound through the neatly-kept corridors. We barely saw anyone at all aside from a handful of other similarly-dressed men I assumed were other artificers. They looked upon our group as a whole with obvious suspicion; they looked upon me with equally-obvious lust.

Eventually we arrived in a spacious chamber with a long, polished wooden table at the center. A few well-kept floral arrangements adorned the walls, and it was only then I realized that none of the rooms I’d seen so far had any windows. This place really was a dungeon, and the plants seemed like a recent addition.

“As you can see, things have changed here of late,” Verne commented as he gestured towards one of the chairs at the table. Larric nodded politely and took a seat. “We finally have some breathing room, and we’ve managed to loosen the Covenant’s leash.”

“Removed it, more like,” Larric said. “You only have one Inquisitor guarding the entire manufactory?”

“Two, actually. They rotate shifts.” The man’s omnipresent grin became incredibly lopsided as he paced around to the other side of the table and dragged me with him. “Prelate Agarius also sends in a few priests to check on us once or twice a week, but they rarely stay for more than a few hours.”

Larric glanced back and forth across the mostly-empty chamber. “It’s hard to believe, is all. Compared to the way things used to be...”

“You mean where we worked as glorified slaves under the watchful eye of overbearing young zealots like yourself?” Verne said with a haughty scoff. “Those days are long gone, my friend. I almost want to head into Sanctum and personally thank Emperor Lucian for starting this war.”

He stopped in front of his chair and turned to face me, then casually started unfastening the front of my dress. I remained as still as I could and tried to ignore the liquor on his breath. It was only midafternoon, but he smelled like he’d already downed a half a dozen pints.

“You would be in the minority there,” Larric said gravely. “Thus far the vaeyn are crushing everything that stands in their path. And there’s no guarantee they’ll stop with Glorinfel.”

“I assume this is the part where you ask me for something,” Verne said. “Weapons, I’m guessing? Armor for Kristoff’s growing mercenary army?”

“Both, but not for our men here. We want you to send as many supplies as you can spare north to help reinforce Mavarinth. Duke Kristoff isn’t convinced that the Legion can hold the city if the vaeyn decide to strike.”

“I don’t blame him. I wouldn’t trust the Legion to fend off an army of old women at this point. But if all he wants are supplies, why not put in a standard requisition?”

“Because by the time anything actually gets to Mavarinth, it will be too late,” Larric said. “Your people understand the terrors of bureaucracy better than anyone.”

“True enough,” Verne admitted as he unfastened the last strap and peeled open the front of my dress. “The Covenant often lacks proper motivation. But then again, so do we.”

He cupped my breasts in his hands, and the moment his skin touched mine was tempted to reach into his mind. He was only half paying attention to me, after all, and he glanced back over his shoulder to Larric enough that I would have probably had sufficient time to channel the spell without him noticing. But unlike the vast majority of nobles I’d served over the past month, Verne was a channeler himself...and he would be far more likely to recognize a spell when he saw it. I was going to have to wait.

“Decent tits,” he commented with a rough squeeze. “Though you can’t imagine what I’d pay to see a nice pair of human tits attached to one of these little bodies.”

“You seem to have enough freedom now I’m sure you could make arrangements with one of the brothels in the city,” Larric told him.

“Oh, we have. They send over a dozen girls at the end of every week. They’re fun enough, but there’s really nothing quite like a fresh elf cunt now and then.”

“Then consider her an advance on your payment,” Larric suggested. “I’m sure your men would—”

“You misunderstand,” Verne interrupted as he spun around. “We don’t need Kristoff’s charity. We don’t need anyone’s charity anymore.”

He flicked his palm, and a tiny spark of blue-white Aetheric energy leapt from his fingertips and rattled against the small bell hanging near the doorway. I heard a shuffling sound from the hall, and a few moments later another faeyn woman appeared around the corner.

“We already have our own *avenari*, you see,” Verne said with a smirk. “And Prelate Agarius promised he’d send us another soon—hopefully younger and maybe even still ripe.”

The woman waited patiently, her eyes lowered. She was older than me, though of course it was difficult to tell with our kind compared to humans. Her long, blonde hair was pinned into a tight ponytail, and she wore the same style dress as most Covenant-owned slaves I’d seen in Sanctum. The bottom was a floor-length skirt, but the top was a halter cut just below her breasts.

The design wasn't intended to be erotic; it was instead meant to show off the intricate tattoo encircling her navel. The "mark of sterility," the priests called it, and it was meant warned potential buyers that the Covenant had magically sterilizing her. Given the value of faeyn children on the auction block, it significantly diminished her long-term value.

I also noticed that her wrists and ankles were completely unshackled, but even more curious was the fact she didn't appear to be wearing an obedience collar. It probably shouldn't have been so surprising. She was surrounded by channelers all day, after all, and they probably had plenty of other means of ensuring her obedience.

"Impressive," Larric said, though to my ears it didn't sound even remotely sincere. Perhaps I was simply biased by knowing how much he reviled elves. "Still, I doubt her training compares to the personal *avenari* of a Grand Duke."

Verne grunted. "Go and fetch us some wine and fruit from the kitchen," he ordered.

The faeyn woman nodded. "Yes, master."

She vanished back around the corner, and Verne callously shoved me away and pointed to the nearby wall. I obediently shuffled over and waited as he finally sat down in his chair. "Either way, the point is we're going to need a more than another whore to risk crossing the Covenant and the Legion. A lot more."

Larric glanced about the wide chamber. "It seems to me like you've crossed the Covenant plenty and come out ahead."

"For the moment, but I don't see the point in taking foolish risks to help in a war that frankly doesn't concern us."

"It will once the vaeyn push through the Wreath and threaten Veshar," Larric warned. "And that day might not be as far off as you think."

"We're willing to risk it," Verne replied coolly. "And as I said, right now this war is good for business. You might even say that helping out Mavarinth is against our best interests. If the gray-skins attack it and fail, the Legion might actually manage to push them back into Sulinor. And once that happens..." He made a sweeping gesture with his hands. "Well, you can bet these walls will suddenly be filled by zealots in robes again."

The slave woman returned with a bottle of wine in one hand and a tray of fruit in the other. She set them down on the table before pouring both men a glass. Verne swigged his down immediately, a boorish behavior that probably would have made any self-respecting noble faint. Larric simply stared at the glass, his eyes glimmering in thought.

He wasn't a negotiator—that much was obvious. In my time spent amidst the Court, I'd witnessed plenty of skill and folly in the diplomatic arena, and unfortunately right now Larric's behavior was leaning much more towards the latter. He was usually quite good at controlling his body language, but here he was completely out of his element...and the cracks were showing. He was a warrior, plain and simple, and I yet again wondered what in the name of the Triad Master Kristoff had been thinking in sending a warrior to do an ambassador's job.

Worse, Artificer Verne didn't seem particularly interested in me. And if I didn't get another chance to touch him, I wouldn't be able to delve into his mind and help the process along...

"This war must end," Larric said after a moment, "but perhaps there's another solution for you and your people. Once we've retaken Stormcrest, Duke Kristoff is willing to offer the Artificers amnesty."

Verne cocked a curious eyebrow as his slave set out some of the fruit on his plate. "Amnesty? From the Covenant?"

“From the working conditions of the Infintium,” Larric clarified. “The manufactory outside of Stormcrest has always been understaffed, and you and your people would be welcome there. He would be willing to compensate you generously for your work in helping to rebuild the border defenses.”

“I’m sure he would, assuming he ever gets his city back,” the artificer murmured. “But we both know that’s hardly a foregone conclusion. And more to the point, there’s no way he could possibly guarantee us protection from the priesthood if we attempted to up and leave. Not even a Grand Duke has that kind of power—and certainly not one in Kristoff’s current position.”

Larric’s cheek twitched, though whether it was in annoyance or frustration I couldn’t tell. Regardless, I could feel the situation quickly slipping away, and I knew I had to do something...

As I mentally scrambled for an excuse—any excuse—to step forward and interject myself into the discussion, the slave woman shuffled over to Larric. She helpfully topped off his glass, placed a few pieces of fruit on his plate...and then dropped to her knees and began working to unfasten the front of his trousers.

“That’s...not necessary,” the bodyguard stammered as he grabbed ahold of her wrists. She blinked in confusion before glancing back over her shoulder to Verne.

“Please, I insist,” the artificer said with a bemused smirk. “It’s not every day I get to entertain the emissary of a Grand Duke, after all. The least I can do is act like a proper host.”

For a moment, I thought Larric might actually push the woman away. It was all a setup, of course—Verne just wanted to distract Larric and earn himself and even better bargaining position. But that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, and from the subtle glint in the bodyguard’s eyes I knew he had figured that out as well. If the First Artificer was truly just going to reject Master Kristoff’s proposal outright, he wouldn’t have bothered continuing to play the game; he would have simply tossed us out of the tower. But if he was still jockeying for position, it meant he was willing to deal after all. He was just hoping to get the best offer possible.

And so with that reality in mind, Larric forced a smile and released his grip on the other *avenari*. She glanced back to her master for approval once again, and when Verne nodded she leaned forward and deftly worked Larric’s manhood free.

“Don’t worry: she’s quite skilled,” the artificer said as he leaned back in his chair and popped a grape into his mouth. “Maybe not as adept as Kristoff’s personal pet, but skilled enough all the same.”

I wasn’t sure why I found the sight of this woman kneeling between Larric’s legs so strange or unsettling. During the past few months in Sanctum I had seen plenty of other slaves servicing nobles or soldiers or even merchants. And more to the point, Larric *was* a former Inquisitor; he was undoubtedly accustomed such privileges. Just because I had never personally seen him with a slave or prostitute before didn’t really mean anything.

But for reasons I couldn’t explain or understand, my heart fluttered each time the *avenari* licked and kissed the tip of Larric’s cock...and my legs grew weak when she leaned forward and swallowed him to the hilt.

“Enjoying the competition, girl?” Verne asked, his voice light with obvious amusement. Dimly, I wondered if he’d noticed my reaction or just felt like continuing to flaunt his position. “You can always help her if you like.”

I glanced over to Larric, and he warned me off with a single glance even as his breaths became short and beads of sweat began to trickle down his cheeks.

“That’s all right; he’s probably tired of you anyway,” the artificer said with a grunt before turning back to Larric. “In any event, you were saying something about His Excellency wanting

to offer us amnesty. But I'm afraid we'll need more than empty promises to risk helping you against the Covenant's wishes."

The bodyguard swallowed visibly as he tried to split his concentration. "Duke Kristoff has a sizeable mercenary at his command in the city," he managed, "and I'm sure he'd be willing to commit them to your protection."

"A handful of mercenaries aren't going to help against the army of Inquisitors who'll arrive on our doorstep the moment the dark elves are contained," Verne said. "We'll need more—*much* more."

Larric nodded distantly as the slave bobbed up and down in his lap. She really was skilled, and judging from the way she kept methodically pulling back and slowing her pace, she had obviously received specific instructions from her master to drag this out as long as possible. Verne was good, I'd give him that. He must have been preparing for this meeting from the moment he'd learned about it, and he'd obviously planned for every contingency.

Except for me.

Taking a deep breath, I called out to the Aether. Its power crackled through me, and I concentrated on breaching into Verne's mind. Normally, I needed to make direct physical contact to probe into another's thoughts and memories; so far I had only been able to sense the most basic surface emotions from a distance. But Master had told me that a few of most powerful Covenant priests had the ability to manipulate the perceptions of their congregation from all the way across the worship chamber...and as an Unbound, I should have been able to accomplish even more.

For the first few seconds, nothing happened. The two men continued to banter back and forth, but the words faded into the background as I glared at the side of Verne's head. I half expected him to turn towards me and recognize what I was attempting...but he didn't. And after a solid minute of concentration, I finally broke through.

At first, the artificer's thoughts were a vague, indistinct mumble, almost like I was listening to a conversation through a wall. But when he didn't react to my intrusion, I eased myself in deeper and deeper until the "words" began to take on a distinct shape. I felt his smug satisfaction at how successfully his plans were unfolding so far, and I felt his unbridled rage at the Covenant and everyone who supported them. I saw flashes of schemes and memories and raw passions given shape—

And then suddenly it all washed over me at once. I found the dam's shatter point, and what had once been a small leak burst into a full-blown rupture. A tidal wave of thoughts and emotions flooded over me...and in a single instant, I knew everything there was to know about First Artificer Tacitus Verne.

He was thirty-seven years old, the son of a blacksmith and a sailor from a village near the Gulf of Tuvari. The local priest had conscripted him into the ranks of the Artificers when he turned fifteen, and when his mother had protested they'd locked her in the dungeon and thrown away the key. For over twenty years Verne had slaved away inside the Infintium, and he'd slowly risen through the ranks all while carefully nurturing his hatred of the Covenant, the Imperial Court, and even the Empire as a whole. He was a man forged by rage and sharpened by pain...and he believed that his time had finally come.

My eyes abruptly flicked open—I hadn't even realized I'd closed them—and I felt beads of sweat dripping from my forehead. The two men were still speaking, and mercifully neither of them was paying any attention to me. Verne chuckled to himself as he finished off his grapes, and Larric groaned softly in pleasure as the *avenari* continued her ministrations. They still hadn't

agreed to anything, and I realized there would probably never be a better time to put the limits of my powers to the test.

Having implanted suggestions in the minds of Duke Arland, his wife, and a dozen other nobles over the past month, I had grown quite adept at the technique, but here my refined expertise almost wasn't necessary. Now that I knew everything about Verne, his mind was a wet lump of clay. I could do far more than subtly manipulate him; I could almost completely control him. And that's exactly what I did.

"If Kristoff is willing to promise us protection and a place in Stormcrest once the city is retaken, we'll gladly send everything we can spare to Mavarinth," Verne said in a hushed, conciliatory tone as if he were ashamed he'd ever contested the idea. "There's very little security here at the moment, as you've noticed. As long as your people are willing to come to us, there's no reason we shouldn't be able to slip out the supplies overnight."

Larric, nearly consumed by his rapidly-approaching climax, nevertheless managed to open his eyes and blink curiously at his counterpart's abrupt change of heart. "I'm...sure we can arrange that."

"Good. The others would probably like some more direct compensation, but as long as you give me your personal assurances that Kristoff won't back out on his promise, I should be able to convince them easily enough."

"His Excellency always honors his word," Larric said, his voice still floundering. "You will get your protection."

Verne smiled. "I knew we'd eventually see eye to eye. Old friends always find a way." He glanced down to the slave girl. "Now hurry up, dear. You don't want him to get bored, do you?"

Even she glanced back to her master in confusion for a moment, but then she quickly remembered her duty and swallowed Larric whole once more. He pressed his hand firmly against the back of her head, clamped down on his jaw...and then swiftly spilled his seed down her throat.

"I told you she was skilled enough," Verne said of his own accord. I allowed him the moment of smug satisfaction; in his mind, he believed he'd negotiated exactly the agreement he'd wanted. "We make certain she earns her keep each and every day."

Larric held her head in place for a few seconds while he recovered, and when he finally removed his hand she leaned back on her haunches, licked him clean, and then tied his trousers—all without meeting his eyes a single time.

"Thank you, my lord," she said softly.

"You're...welcome," Larric managed. The woman stood and backed away, and Verne waved a hand at her.

"You may leave, dear," the artificer said. "Go and see if they need any help in the kitchen for tonight's dinner."

"Yes, master."

She vanished almost immediately, and Verne grunted. "You're welcome to stay and celebrate, if you like. She'll be available if you want to fuck her, and two of the brothel girls are actually still here as well." He glanced back over to me for the first time since I'd penetrated his mind. "Besides, I'm sure plenty of my men would like a turn with this one."

"We'll be heading back shortly," Larric said as he sat up straight. The reality of the moment—and what he had miraculously accomplished—looked like it was finally settling in. "Duke Kristoff will wish to hear the news as soon as possible."

Verne was actually going to protest, but all it took was a subtle tug from my mental leash to set him straight. “Of course, I understand completely,” he said with another contented smile. “I’m just glad we were able find a common ground so easily.”

Larric nodded idly as his eyes flicked over to me. For an instant, I feared he might have actually suspected something...but of course he couldn’t have possibly guessed my true nature. Who could have? The very notion that Master Kristoff was been harboring an Unbound slave was ridiculous.

And that, more than anything else, was precisely why I was so dangerous.

“So am I,” Larric murmured as he stepped over grabbed ahold of my leash. “So am I.”

Chapter Four

“Leaving already, sir?” one of the house guards said as Larric and I walked back towards the line of horses waiting outside the tower. It appeared as though they’d only just finished setting up a small camp to wait for us.

“Yes,” Larric told them. “We got what we needed. Now pack up—we should be able to make it back to the city before dusk.”

The other guard frowned and glanced up into the clear midday sky. With the days slowly growing longer, we would probably be back several hours before dusk at least. But the man didn’t comment, and he had the others picked up and back on their horses within just a few minutes.

“Something is wrong,” Larric murmured while they were working. “Verne shouldn’t have agreed that easily, not when he knew he could get a lot more out of us.”

“Getting his people away from this place seemed like the most important thing to him,” I commented. “You gave him that.”

He glanced over to me, eyes narrowed, as if he just remembered that I was there. “I knew bringing you would be pointless. Kristoff seems to think he can have you fuck his way into getting whatever he wants, but it’s not that easy. Just because Arland is a fool doesn’t mean everyone else is. Duke Darkstone certainly isn’t.”

I wanted to remind him that we’d gotten everything we wanted, but as usual I kept my thoughts to myself. I also belatedly realized that I needed to be more subtle with my telepathic suggestions in the future. Verne wouldn’t think twice about his abrupt about-face—I had manipulated his mind enough that he legitimately believed he’d gotten the exact deal he’d wanted. But Larric obviously wasn’t buying the unforeseen turn, and some of the other Artificers might not either.

“Get on your horse,” Larric growled with a dismissive wave. “We’re leaving.”

I did as he asked, but the entire time we trotted out of the tower courtyard I felt a nervous lump rising in my throat. I might have just made my first serious mistake. I had allowed the intensity of the moment overwhelm me; I had been so excited at the prospect of delving into Verne’s mind without physical contact that I hadn’t really thought the situation through. What if the other artificers rejected his deal? What if Larric realized I wasn’t what he thought I was? What if there was enough of a fuss that the Inquisitors investigated?

I had nearly worked myself into a panic by the time we turned back onto the White Road and angled towards Sanctum, and I started to worry if the guards might notice my odd discomfort. Larric, for his part, rode far enough ahead of us that the men couldn’t chat with him about what had happened even if they’d wanted to, and a part of me—a very stupid part of me—was actually tempted to try and reach out to his mind to see what he was thinking. I had all kinds of questions about his past and his beliefs, and touching his thoughts would get the answers I sought. It would also allow me to assuage his fears if he really had started to connect Verne’s sudden shift in behavior to me.

But Inquisitors were trained to resist Aetheric manipulation, or so I’d been told, and it was far too much of a risk. It was baffling that I was even considering such a thing considering the trouble I may have already gotten myself into...

I continued to inwardly chide myself for several minutes before realizing that the house guards had finally broken the odd silence around us. And it only took a few more seconds to

realize that they weren't simply engaging in idle chatter. Something was wrong, and Larric gradually slowed and brought his steed in line with the others.

"Sir, I think I spotted movement along the tree line," one of the men whispered. "I thought I noticed something a few minutes ago too, but then it vanished."

"We're being watched," Larric replied gravely. His tone, I noticed, had reverted to that of the cold, stoic warrior I was used to. And for once I actually found it a little comforting. "Someone has been following us for a while now."

"What..." I blurted out. "What do we do?"

His eyes fastened onto mine and narrowed. "*You* are going to keep your mouth shut. *We* are going to do our jobs."

He gestured with his chin, and two of the guards slowly fanned out to opposite ends of the road while the others remained in formation around me. They didn't draw their weapons, presumably to make it seem like they didn't realize anything was wrong, but unsurprisingly they were poor actors. Their postures stiffened, their hands clenched and unclenched in their saddles, and one of them even brushed his fingers across the pommel of his blade from time to time. I had no idea if our stalkers would notice such details or not, but I had been trained to read body language as well as minds. And the fact that a battle-hardened squad of men had suddenly gotten this nervous made the hairs on the back of my neck stand.

Only Larric seemed unaffected...though that might have had more to do with the fact that he *always* looked like he was ready for combat. His eyes scoured the tree line, and he gently nudged his horse forward until he returned to the front of the formation. Meanwhile, it was all I could do to clutch more tightly onto my reins and try not to shake myself out of the saddle.

I felt more helpless than when my wrists and ankles were shackled. I hadn't the faintest clue how to fight. I had never lifted a blade or bow or even a knife in my entire life, and Master had only taught me the most basic defensive spells. Not that channeling Aether out here in the open was much of an option anyway. Reading minds was subtle and difficult to detect, but sheathing myself inside a glimmering, plainly visible protective barrier would probably just make the house guards turn and run me through right here and now.

I paused as a thought belatedly struck me. *Reading minds....*

Closing my eyes, I closed my eyes and allowed the Aether to flow through me. I focused on replicating the same technique I'd used earlier with Verne; I slowly stretched out with my mind, first to nudge against the simplistic bestial consciousness of my horse and then outwards until I felt the faintest emotional ripples of the other guards. I didn't delve into their actual thoughts, but I didn't need to. All I wanted was a reference point for when I extended my senses out into the surrounding forest...

And there it was. Or rather, there *they* were—eight minds lurking in the bushes and split up evenly on either side of the road. I couldn't tell specifically what they were thinking, but I could tell that they were there...and that was enough to make my heart skip a beat inside my chest.

My eyes blinked open as I dismissed the spell, and I noticed that Larric's mount had drifted back to within a few feet of mine again. I opened my mouth to warn him, but then I realized I had nothing to say. How was I going to tell him what I'd sensed without revealing my powers to him? Was it worth the risk if we were about to be attacked anyway?

Before I could make up my mind, he tilted his head towards me. "Be ready to ride," he whispered as his fingers casually slipped down to the handle of his sword. "Whitstone Tower is just a mile down the road, and you should—"

The words died on his lips when one of the other guards shrieked in agony and clutched at the arrow suddenly jutting out of his breastplate. He tried desperately to heft up his shield, but it was already too late—a storm of arrows rained down from the tree line, and he and most of the others were dead before they even had a chance to draw their blades.

I screamed. My body froze helplessly in place as I watched the carnage around me, and I knew deep in my heart that I was about to die.

“Go!” Larric screamed into my ear. He smacked my steed with the flat of his blade, and I barely had a chance to steady myself in the saddle before the horse bolted down the road at a full gallop. My breath caught in my throat, and I pressed my eyes shut as I whispered a quick prayer to the Triad that they might spare me just this once...

And then suddenly the horse whinnied and stumbled, and before I even knew what was happening I was soaring out of the saddle. I rolled instinctively as I hit the ground, but the impact still knocked the air from my lungs. Gasping breathlessly, I managed to grab onto something and stop my reckless tumble, but not before a stabbing pain shot down the entire right side of my body.

“What the fuck are you doing?” a deep male voice growled from somewhere. “If she dies we lose everything!”

“She was getting away, what the hell was I supposed to do?” another countered. The rest of the argument devolved into an unintelligible chorus of irritated male voices. I opened my eyes to try and see what was going on, but they refused to focus. Everything was a spotted red blur, even the otherwise clear sky.

After a few moments a strong hand clutched around my waist and hoisted me to my feet, and soon after another grabbed onto my wrists and locked them behind my back. There were at least three men nearby, as far as I could tell, and I continued to blink to try and clear my vision...

“See? She’s fine,” the second voice said. “Just a few scrapes and bruises.”

“You’re lucky,” the first one snarled back. “And if we can’t clean this up for the auction, boss is still going to gut you.”

“You worry too much.” One of the hands clawed up into my hair and jerked my head back hard enough that my jaw rattled. “See? She’s the Grand Duke’s finest, just like I said. Worth a thousand sovereigns at least.”

“More than that,” another voice put in. Another hand abruptly grabbed onto the front of my dress and tore it open. “See? No brandings. She’s ripe and ready. Probably worth three times that much at least.”

One of them whistled. “Almost makes me want to try and sell her myself.”

“I’d rather not be marked for death, thanks.” A hand brushed against my chin. “Poor Duke Kristoff seems to be losing everything these days. First his land, then his army, and now his favorite pet.”

“What a tragedy,” another voice muttered. “Maybe we should try her out, make sure everything’s still working.”

“You so much as touch her and the boss will cut your balls off. Now stuff her in the wagon and open some of the healing salves. We need to get her to auction before word hits that she’s missing.”

One of them hoisted me up over his shoulder, and as my head dangled against his back my vision finally started to refocus. I glanced up as best I could to inspect the carnage...and almost immediately wished I hadn’t.

The guards were dead, most struck down before they'd even had a chance to draw their blades. Only two of them appeared to have managed any kind of serious defense, and their arrow-riddled shields and armor had still succumbed in the end. In the middle of pile, his armor splattered with blood, was Larric.

I wanted to scream, but I had no voice. I wanted to cry, but I had no tears. My entire body seemed to have gone numb, and my hand quivered in front of my face as I hung listlessly over the bandit's shoulder. My brain refused to work at all; it was like I had been ensnared by some type of stasis spell.

But there was no magic involved here, just cowardice and fear. In the span of a few hours I had gone from a powerful sorceress capable of bending the mind of the First Artificer to a hapless slave so terrified she couldn't even speak.

Eventually the bandits dragged a small wagon out from the forest and onto the road, and my captor tossed me inside. Now that my eyes were working I finally caught a real glimpse of his face, and he was actually less savage-looking than I assumed. All of his men were, in fact. They were adorned in unmarked leather armor, and even my untrained eye recognized the impressive quality. These were definitely not average street-side bandits; they were professionals hired by someone specifically to capture me. And Larric and all of the other guards were now dead because of it.

"Your master is pretty trusting to let you ride without cuffs," the man commented as he grabbed my feet and started to tie my ankles together. "So who was carrying your control rod?"

"It's here," another of the men commented as he rifled over Larric's corpse. "Looks like a nice one, too, probably enchanted by—"

And then, just as the man leaned up and turned his back, Larric moved.

In the span of a heartbeat the bodyguard leapt back to his feet, stole the bandit's sword from its scabbard, and plunged it through the man's back. My eyes gaped open in shock, and my mind barely had time to register what was happening before the bandit leader yelped out a warning to his comrades.

He needn't have bothered. Reaching into the folds of his armor, Larric whipped out a pair of wicked-looking throwing knives and then hurled them at the closest two bandits with a synchronized flick of his wrists. The men died with choked-off gurgles, and before their corpses even hit the ground Larric had already drawn his own blade and lunged forward.

The road in front of me became a blur of steel, blood, and death as Larric whirled between the still-staggered bandits and carved them to pieces. One attempted to leap backwards and draw his bow, but Larric pounced forward and cut him down before he could nock an arrow; another tried to meet the newfound threat blade-to-blade, but Larric ran him through after single masterful parry and riposte.

It seemed to me that even the most hardened thugs should have panicked and fled at that point, but to these men's credit—or perhaps abject stupidity—they stood their ground and pressed their assault regardless of the massacre unfolding before them. I could only assume they were more terrified of their mysterious employer than of the man who had just killed five of them in the span of a few seconds...and if that was the case, I trembled to think who that person possibly could have been.

Two of the remaining bandits drew their weapons and pivoted about in an attempt to flank their attacker, but the third drew a small, hand-sized crossbow and leaned against the wagon next to me as he lined up a shot. Larric, caught in another melee, probably didn't even see

the marksman, and I held my breath as I watched the bandit's narrow and his finger twitch on the trigger—

I didn't do it consciously. I wasn't even sure how I did it at all. But suddenly my hands flicked upwards and a gout of fire roared outwards from my fingertips. The bandit shrieked in shock and anguish...and then abruptly fell silent as the flames consumed him. A pile of seared bone and charred flesh was all that remained when he hit the ground, and I gaped down at my hands as if I didn't recognize their owner.

Unbound.

It took me a moment to realize that the word hadn't just been inside my head; someone had spoken it aloud. And that was when I turned and saw Larric standing over the corpses of the bandits, his face contorted in disgust and horror. Blood still dripped from his sword, and for an instant I wondered if he might leap forward and cut me down as well...

"Merciful Triad," he breathed. "That's why Kristoff sends you everywhere. That's why he protects you as if you were kin..."

I tried to speak, but again I had no voice. I stared at him, hands quivering, as my greatest fear was finally realized. My secret was out. And now he would drag me before the Covenant and have me executed as a heretic...

Larric closed his eyes and swore under his breath. He stood there silently for what felt like a small eternity before finally glancing behind him to survey the carnage. "We need to get back to Sanctum," he murmured as he wiped his blade on his tunic and then sheathed it. "There could be more of them waiting nearby."

He crouched down over the bodies and rummaged through them for a few moments. I had no idea what he was looking for, but he tore off a small patch from one of the bandit's armor and eyed it as if it were significant.

"Come on, get up," he ordered as he spun back around. I tried to spin my legs over the edge of the wagon and untie the rope around my ankles, but my trembling muscles made it impossible. Larric growled under his breath and slashed the bindings clean with a single sweep from his knife. I yelped in shock, and he grabbed me roughly around the waist and hoisted me up onto his shoulder. He then strode over to the only surviving horse and plopped me into the back of the saddle before hopping on himself.

"Try channeling again and I'll slash your throat," he snarled. "Now hold on—we're getting out of here in case more of them show up. His Excellency needs to know what happened." I felt his muscles tense as he grabbed onto the reins. "And then he has some explaining to do."

Chapter Five

We rode hard and fast, and for the first several minutes I clutched my arms tightly around Larric's waist and attempted to breathe normally. It didn't work. I squeezed my eyes shut, but all I could see over and over again was a plume of Aetheric fire spraying from my fingertips and searing flesh from bone. I still didn't understand how I had done it. Master had never taught me how to manipulate flame or lightning; such overtly destructive techniques were ostensibly the exclusive province of the Tel Bator. But somehow I had just managed to kill a man on pure reflex...

The wind dried the tears against my face, and eventually my arms stopped trembling. I had no idea whether Larric even noticed or not; the man didn't utter so much as a peep the rest of the trip. But once I settled down and started to think clearly again, I wondered if clutching onto him like this was a mistake. There was a very real chance he would attempt to turn me over to the Covenant the moment we reached the Sanctum gates, and for an instant I was tempted to leap off the horse and try to hide in the forests around the city.

But even if I somehow managed to escape, my life as I knew it would have been over. The Inquisitors would track me down eventually, and in the meantime I would probably starve or end up captured by more bandits. No, whether I wanted to admit it or not, my life—and Master Kristoff's—was now in Larric's hands. He could turn me in and have both of us executed, and ultimately there was nothing I could do about it.

Swallowing heavily, I glanced up and studied the man in front of me. From the tightness along his jawline to the way his hands clenched and unclenched around the reins, I could practically feel the turmoil raging within him. He was probably trying to decide for himself what he should do, and just like before we'd been ambushed, I was yet again tempted to risk prying into his mind to see exactly what he was thinking...and to perhaps "convince" him to forget the whole incident. But I still had no idea whether or not my powers would even work on an Inquisitor, and so instead I rode along in quiet terror waiting for the inevitable.

We reached the Sanctum gates several hours before dusk, and I bit down on my lips as we cantered through the streets and approached the Aetherium. But to my pleasant surprise and unbridled relief, we rode straight past. I couldn't even conceive of what Master had done to earn this kind of unwavering loyalty from one of his employees, even the captain of his guard. Larric was an Imperial citizen, not a slave—his contract would be forgiven the moment he proved that Kristoff was harboring an Unbound slave. It didn't make any sense.

Still, I obviously didn't protest, and by the time we reached the estate my stomach was so twisted into knots I feared I might wretch at any moment. But somehow I managed to hold myself together, and Larric screamed at the other guards to go and retrieve the lord of the house. By the time we had dismounted Master Kristoff came rushing out the door, his face pale.

"What the hell happened?" he gasped. "Where are the others?"

"Dead on the road just west of Whitestone Tower," Larric said. "We were ambushed."

Master leapt forward and grabbed my hand. Our eyes met, and his face twisted with worry and pain and outright disbelief. For a single fleeting moment, I could have been his wife returning from a long journey, and he could have been my loving husband waited desperately to embrace me.

Except it wasn't love I was seeing in his eyes, not really. It was *fear*. Fear that he would lose his most valuable weapon—fear that all this schemes would finally come crashing down around him. Without me, he hadn't a chance in the void of raising an army and reclaiming

Stormcrest; without me, he would never be able to rally the Quorum or dethrone the Emperor. I was, quite literally, his last and only hope for redemption...and he had come within inches of losing me forever.

Eventually he seemed to compose himself, and he scoured my body for injuries. Now that the heat of the moment had passed, my shoulder and left leg had begun throbbing from dozens of scrapes and bruises. Still, I was absurdly fortunate that I hadn't broken anything after being thrown off my horse. Each twinge of pain made me want to channel a healing spell, but naturally that was out of the question. I didn't know if Larric would reveal what he'd learned about me, and I didn't want to force the issue...

Master's palm abruptly flashed with Aetheric power, and an instant later a soothing chill tingled through my skin as the healing magic stole the worst of the pain away. The bruises would probably still last for a day or two, but the actual cuts sealed almost immediately.

"I can't believe bandits would risk attacking you so close to the walls," he murmured as he stroked at my hair.

"They weren't bandits," Larric told him. "They were mercenaries hired specifically to capture Elara."

Master froze in place. "How can you be certain?"

"They wagged their tongues after they thought they'd killed me. They knew exactly who we were and where we were headed. They were hoping to sell her at auction." The bodyguard reached into his baldric and withdrew the scrap of armor he'd taken from the attackers. "And then I found this."

"What is it?"

"Cured hide," Larric said. "Specifically, cured thacedon hide. It has a unique texture and hardness that's much different than what you'd find from any the local tanners."

"Thacedon..." Master whispered, his jaw tightening as he rubbed the leather between his fingers. "As in, the nocturnal predators found exclusively in Rivani?"

"Correct. I can check the local merchants and see if they've received any shipments recently, but I don't think it matters. Like I said, these weren't local thugs; they were professional mercenaries. And there aren't many people who would be willing to pay top sovereign to equip their hired swords with authentic thacedon hide armor. It's just not worth the extra expense."

"Unless, of course, they had an abundant local supply," Master reasoned, his jaw tightening. "Like the ruler of Rivani."

"That was my first thought," Larric said with a nod. "It would seem that Zarene has finally decided to make her move."

Master turned and paced away for a moment, his eyes glimmering in deep thought. I had never heard of thacedon hide before, but Grand Duchess Jora Zarene was the ruler of Rivani, often called "the Basin" due to its shape and position along the Empire's southern coast. Rivani's numerous ports made it the wealthiest of the Imperial provinces, and many believed that its lush forests and endless beaches also made it the most beautiful. I had never been there myself, obviously, nor had I ever wanted to for one simple reason: Rivani was the center of Covenant power in the Empire, even more than Sanctum. And its Grand Duchess was as legendarily fanatical as any of the prelates and possibly even the Hierophant herself.

"Why would the Grand Duchess wish to capture and sell me?" I asked softly. The two men turned to look at me as if they'd forgotten I was even there.

“Because she knows,” Master told me. “She knows I’m trying to organize the rest of the nobility.”

“Which isn’t particularly surprising,” Larric said with a fractional shrug. “You’ll forgive me for being blunt, Your Excellency, but we haven’t been nearly as subtle in our movements since the fall of Balagarde. Zarene has as many eyes in Sanctum as any of the other Grand Dukes, possibly more.”

Master closed his eyes and pinched his nose. “If she had any tangible proof, she probably would have gone straight to Emperor Lucian by now. We haven’t actually done anything yet.”

“No, but once Arland and Farrow begin to march their auxiliary forces towards Sanctum, we’ll have crossed that line,” Larric said. “There won’t be any going back.”

Master stayed silent for a few moments before finally sighing and drifting back over to us. “It’s all right. We’ll just have to be more careful in the future.” He smiled and gently ran his fingers through my hair. “I should have sent more men to protect you. Next time you’ll get three squads. I’ll leave the whole bloody estate empty if I have to.”

I offered him a faint smile. I wanted to believe he was speaking out of genuine affection, but at this point I knew better. All those months I’d believed I was different than his other slaves, all those months I’d believed I was special...

I was, but not in the way I’d hoped.

“It might be worth keeping her inside the city for a while,” Larric suggested. “And you should reconsider your trip the Korvale. It’s too dangerous.”

Master shook his head. “We need Darkstone’s support before we can pressure the Emperor, and he won’t budge unless we push him.”

“Then perhaps you should at least postpone it until the Legion can—“

“No,” Master replied firmly. “Arland’s troops are nearly ready, and I doubt it will take much longer to convince Farrow. We cannot afford to wait.” He stared at me for a moment longer before shifting his eyes to Larric. “Are you wounded?”

“Not seriously,” the bodyguard said. “A few scrapes, but nothing some salve won’t cure.”

“There’s no need for that,” Master said with a dismissive wave. His hand glowed again as he touched the other man’s arm. At first I thought Larric might pull away—his face twitched in discomfort or maybe even disgust—but his face quickly became an unreadable stone wall again. Master pulled away after a few seconds and nodded. “That should handle the worst of it.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency.”

“Thank *you*,” Master said as he clapped the younger man on the shoulder. “You have served me well yet again—you’ve served the entire Empire. If anything had happened to her...”

“I understand,” Larric murmured. His eyes flicked over to mine, and for the span of a few heartbeats I wondered if he might reveal that he’d learned my dark secret. But then he looked away and the moment passed.

“What happened with Verne, anyway?” Master asked. “You’re back earlier than I’d expected.”

Larric’s cheek twitched. “He agreed to aid us with all the supplies he can spare. All he asked in return was the promise of protection once the war is over. He wants us to move his people to Stormcrest.”

“That’s all?” Master asked, eyebrow cocked. “He didn’t ask for sovereigns or slaves or anything else?”

“No. He was unexpectedly cooperative. Suspiciously so, in my opinion.”

“Well, I learned long ago never to argue with good fortune,” Master said with a smile. He didn’t look at me either, though I assumed he realized that I had been the one to make Verne so amicable. “Besides, I always knew you wouldn’t let me down.”

“Warrior’s luck, I’m sure,” Larric murmured. “Now if you don’t mind, Your Excellency, I would like to return to the barracks.”

“Of course, but you deserve to be rewarded.” Master glanced back over to me and eyed me up and down. “Go inside and have the handmaidens clean you up. Once they’re finished, go and meet Larric in his quarters. You’ll be serving him this evening.”

I blinked. “Master...?”

“He saved your life,” he replied with a shrug. “This is the least you can do to repay him.”

“That...won’t be necessary, my lord,” Larric said gingerly. “I’ll need some time to coordinate with the rest of the men—”

“You can do that later,” Master interrupted. “You’ve earned a respite. My father always made sure to reward excellence, and so will I. She is yours for the night—do whatever you wish with her. I have some arrangements to make...”

The bodyguard looked at me again, and I wondered if he noticed the newfound terror behind my green eyes. “Thank you again, my lord,” he said. “I’ll be certain to make the most of it.”

Chapter Six

The house servants drew a bath for me the instant I shuffled back into the mansion, and as I melted into the tub I closed my eyes and prayed to the Triad that all of this had simply been a bad dream. They didn't respond, of course, nor did the long-forgotten gods of my people when I dared whisper their name. I felt more vulnerable than when I'd been standing at the auction block at Stormcrest. And worse, for the first time in as long as I could remember, I felt completely and utterly *alone*.

Even Master seemed to have abandoned me. All I really wanted was to collapse in his arms and curl up into his bed... but instead it appeared I would be spending the evening with the man who had looked upon me with disgust even *before* he knew what I really was. Now...now I didn't know what Larric would do. I didn't understand why he hadn't told Master that he'd learned my secret, just like I didn't understand why he hadn't turned me over to the Covenant. If nothing else, perhaps tonight I would have the opportunity to find out.

Or perhaps he would simply change his mind and kill me himself.

With that grim thought looming over me, I did my best to relax as the handmaidens slipped inside and scrubbed me clean. Sharela stopped by a few minutes later, and I actually thought she was going to faint when she first saw the tattered remnants of my dress. She spent the better part of ten minutes scolding me as she salvaged as many of the encrusted gemstones as she could, but by the time the handmaidens had finished she seemed to have gotten the worst of it out of her system.

"Here, you can wear this," she grumbled as she picked out a long, silvery dress that was easily the most modest outfit I'd seen since arriving in Sanctum. "It's simple and sturdy, and I doubt a soldier has enough taste to care what you're wearing anyway. I'm sure he'll have you bent over a table before he can get his bloody armor off."

She had me slide the dress on almost before the other women had even finished drying me off, and after a few minor adjustments it fit comfortably enough. Normally she would have paraded me back in front of Master to make sure he was happy with her work, but of course tonight he didn't really care. He had made that abundantly clear earlier, and every time I thought about it I had to fight back the urge to break down into tears.

Sharela pushed me out the mansion door not long after, and a few minutes later I was back in the barracks area of the courtyard. The house guards watched me approach like a pack of sabre cats stalking a wounded gazelle, but I knew they wouldn't risk Master's ire by touching me. After a few awkward seconds one of them nodded towards a door on the far side of the building, and I sheepishly made my way over and paused in front of it.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and reminded myself that Larric had already passed on the opportunity to turn me over to the Covenant once, and there was no reason to expect that now, just a few hours later, would be any different. And if all he wanted was sex... well, I could oblige him easily enough. I really *did* owe him my life, after all, and he was a handsome, athletic man. There were certainly far worse potential fates than spending a night with him inside me.

Or so I told myself. As I reached out to knock on the door, I realized belatedly how odd that thought would have seemed to me even just a few days ago. I had always been intimidated by Larric...and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't pretend the thought of spending a night with him wasn't anything less than terrifying.

“Enter,” his voice called after I knocked. I stepped inside and shut the door behind me. His quarters were quite a bit larger than they looked from the outside. A wall separated the room from the rest of the barracks, and he had space for a kitchen and dining table, a wide storage area, and even a cozy upstairs nook complete with a bed and assorted furniture. Larric himself was standing near the armor rack on the far wall polishing his breastplate. He appeared to have just stepped out of the bath, and all he was wearing was a pair of simple trousers. Having never seen the upper part of his body without armor before, I almost didn’t recognize him...but his back and arms were every bit as taut and chiseled as I’d imagined.

For a long, agonizing couple of moments he seemed content to ignore me, and when I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out. I had no idea what to say. He clearly knew I was there, and he just as clearly didn’t seem to care. So I stood there in silence for what felt like half the night as he continued wiping the cleaning rag across his armor.

“I couldn’t understand it at first,” he said once he finally finished. “*Avenari* are rare enough in Stormcrest, but in Sanctum even minor nobles own at least one of your kind. It made no sense why Kristoff believed you could spread your legs enough to win him an army.” Larric hung the breastplate on the rack and then turned to face me, his pale blue eyes as cold and terrifying as ever. “But it was never about the sex, was it? It was about the Aether. It was about worming your way into the minds of his enemies and getting leverage on them one dirty little secret at a time.”

Again I started to speak, and again I thought the better of it. Larric grunted and tossed aside the rag before taking a swig from his wineglass.

“How did he find out what you were, anyway?” he asked. “The Covenant has spent centuries trying to develop a technique to reliably identify Unbound, but they’ve never figured it out.”

“I...” I swallowed and lowered my eyes. I couldn’t bring myself to meet his gaze; it felt like he was staring right through me. “I told him.”

“So you knew, then. Interesting. Many heretics don’t even realize they have the power until something triggers it. A few have even joined the Covenant over the years. Sometimes the truth doesn’t come out until years later.”

My lip twitched. “The Covenant let Unbound serve?”

“Of course not,” Larric replied matter-of-factly. “They were executed the moment the truth was revealed. ‘It is the will of the Triad that those born with demon blood be put the sword before their taint can spread.’ Kristoff knows this...and yet he chooses to ignore it. He plays a dangerous game.”

I closed my eyes and tried to swallow, but my throat was parched dry. “Why didn’t you tell him that you knew?”

“What would that get me? He would probably order the other men to kill me before I could leave the estate. He couldn’t take the risk that I would use it against him.” Larric took another long sip and then set his empty glass back down on the table. “No, telling him would be foolish. Better for me to take you straight to the Prelates...or to simply kill you myself.”

My body tensed as he stepped forward, and I heard the faint hiss of a knife being pulled from its sheath. My breath caught in my throat as one of his hands clutched around my right wrist...and a few seconds later I felt the chill of cold steel press against my throat.

“You would let me kill me without a fight, wouldn’t you?” he whispered. “He really has broken you. No spirit, no will...just unquestioning obedience.”

He held the blade in place for what felt like a lifetime before finally grunting and pulling it away. “Pathetic,” he spat. His other hand shifted up and grabbed my chin until I was forced to look at him. “Do you even realize the power you wield? Do you understand how dangerous you could be? The Faedari rebels would butcher half the villages in Veshar to get their hands on another Unbound. You could run to them and live like a goddess...and yet you stay here and allow Kristoff to whore you out to every noble in Sanctum with a sovereign to his name. Why?”

“I...”

Larric snorted. “You love him, don’t you? Or you’re so broken that you think you do. It’s remarkable, really—he doesn’t even need the collar to keep you in line. Maybe the reason you elves are so supple is that you lack a spine.”

I wanted desperately to speak, to say something, *anything*, in my defense...but I couldn’t. He was right, and deep down I knew it.

“I always thought you were especially doe-eyed, even for a slave, but now...I think I’ve seen hounds with more dignity.” He scoffed and put his hand on my back. “Bend over.”

I swallowed heavily and lowered my elbows onto the table. He shifted in behind me and leaned down over me, and a moment later I felt the cold steel of knife press against my throat once more. I was trembling so hard I actually feared I might cut myself.

“Do you really think I’d let you touch me?” he said in disgust. “You’re pathetic. The only reason I’m not going to slit your throat is that the Empire needs you alive. We won’t survive this war, not with Lucian in charge. For now, I’m willing to do whatever is necessary to secure the support of the Quorum and challenge the Emperor.” He leaned in closer until his lips were nearly touching my ear. “You had best hope that doesn’t change.”

The pressure on my back released as he removed the knife and stood. I heard him shuffle over to the door and grab the handle. “Lord Kristoff will expect you to stay the night, and I’m not going to insult him by refusing his gift. You can sleep on the bed upstairs if you want. I’ll return in the morning and take you back to him.”

With that, he was gone. I wasn’t sure how long I leaned against the table, arms quaking against the wood, but eventually I slumped backward and curled into a ball on the floor. I should have been overjoyed, or at the very least relieved—he wasn’t going to kill me or turn me into the Covenant or reveal that he knew my secret to Master. He wasn’t even going to fuck me.

But somehow, being abandoned like this actually felt worse. Not because of callously he’d treated me or how harshly he’d berated me...but because he was right. I was pathetic. I was broken. Here I was, a channeler blessed with an inborn power so fearsome that the Covenant hunted down and killed anyone born with the gift. They legitimately believed that if enough of us were allowed to roam freely across Calhara, we would tear down the Empire and throw the entire world into anarchy.

I wielded this great power...and yet I allowed myself to be controlled. I allowed myself to be enslaved. The Covenant might have called me Unbound, but the chains I’d wrapped around myself were far stronger than any cuffs or collar the Artificers could craft. I was bound—not to the Covenant, but to my own cowardice.

I lied there on floor, sobbing quietly to myself, until deep into the night.

Chapter Seven

Master Kristoff wasn't at the mansion the next morning when I returned from Larric's quarters, a fact I found both disconcerting and relieving all at once. The former because it fed my ever-growing sense of estrangement from him, and the latter because I really had no idea what I was going to tell him. Should I inform him that Larric knew I was Unbound? Should I reveal that his bodyguard had allowed me to cry myself to sleep on the middle of his floor without laying a finger on me?

The long, empty hours of the next few days gave me plenty of opportunity to debate both questions and more. I hardly saw or spoke to anyone, Master included. He didn't summon me a single time—not to prepare me for our forthcoming trip to Korvale, not to check up on my continued progress as a channeler, not even to bend me over his desk and relieve himself. I avoided the barracks completely for obvious reasons, and other than mealtime I mostly remained alone in my quarters reading or practicing my channeling techniques. I was tempted numerous times to replicate the gout of flame I'd somehow conjured during the bandit attack, but I was never able to muster the nerve to try something so dangerous again. Courage, it seemed, was never going to be my strong point.

On the morning of the third day, Master finally summoned me to the conference room. I half-expected Arland and Farrow and half the other minor nobles in the city to be there, but when I opened the door I saw it was just him.

"Ah, good," he said, beckoning me over. "Come here."

I slid over next to his chair and waited patiently as he frantically scribbled something onto a scroll. After another few minutes he set the stylus down and smiled as he clasped my hands.

"How are you feeling, my dear? All rested and ready to travel?"

"Yes, my lord," I told him. "I am ready to serve."

His smile faded ever so slightly, and he pulled me down onto his lap. "You look worried. Is something wrong?"

"No," I lied. "I'm simply anxious to begin our trip."

He grunted and placed his hand on my cheek. "I know I haven't been able to make much time for you lately, but these past few days have been more hectic than I'd anticipated. Duchess Farrow continues to be too obstinate for her own good, and I needed to finalize terms with the Artificers."

"I understand."

He eyed me for a long moment, probably trying to decide if I was telling him the truth or not, before his hands slipped inside my loose robes and curled around my back. "I've been meaning to ask you about the ambush on the road. Larric has been uncharacteristically vague when it comes to details. Did something else happen I should know about?"

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. Was this a test of some sort? Had Larric revealed what had happened after all? I'd had the better part of three days to prepare for this conversation, and yet still I had absolutely no idea what to say...

"I don't believe so, master," I replied so softly I feared my voice would break. "It was... terrible. I thought they would kill me for sure."

He squeezed me reassuringly. "You were the safest one there. They wouldn't dare risk harming their prize."

I nodded but remained silent, and his smile eventually returned. “Though you’re very fortunate I decided to send Larric with you. Otherwise you’d probably still be in a slaver’s wagon somewhere on the road to Rivani. I hope you thanked him properly the other night.”

“He...seemed content enough,” I managed. “I find him difficult to read.”

“You and I both,” Master muttered. “In retrospect, I’m a little surprised he was willing to take you. I’m sure you’ve noticed that he’s not overly fond of your people. But I suppose all men have needs, in the end.”

“Yes,” I whispered. As far as I could tell, Master really didn’t know anything—not about how Larric had treated me or about his discovery of my powers. I wondered dimly if that might not have been a good thing after all. A part of me just wanted to spill my guts right now and get it over with.

But another part, a growing part, realized something far more important. Even Master, the man who knew best how dangerous I was, still didn’t consider me a threat. He didn’t bother peeking into my mind to see if I was lying to him; he accepted my explanations without question. He trusted me implicitly.

And it was in that moment I realized our relationship really had changed. Not because of his obsessions or schemes or growing detachment—not because of him at all. What had changed was *me*. For the first time since he’d purchased me I had lied straight to his face...and now I realized I could do it again if I had to. Or even if I just *wanted* to.

“On that note, Larric should be stopping by in a few minutes to discuss the trip,” Master said with another squeeze. “But in the meantime, there is one last thing I wanted to show you.”

Gripping me tightly, he hoisted me off his lap and sat me down on the edge of his desk. I frowned, unsure of his intentions, until he untied the sash holding my robe together and then gently pushed my knees apart.

“I really haven’t been paying you enough attention if you’re wearing these again,” he said playfully as his fingers brushed against my knickers.

“I’m sorry, master,” I replied. “I didn’t know—”

“It’s fine,” he assured me with a warm grin. He unfastened the front of his trousers and worked his cock free. It was only semi-hard, but when I reflexively reached down and curled my fingers around the shaft that quickly changed. “There is a technique I learned several years that I never taught you,” he went on as I continued to stroke him. “It’s very powerful, but frankly I had trouble imagining where and when you might use it.”

I tilted my head quizzically. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s not something you can hide,” he explained. “Your partner will know the moment you channel the spell. The only reason I’m teaching you now is because your powers are growing so quickly. I suspect you might be able to figure out a way to adapt the technique somehow.”

I remained as confused as ever, and I’m sure it showed on my face. Master just smiled and readjusted me closer to the edge of the desk. I started to lean back to make it easier for him, but to my surprise he cupped a hand around my back and held me upright even as he lifted my feet up onto my shoulders. With his other hand he slid my knickers out of the way and then pressed the tip of his cock against my smoldering entrance.

“Brace yourself,” he warned. “This won’t be like anything you’ve ever felt before.”

The Aether stirred around him, and I felt him reach out to touch my mind. For an instant, I feared he might attempt to read my thoughts and ensure I wasn’t hiding anything from him after all, but thankfully this particular spell wasn’t about intrusion—it was about joining. Our

thoughts and emotions swirled together, and a wave of dizziness threatened to steal my consciousness away...

But then the discomfort passed, and my body tingled in anticipation as the tip of his cock slipped into me. I leaned back my head and moaned softly, but between the waves of delighted contentment I couldn't help but notice that something was...different. Master had taken me a thousand times over, but it had never felt like this before. It was only then, after another wave of pleasure washed over me, that I realized this new sensation wasn't actually coming from my body at all.

It was coming from *his*.

"It's called an empathic bond," Master said, his own voice shaking as he tried to process the new sensations. "I feel what you feel, and you feel what I feel. Not metaphorically—I mean that quite literally. Here, like this."

On cue, he thrust into me another inch...and I actually cried out as a shockwave of pure ecstasy shuddered through me from my toes all the way to my lips. Master was right; I had never experienced anything like this before. And in that moment of pure euphoric delirium, I couldn't imagine ever experiencing anything like it again.

I could feel his cock as if it were my own—every tingle, every twitch, every inch of impossibly warm wetness as he slid deeper inside me. For a single instant, I knew what it felt like to be a man...and yet I simultaneously retained my own senses. His pleasure was mine, and my pleasure was his...and I had no idea how in the world he didn't immediately climax inside me.

"You see," he breathed. "There really is nothing like it."

I didn't answer. I *couldn't* answer. Instead I just locked my feet behind his neck and grabbed his waist to try and pull him in deeper. He obliged, and soon he was buried inside me to the hilt. My vision went black, my breath caught in my throat...and I realized that if I died in that moment I probably wouldn't have had a single regret.

"You can use this knowledge," Master's voice said from what seemed like a thousand miles away. "Even without channeling the spell, you can understand precisely what they're feeling. You can understand why you're so irresistible...and you can use that knowledge to control them."

"Please," I begged. "Please fuck me."

His strong hands held me upright when all I wanted to do was fall backwards. "I've always been worried about overusing this technique, even with you," he told me. "The one who showed it to me said it was as addictive as lotus and every bit as dangerous. I think she was right."

"Please," I pleaded again. "Please..."

He released his grip, and I collapsed onto the desk. Grabbing my waist for leverage, he slammed into me again and again, and this time I couldn't even scream in delight. I couldn't make any noise at all; it was like my muscles had been completely paralyzed. All I could do was flop in rhythm with his thrusts and reel at the sensations bombarding my every nerve. My vision blurred and my eyes rolled back into my head, I could almost visualize myself in Master's place.

I felt his cock twinge in appreciation as it pounded deeper and deeper into me; I felt his testicles contract as they prepared to flood me with his seed. I felt every strain of his thigh muscles and every beat of his quickening heart. But most of all, I felt his *power*. Not as my owner or even as the Grand Duke, but as a man. I had always been adept at reading men's

desires and giving them what they wanted, but now the last veil of doubt had been pulled away. And Master had been completely right: I would be able to use this knowledge to control them.

Just not right now.

“Fuck me!” I yelled so loudly I could hear my voice echo off the high ceiling. Under different conditions, Master probably would have been amused...but I could feel in his mind that he was barely able to concentrate himself. Finally he reared back his head and shouted in triumph as he spent deep inside me. Before today I had only been able guess at what a man must have felt like when he released, but now I understood. The spasms of his cock, the abrupt weakness in his knees...it all washed over me in a glorious, euphoric epiphany. And my own climax followed swiftly on its heels.

I had no conception of how long I lied there fully splayed, head slumped over the back of the desk, but I was dimly aware of voices speaking in hushed tones. Eventually I felt a pinch on my thigh, and my eyes shot open and slowly refocused.

And standing there, staring at me from near the doorway on the opposite side of the room, was Larric.

I wrenched my back as I bolted upright, and a pained yelp escaped my lips before Master grabbed my arms and held me in place. He smiled in amusement.

“You can stay,” he told the other man. “I’m finished with her anyway, and we have much to discuss.”

He helped me off the desk, and I struggled to get my wits about me as I frantically tried to pull my robe back together. I was covered in sweat; it looked like I’d just sprinted across the entire courtyard naked during a thunderstorm. I’d never been this disheveled, not even after a three-hour session with the most virile noble lord. I had heard of people having autoscopic experiences before, typically when they had smoked too much dry lotus, but in this case it seemed like it was actually true. I’d been so intimately connected with Master that I almost felt like a stranger inside my own skin.

“I’ve made all the necessary preparations for the trip to Skyfall,” Master said once he’d refastened his trousers and poured himself a drink. “With luck, putting a face on our struggles here in Sanctum will be all it takes to persuade him of the righteousness of our cause.”

Larric nodded stiffly as his eyes flicked between us. And for perhaps the first time, when they settled upon me they didn’t seem filled with revulsion. I had no idea why, given what he’d just witnessed.

“As you’ve said before, with the fall of Balagarde he’ll have no choice but to accept that Korvale isn’t as impenetrable as he’d like to believe,” Larric replied after a moment. “And since there’s virtually no chance that Duchess Zarene will join the Quorum, we can easily promise him a portion of her lands once the war is over. He won’t be able to resist the prospect of controlling a slice of Rivani.”

Master downed his glass in a single gulp and then smiled. “I knew you had a firm grasp on the situation. I’m sure you’ll be able to convince him given enough time.”

Larric’s lip twitched fractionally. “I beg your pardon, my lord?”

“I’m sending you to negotiate with Duke Darkstone,” Master told him. “You’ll get a proper escort this time: two-dozen men, including a handful of orc warriors from Arland’s auxiliary forces. Even the Black Lions wouldn’t risk hitting a convoy with that much protection.”

The bodyguard glanced between the two of us in confusion, and I felt my breath catch in my throat. Master couldn’t be serious, could he? He’d been planning this trip ever since we’d

fled from Stormcrest. Darkstone's allegiance was the final piece in aligning the Quorum against the Emperor...how could he possibly not wish to go himself?

"My lord," Larric's voice piped in when mine failed, "I don't understand."

"I realize it's a bit sudden, but sadly there's nothing for it," Master said as he sank into his desk chair. "Besides, you've proven yourself a capable diplomat already by convincing Verne and the Artificers to aid us, and given what we have to offer Darkstone shouldn't be any more difficult."

The bodyguard's cheeks tightened almost imperceptibly, and he took a step forward closer to the desk. "With all due respect, Your Excellency, I've never even met Duke Darkstone before. And from everything you've told me about him, he's ambivalent about the Covenant at best. I don't he'll respond well to a former Inquisitor."

"You said the same thing about Verne, and that worked out just fine."

"That was different," Larric insisted. "And to be blunt, the stakes are considerably higher here. Darkstone's support is vital to your plans, and you're a dramatically better negotiator than I am. I don't understand why you would wish me to travel in your stead."

"Two reasons," Master said. "First, your fallout with the Covenant will be a tremendous asset. Aemond will be absolutely *delighted* to discuss the hypocrisy of the Hierophant and the prelacy with you. It will ingratiate you to him almost immediately. And second..." He took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. "The bottom line is that I simply can't afford to be away from Sanctum for three weeks, not with the situation as delicate as it's become. I can't take the risk of Farrow or Arland doing something stupid while I'm gone."

Larric set his jaw and glanced away. I could tell he was angry, but I could also tell that he was fighting to control it. Yet again I didn't understand why he was willing to show Master such loyalty. Larric could have easily refused the request, and even if Master threw him out of the estate it wasn't as if a warrior of his skill wouldn't be able to find work elsewhere. I had seen those skills in person, and I had no doubt that any noble in the city would have been more than happy to hire on his services.

But Larric wasn't going to refuse, no matter how much he might have wanted to. Just like how he hadn't sold us out to the Covenant despite the fact it probably would have put him back in the Hierophant's good graces. There was obviously more to his relationship with Master than either of them let on. But as much I yearned to know more, right now I had bigger problems to deal with.

Namely, the fact that I was about to spend the next three weeks away from Master Kristoff for the first time since he'd purchased me.

"You still wish me to accompany him?" I asked into the tense silence.

"Absolutely," Master said, flashing me an empty smile. He could have told me this when I'd first come in, but he hadn't. Obviously he wasn't interested in my opinion on the matter. And just as obviously, he was once again placing faith in my unswerving loyalty. "Aemond Darkstone's harem is something of a legend across Calhara, but I know he's always interested in meeting new, well-trained *avenari*. I'm sure he'll adore you."

I nodded but didn't reply. Three weeks without Master. Three weeks alone with Larric...

"I will need to make preparations," Larric said eventually. "And I will need documents to prove—"

"Everything is already prepared," Master interrupted as he tapped the stack of parchment on his desk. "You'll be given proper treatment in every village and town you stop on along the way. And we can discuss some of the particulars tonight over dinner."

The other man nodded stiffly. "As you wish. I will return later."

"Good, I'll see you then."

Larric spun on a heel and left, and once the door shut behind him Master wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me back down onto his lap. "I know this isn't what you expected, but unfortunately it's just the way things must be," he told me. "But there's no need to worry. Larric will look after you, and Darkstone will no more be able to resist you than Arland or anyone else."

"I hope so," I whispered.

He squeezed my arm reassuringly. "You've accomplished so much these past few months it's almost hard to believe...and I expect you aren't nearly done yet. Now go and meet with Sharela. I've had her prepare a number of new outfits for you that should suit Aemond's tastes."

"As you wish, my lord," I said. "I live to serve you."

"I know," Master replied, smiling. "I know."

Chapter Eight

Two days later, our caravan set out for Korvale. I prepared myself as best I could for the long trip, which included borrowing several of Master's history books as well as his entire collection of Rantavari's dramas. The long-dead playwright was popular all across Calhara, but he was virtually a legend in his homeland of the Vale. My hope was that his works might give me some additional insight into the local culture...and more importantly, keep my mind off the fact that I was just a few feet away from a man who completely and utterly reviled me.

Thankfully, Larric didn't choose to ride inside the carriage with me after all. He stayed outside on his horse with the rest of the men, and at times I felt almost like the Hierophant herself with such an enormous escort surrounding me. Still, after what had happened during our trip to the Infintium, I obviously understood why Master had wanted to take precautions. It certainly made me feel more secure.

The journey itself proceeded largely as I'd expected. I spent the days alone reading, napping, or simply enjoying the shifting scenery outside the window, while at night I was typically offered a modest bed in whatever small town or village we stopped at along the road. The local barons leaned over sideways to provide Larric with every luxury they could afford during our stay, which was a testament to the lingering influence of a Grand Duke—even one who had been driven from his home. On the first night I'd been terrified that Larric might offer me up to the rest of the soldiers like a piece of mutton, but he didn't. I would have liked to believe that Master Kristoff had ordered him otherwise, but I suspected he'd given his bodyguard broad authority to treat me as he saw fit during this trip. I probably should have been thankful that Larric found me so repulsive; it meant he was perfectly content to stuff me inside my own room every evening and otherwise leave me alone.

We passed into Abenwreath on the morning of the third day, and on the end of the seventh we crossed the Peakway Bridge and entered Korvale itself. Up to that point I had largely been in awe of the disparate towns, villages, and even Legion-controlled forts we'd passed along the way. They had given me an entirely new perspective on the size, breath, and general diversity of the Empire. However, the Vale itself was easily the most impressive sight yet, from the towering, jagged edges of the Salt Peaks to the north to the lush, seemingly endless green hills to the south. At a glance it appeared to be the perfect combination of the rocky majesty of Glorinfel and the more temperate climes of Rivani...and I could suddenly understand why its ruler seemed content to hide behind his mountainous walls and remain detached from the troubles of the rest of the world.

From what I'd read about Korvale's history in Master's library and the books I'd brought along for the trip, the natives of the Vale—called the Kor—had been one of the last human ethnicities to join with Sanctus Veshar on his crusade to destroy the elves and unite Calhara under a single banner. That tradition of independence lingered on today, and the current Duke, Aemond Darkstone, was evidently the embodiment of those values. He rarely visited Sanctum or communicated with the rest of the Quorum, and unless Korvale's interests were directly threatened he preferred to remain within Skyfall and reap the rewards of the thousands of iron and silver mines scattered across his duchy. It would be our goal—*my* goal—to change that.

But first we had to get there, and on the final night of the trip the confrontation I'd feared since the beginning finally happened. We set up camp in Reskin, a small mining town at the base of the Ember Peaks, and the local baron loaned Larric an entire wing of his impressive mansion

for the evening. But before I could scurry off into one of the side rooms and vanish for the evening, Larric called me back into the main chamber.

“Yes, my lord?” I asked as I stepped over towards him. “Is there something you need?”

“There is,” he said, gesturing towards the plush chair opposite him. “Have a seat.”

For a fraction of a second I considered feigning fatigue or illness or even injury, but of course that was absurd. Instead of dreading this moment, I should have just been thankful he’d waited the entire trip before springing it upon me. Maybe that was the whole problem; after a week of being left almost completely alone, I’d actually managed to convince myself that I could go this entire trip without speaking to the man.

But instead of conjuring up a nonsense excuse, I merely nodded and slinked over to the chair. The cushions were just as comfortable as they looked, and I crossed my legs and tried to appear calm. Larric was as difficult to read as usual, perhaps even more so considering how half his features were currently cast in shadow. I wondered distantly if the overly dim illumination was intentional; it didn’t look like he’d bothered to stoke the fireplace in some time.

“I trust you’ve prepared yourself for tomorrow,” Larric said after a moment. “Duke Kristoff had a rather specific set of instructions for how he wished you to dress and behave on our arrival.”

“I am ready,” I assured him. “Duke Darkstone will not be disappointed.”

The man grunted softly as he twirled something small between his fingers. It was a ring of some sort, assuming he was following the same pattern as the last few nights. I had no idea what it looked like; I’d only caught a glimpse here and there. But he always seemed to have it with him, just like he always seemed to be wearing his armor. I had started to wonder if he slept in it, too.

“So how do they work, anyway?” he asked after a long pause.

I blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Your powers,” he clarified. “The Covenant always taught us that every Unbound had the capacity to pry into your mind and manipulate your perceptions. It wasn’t until many years later that I realized it wasn’t true at all. Most of the young adepts we captured couldn’t control their abilities in the slightest—some even managed to harm themselves when they attempted to channel.”

I tried to swallow but found that my mouth had gone dry. I had wondered when he’d wish to speak of my powers again. Evidently that moment was now...but if nothing else, at least we were far enough away from Sanctum that it would be difficult for him to turn me over to the Covenant. There would obviously be a temple in Skyfall, but from what I’d read Korvale was probably the least devout duchy in the Empire.

Larric cocked an eyebrow when I didn’t respond. “I assume you never had a similar experience?” he prompted.

“No,” I said, clearing my throat.

“Ah. You mentioned before that you had learned to channel before Kristoff purchased you. When did you first realize you were Unbound?”

“Not until I was almost fourteen,” I told him. It still seemed odd to discuss this so openly with him, but it wasn’t as though I had any choice. “I had cut myself working in master Kurwick’s garden, and when I clutched at the wound something just...happened.”

He clasped the ring tightly in his palm and closed his hand into a fist. “You were able to mend the wound?”

“Eventually, yes. At first I just felt an odd tingling sensation, almost like I’d stuck my hand in a tub of warm water. It was only later I realized I was feeling the Aether as it flowed through me.”

“And I assume you didn’t tell anyone?”

“No. I didn’t want to believe it at first. I knew what would happen to me if anyone found out.” I bit down on my lip as I opened the long-forgotten mental dam and allowed the memories to wash back over me. “But I couldn’t ignore it, no matter how much I tried. The Aether was a part of me whether I wanted it to be or not. After a while I realized I could feel it all the time—I had just grown so accustomed to it I didn’t notice it anymore. It allowed me to do things I knew shouldn’t have been possible. Heal scrapes and bruises in an instant, hear another’s thoughts if I so much as brushed against their arm...”

“Spray fire from your fingertips,” Larric added mildly.

I closed my eyes and swallowed. “I had never done that before the ambush. I didn’t even know I *could* do that.”

“Then you’re luckier than you know. Every adept we tracked down always had a clearly visible display of their power—fire, lightning, something like that. But I always knew it was the ones we *couldn’t* see who were the real threat. A ball of conjured flame can kill a dozen men, but a secret plucked from mind of a prelate or a duke could destroy an Empire.”

I nodded but didn’t reply. I’d never thought of it that way before, but he was probably right. The common people feared the likes of the Tel Bator for their ability to destroy enemy barricades or blast through the walls of a castle, but they were probably near the bottom of the channeler castes for a reason. The priests learned to heal wounds and manipulate minds, and ultimately those were far more powerful skills. As Master had once told me, the ability to destroy meant little without the wisdom and temperance to control.

“So your owner never knew what you were, then?” Larric asked after another pause.

“No,” I told him. “He paid very little attention to me unless I overcooked something.”

“That seems hard to believe. Faeyn slaves are rare enough in Mavarinth, and potential *avenari* are rarer still. I’m surprised he didn’t just hire a normal servant.” He paused and eyed me strangely for a moment. “He never took you? Not even once?”

I shook my head. “No, never. I always expected him to...change my duties once I came of age, but he never did.”

“So Kristoff really was your first then. That explains a great deal...”

I wasn’t sure exactly what he meant, but I nodded absently in response. A small part of me still expected him to drag me off to the Inquisitors at any moment...but it seemed less and less likely as the seconds ticked by. For months he had looked upon me with absolute revulsion, and less than a week ago he’d been visibly disgusted at the thought of laying a hand on me. But something had changed between then and now. His eyes were contemplative, not damning. His entire body language seemed to have shifted from hostile to curious. And I had absolutely no idea why.

Perhaps he’d resigned himself to the fact that Master intended to use him as his chief negotiator, or perhaps he’d simply realized that I wasn’t a threat to him or the Empire despite the magic in my blood. Or perhaps I just didn’t understand him at all. At this point, that seemed the most likely explanation.

“Did you ever know your parents?” he asked.

“No, I don’t remember them,” I said. “Master Kurwick told me I came from a breeder somewhere across the border in Sorthaal, but he never elaborated beyond that. My first memories are from Mistress Grolaine’s slave house, and she sold me to Kurwick when I was eight.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “She’s still in business, as far as I know. Or was, before the invasion. At this point I wouldn’t be surprised if everyone with the means has already fled across the border to Sorthaal...”

I swallowed again and took in a calming breath. I had no idea if I’d ever get another chance to ask him this question, and now seemed like as good a time as any...

“If you were in an Inquisitor,” I managed, “weren’t you able to channel, too?”

His cheek twitched. Like most of his tells, the movement was almost imperceptible, even more so with the long shadows covering half his face. But it was definitely there...and he seemed more pained than surprised.

“Yes,” he said, his voice a grave whisper. “All Inquisitors swear fealty to the Triad and bind themselves to the Godstone.”

“And they took that away from you.”

His pale blue eyes finally latched onto me, and I felt stark naked despite the thick robe slung over my shoulders. “The Covenant does not allow traitors to retain their powers any more than it allows them to keep their sword or armor.”

Traitor. The word seared into my mind as I conjured up a thousand wild possibilities of what he crime he might have committed to deserve such a label. The Inquisitor at the Infintium had called him an exile, but surely a traitor was worse. Which tenets of the Covenant had he violated? I had always assumed they simply executed any servants who dared turn against the teachings of the Levinthian...

Before I could turn my musings into a question, Larric abruptly stood from his chair and circled around behind me. For a moment he remained silent, and it took a supreme effort on my part to remain patient and not swivel around to face him.

And then suddenly his hands brushed against my arms and pulled the robe from my shoulders. A chilling draft prickled my bare skin, and I wondered nervously if he finally intended the claim the prize Master had offered him a week earlier...

“Kristoff trusts you implicitly,” he said, his tone surprisingly conversational despite my near nudity. “Not many nobles allow their slaves to wander without an obedience collar, and certainly not a valuable one like an *avenari*. He gives you your own bedchamber, he allows you to read anything you wish from the library...and he even lets you practice your dark magic in the safety of his study.”

“I am very lucky,” I replied. Another cold draft prickled at my back, and I struggled to repress a shiver. “Master has been very kind to me.”

“Other than sending you off to fuck half the city, anyway.”

My lip quivered. What was he getting at? What did he want me to say? Was he trying to bait me into revealing something?

“I gladly serve Master however he wishes.”

Larric grunted. He was just behind my ear now; I could feel the warmth of his breath against the back of my neck. “That’s what I don’t understand. You serve him, but you clearly don’t have to. With your powers, you could easily escape the mansion and flee the city. You could find the Faedari. You could fight with them to try and free your people, but you don’t. Why?”

“I...” My throat went dry and took my voice with it. He *must* have been testing me. I couldn’t think of any other reason why he’d choose to confront me tonight after he’d had so many other opportunities. “I serve because I am a loyal subject of the Empire. I would never join the heretics.”

“But they want to help you. You wouldn’t be a slave anymore. Don’t you want freedom?”

“It is my place to serve,” I told him. “It is the only way my people can find penance in the eyes of the gods.”

Larric remained silent for a moment, his breath continuing to tickle my skin, before he finally snorted and stepped back around in front of me. “This is what the Covenant doesn’t understand. They see every Unbound as an uncontrollable threat, but there are methods of control besides the Godstone. Here you are, gifted with almost unimaginable power, and yet it never occurs to you to use it. You are sapped and docile. You are *broken*.”

I lowered my chin and remained silent. I didn’t know what he expected me to say. Perhaps he didn’t expect me to say anything. He just stood there glaring at me, the temporarily forgotten revulsion blazing in his eyes once again. I could almost feel the disgust pouring off him.

His hand flicked down to his belt, and when it returned it was holding a knife. Somehow I managed not to jump or even recoil as he leaned in closer to me. He reached down and grabbed ahold of my knickers before crisply slicing the band and letting the remnants fall to the floor. I was now completely naked.

“Kneel.”

I did as he asked without a second thought, and I waited expectantly for him to open his trousers and present me with his manhood. But he didn’t. He just stood there, the same as before, staring at me like I was something he’d scraped off his boot. Finally I couldn’t stand it anymore, and I reached out to touch his belt—

“I never said you could touch me,” Larric said, his voice as cold and dark as the fading winter. “I never said you could do anything.”

“Forgive me, my lord,” I groveled. “I just...”

He snorted again before curling his fingers through my hair. He then abruptly squeezed and jerked my head backwards until I was forced to look up at him. “This is all you know, isn’t it? You can’t even conceive of a life where you’re not swallowing cocks or bending over tables. I’d say it’s pathetic...but really I think it’s just sad.”

He released his grip, then leaned over to his satchel and retrieved my leash and cuffs. He hadn’t fastened it onto my collar the entire trip—he had never needed to—but now he leaned in and snapped the leather strip firmly into place.

“It’s time for you to get some rest,” Larric said under his breath as he hauled me back to my feet. “I’m sure Duke Darkstone will make fine use of you. Just like I’m sure you’ll enjoy it.”

He pulled me into the small side chamber with the single bed and pushed me face-first onto the mattress. I heard the clink of metal as he adjusted my cuffs and fastened my wrists behind my back, and he even latched my ankles together before tying my leash off on one of the bed poles.

“I assume you prefer it this way, yes?” he asked snidely as he checked to make certain the bonds were secure. “I wouldn’t want you to be tempted to use your power to escape.”

He glared down at me for a moment longer, probably wondering if I'd be willing to protest even the smallest amount. But I didn't. I just closed my eyes and laid there locked in place, and eventually he grunted and left the room.

A week ago, I had curled into a ball on the floor of his room and cried myself to sleep. But tonight was different. Tonight I didn't allow despair to overwhelm me. Tonight I simply laid there, strapped nude and motionless to the bed, rolling Larric's words over and over in my mind.

I really could have escaped. I could have charmed one of the other guards and commanded them to unbind my restraints. I could have used my powers to blend in with the townsfolk, at least for a while, and then I could have found the Faedari rebels and joined up with them. But I didn't want any of that...and, like Larric, I wasn't sure why.

Did I serve Master Kristoff because he was my owner, or because I had convinced myself that I loved him? Did I refrain from using my powers because I was scared of the Covenant, or because I was scared of taking control over my own destiny? Was I a slave because the Empire demanded it, or because had I simply learned to enjoy the collar around my neck?

I had so many questions, but the more I thought about them the more I realized how terrified I was of the answers. Because if Larric was right, then I wasn't really a slave to the Empire after all. I was a slave to doubt. I was a slave to fear.

I was a slave to myself.

Chapter Nine

Skyfall was the dark reflection of Stormcrest.

I'd heard that saying countless times over the years from the nobles back home, and I'd probably read half a dozen variations of it in the historical texts. But as we curled around the base of the Ember Peaks the next morning and got our first look at Korvale's largest city, I decided that conventional wisdom was, as increasingly seemed to be the case, wrong.

Where Stormcrest was a mighty fortress built atop the mountains at the center of Glorinfel, Skyfall was a mighty fortress built *into* the mountains. According to legend, long ago a great rock had fallen from the heavens and landed at the heart of these ridges, shattering the jagged crests and carving out a massive crater of flame and ash. They had been dubbed the Ember Peaks for that reason, and sitting comfortably within them, tucked neatly away behind virtually unscalable ridges and snow-covered cliffs, was Skyfall.

In a sense, the city was a perfect microcosm of Korvale. While the province was isolated from the outside world by mountains and oceans, Skyfall was isolated from the rest of the Vale by the Ember Peaks. The result was a fractured population with far more diversity and far less unity than any of the other imperial provinces. If not for the fact that the vaeyn had conquered Balagarde, I doubted that Master would have actually bothered sending an envoy. But now, with the enemy disturbingly close to his border, perhaps Duke Darkstone could finally be convinced to join the Quorum.

Not that I was overly concerned with our mission at this point. Larric had placed me on one of the horses rather than inside the carriage today, and he'd actually gone so far as strap me into the saddle. My hands were free to clutch the reins, but my ankles remained shackled and slung over the side together. I was tired and uncomfortable, and I remained haunted by the ghosts of the previous night. Rationally, I knew I needed to prepare myself for our meeting with Darkstone...but I just couldn't bring myself to focus.

We reached one of the guard towers outside the city gates by early evening, and a small unit of soldiers wearing the black-gold tabards of Korvale approached us. They weren't with the Imperial Legion, I noticed. In fact, now that I thought about, I hadn't seen *any* legionnaires in at least two days...

"Greetings, my lord," one of the guards said with a stilted bow. I didn't recognize the rank insignia inscribed on her baldric, but presumably she was some type of officer. "His Excellency Duke Darkstone welcomes you to the Vale."

"Thank you," Larric replied politely. Having gone through this process probably a hundred times with other soldiers over the past week, his responses were almost involuntary. "Duke Kristoff sends his regrets that he was unable to make this trip himself, but I speak in his stead."

"Yes, His Excellency was informed of the change of plans. He welcomes Duke Kristoff's representatives nonetheless." The woman's helmet tilted to the side, and through her narrow visor I could see a pair of hazel eyes fasten upon me. "By His Excellency's orders, however, I must request that you remove all restraints from your *avenari* immediately...as well as those from any other slave you may have brought with you."

Larric froze in place, his brow furrowing in confusion. This was definitely *not* a part of the standard greeting routine. "I beg your pardon?"

"I know it is an unusual request, my lord, but His Excellency's orders were quite clear," the guard said. "He promised to explain why once reach the palace."

Larric glanced over to me and then back to the other two dozen guards fanned out behind us. At least ten of the others Arland had lent us were slave soldiers drawn from Duke Arland's auxiliary army, including the six barrel-chested orc warriors. They weren't overtly shackled, of course—soldiers would have been pretty useless with the feet locked together—but they were all wearing obedience collars.

“Is this the new law of the land in Korvale?” Larric asked. “Because if so, I’ve never heard of anything like it before.”

“We received the orders in anticipation of your arrival, my lord,” the woman told him. “I understand your concern, but I’m afraid we must insist.”

Having seen Larric in action, I had a feeling he could have killed every one of these soldiers by himself if he needed to. But presumably there were reinforcements stationed inside the tower, and of course there was also the inconvenient fact that butchering a squad of Darkstone's loyal soldiers probably wouldn't have been the most auspicious way to open our negotiations. And so after another few seconds of deliberation, Larric simply nodded.

“If this is His Excellency's wish, then so be it,” he said, signaling to his other men. “Were you planning on escorting us to the city gates?”

“Yes, my lord,” she confirmed. “For your added protection, of course.”

“Of course,” Larric murmured. The other house guards set to removing the collars from the slave soldiers, and one shuffled over and did the same with mine. A few minutes later, with all the restraints safely stored inside the carriage, we continued onward to Skyfall itself. And the entire time I felt a dark, warning chill rippling down my spine.

What was Duke Darkstone up to? I couldn't imagine a single reason why he would possibly want Master Kristoff's slaves released. There was no obvious political angle, nor was there an obvious betrayal angle. If all he wanted was to kill us, he could have easily ordered his men to attack us on sight. But no, there must have been something else going on here. Something that none of us had prepared for...

Half an hour later, we reached Skyfall's impressive main gate, and half an hour after that we had crossed through the city proper and were making our way up the long, winding path to the palace. Darkstone's guards had kept the streets clean and orderly for our arrival, and several different processions greeted us along the way. It was a sufficient amount of pomp and fanfare for the arrival of a Grand Duke's envoy, if only just. I started to wonder if perhaps Darkstone was simply trying to send us a message before we arrived...but if he was, I had no idea what it was trying to say. The only thing I did notice was the complete and total lack of visible slaves on the streets. No *avenari*, no orc warriors, no groll laborers...I didn't see a single member of those races at all, in fact.

By the time we reached the palace I was anxious to the point it actually hurt. I half-expected his royal guards to pull out their crossbows and shoot us as we dismounted and made our way up the steps, but again they remained motionless. Duke Darkstone himself stood at the center of the staircase flanked by two heavily-armored guards. He was in his mid-fifties, a bit younger than Duchess Farrow but almost two decades older than Master Kristoff or Duke Arland, and his long hair and trim beard had greyed in a dignified, regal manner. He was a touch overweight but not massively so, and his near solid black outfit was complemented by a golden sash and a smattering of glimmering jewels.

“On behalf of Grand Duke Gabriel Kristoff, ruler of Glorinfel, I greet you, Your Excellency,” Larric said as he knelt on the top step. I followed his lead, as did the rest of our procession. “We have been humbled by your people's hospitality and generosity. My name is—”

“Larric Aresi,” Darkstone interrupted in a deep, bellowing voice, “born twenty-eight years ago inside the Temple of the Triad in Balagarde. At just thirteen years of age you began your training as a Covenant Inquisitor, and your exceptional skill and devotion was noted all through the ranks of the prelacy. At eighteen you were given your first assignment to watch over the Artificers at the Infintium, and at twenty-one you were sent back to the front lines along the Sulinor border to hunt down renegade Unbound attempting to flee into vaeyn territory.”

Somehow, Larric’s expression remained neutral. “I am honored that His Excellency has taken the time to learn so much about me,” he said.

“Oh, there’s more,” Darkstone said, his lips curling in a faint smirk. “At twenty-five you were involved in the infamous ‘incident at Daragar’ where you were sent to kill a vaeyn warlock suspected of breaching the Aether and summoning demons into our realm, but somehow everything went wrong. You found out that this warlock was doing nothing of the sort; she was, in fact, fighting *against* a pack of demons. You decided to help her, but of course the Covenant would never tolerate one of their chosen warriors aiding a vaeyn Unbound, not even if she was actively fighting demons. You were charged with ‘Aetheric Malfeasance’ and exiled from the service of the Triad.”

I swallowed heavily and studied the side of Larric’s face. This time his expression definitely cracked. A dozen different emotions flickered across features, but the one that stuck was simple confusion—confusion which I thoroughly shared.

Darkstone chuckled at the man’s discomfort, and he waved his hand for us to rise. “Don’t worry; there’s no need to be alarmed. Everything I described puts you in my good graces. It’s no secret that there’s no love lost between myself and the Hierophant, and the fact that she was so willing to exile one of her best people only aids my cause. I’m glad that Gabriel decided to send you to speak for him.”

“I’m...pleased to hear you say that, Your Excellency,” Larric managed. “Perhaps it will allow us to reach a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

“I’m sure it will, but first there’s someone else you need to meet,” Darkstone said, his smirk morphing into a full-blown smile. “The circumstances of our negotiations have changed... just like the circumstances of his war.”

A flicker of movement from the shadows behind the duke caught my eye, and a tall, slender figure seemed to materialize from inside the darkness. Long locks of shimmering white hair spilled across her shoulders, and even though I couldn’t see her features from inside the cowl of her thick cloak, I knew her identity purely from the form-fitting purple-back armor sheathing her figure like a leather glove. It was the same armor I had seen on the battlefield the night Stormcrest had fallen; it was the same armor that had seared into my memory as vividly as if the attack had happened yesterday.

It was the armor of a vaeyn shadow knight.

“Hello again, Larric,” the woman said as she pulled back her hood. “We have much to discuss.”

To Be Continued

The Elf Slave series continues with **Unchained**, available in summer 2015!

If you are interested in more hardcore fantasy erotica, you may enjoy my **Dark Elf Fantasies** series starting with *Web of the Spider Queen*.

For updates about new releases, subscribe to the Sarah Hawke Fan Newsletter by sending an email to **hawkenovels@gmail.com** with the subject line "Subscribe."

Appendix

~Dramatis Personae~

The House of Kristoff

Elara: Faeyn female, *avenari* slave

Gabriel Kristoff: human male, Grand Duke of Glorinfel

Larric Aresi: human male, Kristoff's bodyguard

The Imperial Court

Lucian Patravian III: human male, Emperor of the Veshari Empire

Antoine Torelius: human male, High General of the First Army

Inquisitor Jodai: human male, Covenant Inquisitor

Luriel Arland: human (Talishite) female, wife of Duke Arland.

Bolvir Farrow: human male, son of Duchess Farrow

The Imperial Grand Dukes

Kathryn Farrow: human female, Grand Duchess of Abenwreath

Darian Arland: human male, Grand Duke of Sorthaal

Aemond Darkstone: human male, Grand Duke of Korvale

Jora Zarene: human female, Grand Duchess of Rivani

Imperial Citizens

Tacitus Verne: human male, First Artificer of the Infintium

~The Imperial Provinces~

Abenwreath: Also known as “the Wreath,” Abenwreath curls around the central province of Veshar and is known for its vast fields and farms.

Glorinfel: Once the ancestral home of the near-extinct dwarves, Glorinfel is a snowy, mountainous region in northeast Calhara.

Korvale: Also known as “the Vale,” Korvale is a fiercely independent province almost completely isolated from the rest of the Empire by vast mountain ranges.

Rivani: A warm, tropical province, Rivani is the center of power for the Covenant and the most important trade center in the Empire.

Sorthaal: Once the ancestral home of the Faeyn, Sorthaal is a sprawling mass of forests and hills known for its natural beauty.

Veshar: The central province of Calhara is home to Sanctum, the imperial capital and the home of the Emperor and the Imperial Legion.

~Terms~

Artificers: the lowest caste of Bound channelers who create enchanted armor and weapons for the Legion.

Bound: The vast majority of channelers in the Empire are granted their powers in a Covenant ritual that binds them to the “Godstone,” a crystal said to house the souls of the Triad. Through the stone, these “Bound” channelers are able to touch and manipulate the Aether, but the Covenant is capable of severing this connection at any time.

Calhara: The second largest continent in the world of Obsidian, Calhara is under near total control of the Veshari Empire.

Channeler: The all-purpose name for someone who has the ability to manipulate the Aether.

Covenant: The central religious organization in the Empire. They control and regulate the use of the Aether.

Faeyn: the name for the fair-skinned elves who once ruled most of Calhara. The seat of their empire was Sorthaal, now an imperial province.

Hierophant: The highest-ranking priest in the Covenant. Her power rivals that of the Emperor.

Inquisitors: The chief enforcers of the Covenant. The Inquisitors’ primary purpose is to root out and destroy Unbound.

Levinthian: The holy text of the Covenant.

Numen: A large country within Torsia known for its fine silks and berries. The Numense reject the rule of the Triad and instead worship their immortal leader known only as the “Shadow King” to outsiders.

Sanctus Veshar: The founder of the Empire and conqueror of Calhara. The Covenant preaches that Veshar ascended to godhood along with his wife and his top lieutenant. Together they make up the Triad.

Sorthaal Highlands: The ancient home of the Faeyn, now an imperial province under the rule of Duke Darian Arland.

Sulinor: The home of the Vaeyn located in the far northeastern corner of Calhara.

Talisham: A country located in the scorching desert region of Torsia and ruled by a powerful theocracy under the leadership of the Pah.

Tel Bator: Legion soldiers trained to channel Aether.

Unbound: A few rare individuals are born with the ability to channel Aether without being bonded to the Godstone. They are known as Unbound, and they are hunted and executed by the Covenant whenever they are found. Elves of all ethnicities are slightly more likely than humans to possess this ability, and it is incredibly rare in the other sentient races.

Vaeyn: the name for the gray-skinned elves of Sulinor. They are among the last free elves in the entire world, and the Covenant has long branded them demon-worshippers and heretics.

About the Author

Sarah Hawke is a thirty-something aspiring spinster with two cats, a horse, and a car that can technically still get her from place to place. She loves the cold, hates the heat, and desperately watches anything made by Joss Whedon for fear it will get cancelled.