

**Project Prometheus**  
**In Her Name**

By  
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## Prologue

*Temple of Ishtar, Syria, Thirteen years ago*

*Mukamurra* Alzena Binte Samirah, High Priestess of Ishtar and now Revered Mother of the Poet-Priestess, smiled fondly at the dark-haired girl sitting beside her. This child had been reared to take her place, until the day, six years ago, when the Temple Oracle had declared young Manara to be destined for something greater. Now, the girl was asking questions Alzena had both expected and dreaded ever since Manara's destiny had been revealed. Reverently, Alzena touched the clay on the low table and sighed.

"There is a reason for everything, my daughter. These tablets contain prophecies, handed down through our line since the days of Sargon." She reached to clasp one of the girl's slim hands, marveling at the beauty already apparent in Manara. "Your birth fulfilled many of those prophecies. You were born with a special purpose, my darling, and you must be protected from those who would thwart that."

Manara's expression was neither kind nor accepting as she fingered the edges of the tablets. Alzena sighed. Rebellion appeared to run in the blood. First the girl's brother, now her.

"But why must I wait so long, Mother? Most of my age-mates already serve in the public temple! You cannot mean to hold me back because of a few old stories!"

Alzena smiled sadly, glancing at her own reflection in the mirror above the table. Already, Manara had surpassed her own beauty, and that would mean danger for the girl as she grew to womanhood. She would be a temptation hard to resist for any man. For all their sakes, the girl had to be kept away from men.

"Darling girl, even stories have power, if you believe in them with all your heart. Sargon may be dead in the flesh, but his spirit walks closely with your own. Legend says that once a century is born a man capable of channeling Great Sargon's spirit and that he is a man capable of waging war most terrifying and vowing love most enduring. And he will come for you, my child. You will be his link to the justice he seeks. When you most need him, he will be your strength and your solace." She reached

to stroke the girl's cheek, sadness and fear creeping into her eyes. "But, my darling girl, beware. Of all men, only he will have the power to break your heart."

And, as the girl pondered her mother's words, her deep gray eyes narrowed. If such a man did exist, and if her mother was right, then she would have to be careful. She would guard her heart with her very life, and no man would ever hurt her.

## Chapter One

*Lebanon, January 2 (Present Day)*

The noonday sun glinted off of the Mediterranean Sea in sapphire and diamond shafts, reflecting light into squinted hazel eyes. Salty seawater sprayed up against the prow of the sleek speedboat, carrying with it the pungency of fish and seaweed as it speckled the driver's gray windbreaker. His jaw clenched as he shifted gears, watching the shimmer of approaching land dance in and out of view like a desert mirage.

*Sidon.* Matthew Raleigh felt his stomach clench with bitter memory. He was well acquainted with the deceptively quiet Lebanese city. He'd been here too many times in a past he'd just as soon forget, as a Navy, Sea, Air, Land operative on prowl-and-growl missions. His lips curved in a wry grimace. He wasn't a SEAL anymore—there was at least that much mercy left in the world. Not that what he did these days brought him much peace, either, but he wasn't looking for peace, anymore. He only wanted to deaden the pain in his soul. So he'd formed Project Prometheus, a special mercenary unit dedicated to ending terrorism. A futile enough cause. He scowled. The men who'd hired Prometheus mercenaries had business in Lebanon. Matt's hazel eyes narrowed, anger darkening them. Scum was still scum. *That* never changed.

Matt pulled his mind from the dark thoughts creeping in, forcing himself to concentrate on the mission. Was the team ready? He'd brought them in under the cover of night, yesterday. He hoped they'd made it to the pre-arranged safe house, but he had no way of being sure. They were on radio silence, and he couldn't go to find them until he was ready to join them, for safety's sake. Matt glanced at his wristwatch. Besides, he was already on his way to meet with the CIA operative, codenamed Star.

Matt had no trouble admitting it made him uneasy that no one at Langley had ever actually seen Star. They'd had no picture, not even a physical description, though Langley had claimed Star was a miracle worker. Matt scowled. He didn't believe in miracles, or miracle workers. From the little Matt knew, he surmised that Star was an important figure in Lebanon, well connected and with an extensive

knowledge of the local area. Matt also guessed that, whoever Star was, he was likely connected to arms sales to terrorists, or some other dubious operation. Great. Just what they needed: a contact they couldn't trust.

Matt pulled the speedboat smoothly into dock and cut the engine, then secured the vessel and leapt gracefully to the pier, his eyes searching for a spy.

*No one*, Matt realized as he surveyed the docks grimly. The din on the pier was maddening; orders and insults thrown around in coarse Arabic, and men jostling about like fish in a barrel. Not even one with the sophistication he'd been led to believe was Star's style.

Sunlight glinting off polished metal had Matt whipping his gaze to the left. *There*. Beyond the dock master's digs. A large, black sedan, gleaming with a fresh coat of wax, sat brazenly in the midday sun, oblivious to its high visibility.

Matt shook his head in disgust. Some spy. Cautiously, he approached the vehicle, aware that he could be watched easily, here on the docks. As he drew near, the rear window slid smoothly down, revealing the face of an older gentleman with sharp, dark eyes and aquiline features. His beard and moustache were neatly trimmed and more silver than black. Dark eyes fixed sharply on Matt's face.

"You are late."

Matt's gaze flashed to his watch. It was exactly twelve-hundred hours.

"No, I'm not."

A smile twitched at the old man's lips. "You are careful. Very wise."

"Star?"

The man inclined his head briefly in affirmation. "Come. Get in. We have much work to do."

As Matt opened the sedan's door, a flash of white caught his eye, pulling his gaze to the dock as a woman in swirling white robes slid from a sleek white horse. Blinking in disbelief, Matt climbed into the car and closed the door, but continued to watch the woman. Slowly, her dark, unveiled head turned, and he caught a glimpse of startled gray eyes as the car pulled away. Then, the car was speeding away from the docks, and Matt had the unsettling sensation of danger, reflected in a pair of haunting eyes.

“Where are we going?” Matt asked the man beside him as the car sped through the narrow streets of Sidon three minutes later, its destination a mystery to the mercenary. If there was one thing Matt despised, it was a mystery.

“Are you aware of your mission?”

“Yeah,” Matt answered in a mutter. “What kind of answer was that?”

The older man seemed fascinated with the smoking husks of bombed out buildings that lined the streets. “Amazing, how quickly things change, is it not? One day, a building is built, the next, it is gone. Like that.” Star snapped his fingers in emphasis. “Not unlike your Ambassador’s two daughters, no? One day, alive and happy, the next, mailed back to the Embassy in tiny pieces.”

Matt scowled. “Is this all leading somewhere?”

Star shot him a warning look. “Look around you, my friend. The United States supplied the bombs that destroyed these buildings, the guns that these children are carrying. There are many here who would gladly see Americans suffer for the suffering they have bestowed on Sidon.”

Matt’s gaze narrowed on the man’s face. “And you?”

Star shook his head. “Children should never be made to suffer for the mistakes of their elders. I am a peaceful man. All I do is caution you to tread lightly.”

Matt nodded. “Why do you think the State Department called in mercenaries, rather than using the SEALs? The political fallout would be catastrophic, if something went wrong. My team has no political affiliations.”

Star looked surprised. “You merely act upon what you have been paid to do? What has happened does not make you angry?”

“Hell, yeah. It pisses me off,” Matt said darkly. “It should piss anyone off. Two little girls abducted and then butchered? It’s sick, no matter *who* is responsible!” He glanced at Star. “Did you get IDs on the photos State turned over to the CIA?”

Star nodded somberly, taking a photograph from the briefcase beside him and handing it to Matt. Looking down, Matt studied the face of a man in his early thirties, with clean-shaven good looks and dark eyes that seemed to stare right through the camera. He had, Matt decided glumly, the look of a fanatic.

“Who is he?”

“Ra’id Asim Ibn Hassan Sharif Al-Mawsil. He is Iraqi. A distributor of crude oil, I am told.”

“A business man?”

Star shrugged. “Business and war often go hand-in-hand, here. He distributes weapons on the black market to terrorist training camps in Tunisia and Chad and supplies his own private army, as well. He was an Iraqi operative during the United Nations stand-off in Saudi Arabia.”

Matt’s eyes narrowed on the classically handsome face in the photograph. “A spy, huh?”

Star nodded. “Let us wait until we have reached your men, then I will show you where Ra’id has taken up residence, lately.”

Matt sighed, nodding grimly. One thing for sure, it was already shaping up to be one hell of a new year.

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*Mawsil Petrol Corporation, Damascus Headquarters*

“Sir! Sir!” The door burst open, and a dozen guns snapped up, safeties off, and then lowered at a signal from the man behind the wide desk. Steady, umber-tinted eyes regarded the newcomer shrewdly.

“I trust, Mahir that you bring our cause good news indeed, coming in such unwise haste.”

Mahir swallowed hard, drawing in gasping breaths as the dark eyes peered, unblinking, into his own. Dizzy from the strain, he touched one hand to his forehead.

“Yes, yes! It is good, sir.” He hurried on, desperate to get this interview over with. “It is how you were shown in your vision, sir. The man has arrived.”

Ra’id Asim Ibn Hassan Sharif Al-Mawsil settled back into his chair with a grin. So, it appeared the old harlot had been right all along! “Of course it is. I was given a prophesy from Allah on high.” His eyes darkened to smoldering embers. “We must rid this land of the infidels that feed so ravenously on the hearts of good men.” He picked up a hunting knife from the desk, its blade crusted with dried blood, and closed his eyes as he savored the memory of slitting that old slut’s neck. Syria was cleansed; they were all dead. All but one. The righteous little bitch had gotten away from him here and robbed

him of victory in Lebanon as well. He smiled cruelly. He had the perfect bait, now, though. “Set a trap for the American. She will not be able to stay away long.”

One of the men near him stirred slightly. “Sir... the Black Widow...what should we do with her?”

Ra'id waved his concern away. “Leave her be. She is still of use to us, for now. I will deal with her when the time comes.”

Dutifully, the men departed, leaving Ra'id alone in the room. Settling back, he toyed with the knife, a smug smile on his face. His father had raised him to see the truth of these heathen women, and Allah had called him to purge the land of them. And the woman... The little Sumerian bitch was his key to the power to destroy them all.



## Chapter Two

Matthew Raleigh paced restlessly in the confines of the safe house's planning room. If there was one thing that was guaranteed to drive him crazy, it was confinement, even self-imposed confinement.

"You keep pacin' like that and you'll wear a hole clear through the world, lad," Peter Talladay, Prometheus' second-in-command, observed from where he lounged easily against the wall, rolling a coin absently over his knuckles.

Matt stopped, rubbing the back of his neck in an attempt to relieve the tension building there. "I can't believe we have to wait," he complained in frustration. "I don't like waiting."

"Sometimes," Talladay drawled in his Irish brogue, "waitin's the only part worth doin'."

"I know that!" Matt resumed pacing in an effort to stave off the feeling of walls closing in around him, bringing with them the phantom smells of another life. A life he'd thought dead and buried.

Talladay sat forward suddenly, the coin forgotten in his hand as his gray eyes tracked Matt's movement. "You're thinkin' of Somalia again?"

Matt shook his head sharply. He wished his thoughts were that easy to live with; his memories of Somalia were bad, but he could bear them, most times. Eventually, those memories he could block out. However, for some reason, ever since he'd landed in Sidon, all Matt could think about was Rachel Murray. A memory of three terrifying days in Hell, when he'd learned that, sometimes, the worst torture a person could do was to do nothing at all. And, ever since he'd seen that secretive light in Star's eyes as the older man departed yesterday, Matt had felt stifled by the memory of Rachel.

"I'm wondering about Star." He shot Peter an assessing glance. "Was he what you expected?"

Talladay frowned and shrugged as he resumed his absent coin rolling. He cast a glance toward the other room, where the rest of the team was. "I'll admit he's a wee bit different from any spy I've ever known. But this is the Middle East, Matt; it's a different world. Everythin' works different here.

You should know that.” His eyes narrowed at his commander. “Is there some other reason you’re questionin’ this?”

Matt sighed heavily as his mind flashed over one memory in particular—a woman in white, with eyes like a stormy sky. She was memorable in herself, in this region where women hid themselves in head-to-toe veils of black. However, oddly enough, the look in her eyes was what haunted him; a shocked look of disbelief and fear mingled together. As if she’d known something he hadn’t.

“There was a woman, on the docks...”

Talladay’s gaze sharpened. “You think she’s a spy for Al-Mawsil?”

“No.” Matt shook his head. He couldn’t imagine that she was a spy; she’d been even more conspicuous than Star’s vehicle. “But there was something about her; as if I know her from somewhere...”

Curiosity bloomed in the Irishman’s gray eyes. “Do you?”

“Never seen her before in my life.” At Talladay’s skeptical look, Matt grinned briefly. He knew his reputation as a lady-killer was legend among his mercenaries. It wasn’t that the reputation was unearned; it was that it’d ceased to matter a long time ago. “Trust me, Pete, I’d know. She wasn’t the kind of woman a man forgets. I haven’t been able to get her eyes out of my head since I saw her.”

Talladay cocked one dark eyebrow at him. “So, who do you think she is, then?”

Matt shrugged. “I’m more concerned about how she seemed to know who *I* was.”

That brought a frown to Talladay’s face. “How do you figure?”

“She looked straight at me and seemed surprised and worried that I was leaving with Star.” Matt paced a few more steps and stopped, heaving a sigh. “Damn. I wish I knew who she was.”

Which only served to make him *more* restless. Whoever she was, Matt had an eerie feeling he hadn’t seen the last of her. Somehow, that woman was going to turn his world inside out.

Two weeks later, Matt studied his surroundings distastefully from the passenger seat of a rickety open-topped jeep as it sped through the dry savannah. Glancing briefly at the man driving, Matt felt a sense of dread clutch his gut. Peter Talladay was a man he trusted to speak his mind, and usually wisely. That he was silent now bothered Matt. They both agreed that Star had seemed almost *too*

capable, considering how limited he claimed his resources were. However, his smooth manner worried Matt more. Matt's hand clenched in a fist. If only there was some way to be sure he could trust Star.

"You okay, Matt?" Talladay asked in his bluff Irish manner, his gaze sliding briefly to Matt's face. "You're a mite quiet for a man who's gettin' what he wants."

Matt shifted uncomfortably. Talladay, the mercenaries whispered, had the famed Irish Second Sight. While Matt didn't believe in such superstitions, even he had to admit that, sometimes, Peter was just a little too perceptive for comfort.

"Star still bothers me. Gut instinct says he's up to something. I mean, he knows an awful damned lot he never told the CIA. How do we know this guy is really one of ours?"

Talladay frowned. "We don't, Matt; you know that. But what choice do we have? The CIA says he's reliable."

Matt grunted in derision. "They didn't even know his real name. I hardly think they know this guy well enough to make that call."

"You think they're making deals with terrorists?"

"The thought's crossed my mind more than once," Matt admitted in a mutter, his hazel eyes scanning the low brush ahead. He hadn't felt this ill at ease since right before he'd landed in Somalia.

Talladay nodded soberly. "Star's a little too charmin' for my peace, too, Matt, but he's definitely a Spook. Man's made of whiskey and lies, and spies are more than human."

Matt's lips twitched involuntarily at his friend's quip. There wasn't a man alive Matt would rather have at his back in a fight, but Peter's little Irish witticisms made him appear eccentric at times. He absently fingered the smooth metal barrel of his M-16, and then frowned. They were all eccentric, in some way; that was why they chased around the world on a fool's dreams of duty and honor. Too much war changed a man. It made him unable to see beyond the next battle. Matt had prayed, when he'd still believed there might be a God up there that he wouldn't lose that little piece of humanity he'd had left. Then the SEALs had dropped into Somalia, and every hope of peace or salvation had been beaten from his heart. God was dead, and so was he. All he was looking for now was a grave.

A flash of white to his right yanked Matt from his thoughts. Scanning the low brush along the canyon top, he saw nothing. His frown deepened

"Somethin' wrong, Matt?" Talladay asked quietly, his voice tinged with alert concern.

“Maybe nothing. Did you see anything, just now?”

“Sorry, lad. I didn’t see a thin’.”

Matt rubbed his face wearily. “Must’ve been a trick of the light, then.”

The canyon Star had marked on their map loomed ahead of them. Four jeeps cut their engines at Matt’s signal, and the mercenary team moved silently toward the basin on foot. Matt felt a prickle of awareness along his scalp, and his eyes flew to the canyon wall as he flicked off his weapon’s safety. Gesturing to Talladay, he pointed toward the sandstone ledge, indicating that they were being watched.

As Talladay passed the caution on, Matt moved toward the high sandstone walls, his hazel eyes absorbing every detail. The basin was free of footprints, except where he and his men had been walking. No fire pit remnants, no tent peg marks, and no tire tracks. Even the low brush was undisturbed. The eerie tingling at the base of his skull grew to a dreadful gnawing, and his stomach knotted. Something was definitely not right here!

A loud *click* from behind him stopped Matt in his tracks. He swung around, fear rushing through him as he watched one of his men, John Pelizone, freeze in place. Everything seemed to slow as Matt’s mouth opened to shout a warning. Then time ripped apart as a blast large enough to level a city block ripped through the canyon. Matt felt something heavy hit his chest, sending him flying backward. He smashed against the sandstone wall with a groan and lay still. His eyes fixed hazily on the canyon ridge as a vision from another world crested its top. He blinked once to clear the mirage, to no effect. There, framed in sunlight, the wind blowing a loose cloak and dark strands of hair up around her like wings, stood his Angel of Death. In that instant, he became aware that his sins were being weighed against him. His reckoning had finally come. With a relieved sigh of surrender, Matt closed his eyes and let his world go dark.

## Chapter Three

He was floating in darkness, for once without plaguing nightmares. Where was he? Beirut? Muqdisho? Then the explosion rushed back over him, and he remembered. *The canyon.*

Matt forced his eyes open and felt a chill envelop him. This wasn't the canyon, and that certainly wasn't the blue desert sky above him. The white canopy of a Bedouin tent swayed above him, and the sounds of an encampment penetrated his muddled senses. Had the terrorists come back for prisoners? That woman... the one on the canyon ridge.... had she been one of the terrorists or merely a hallucination? Grimly, Matt tried to sit up, but searing pain lanced through his chest. He sank back with a barely-suppressed groan, his eyes squeezed shut against the pain.

"Do not move," a soft, feminine voice advised him in Arabic. "You will do yourself more injury."

Matt's eyes opened again, and he found himself staring into the face of an angel. His pulse quickened as he studied her with interest. She had a softly exotic face, the shade of desert sand, with high cheekbones and a smooth, straight nose. Her lips were full and unmarred by make-up, leaving them a dusty-rose that had him thinking of desert sunrises. Her eyes were a liquid dark shade somewhere between black and pearly gray, framed by thick lashes lightly painted with the kohl Bedouin women favored. Her hair was like midnight, falling around her face as she bent above him. It flowed over her shoulders and spilled over lush breasts, barely concealed under some sheer white material that clung to her in all the right places.

Matt swallowed hard as his heart slammed into his gut, making breathing difficult. This woman went beyond the textbook definition of beautiful. She was every man's secret fantasy, come alive. Then a shiver of memory crossed his mind, and he remembered where he'd seen those eyes before. The docks... and then the canyon.

Like lightning, Matt's hand flashed out, closing around her forearm with enough force to make her wince. "Where are my men? What have you done with them?"

The woman's eyes filled with tears and his stomach churned. He knew. Swallowing hard, he fought down the urge to vomit. Hadn't he lost enough men over the years to be immune to this pain?

"Only two survive." The woman's soft, sweetly accented voice broke through the haze in his mind.

Two survivors?

"Who?" he demanded sharply, his mind roiling with possible losses and saves. Who had been closest to the blast? He couldn't remember. "Who're the survivors? Where are they?"

"I do not know their names," she said in a softly apologetic tone. "I have not found the time to enquire. They are near and being well cared for."

His eyes narrowed as the ghost of another memory passed across his mind.

"I saw you at the canyon. You had something to do with what happened there, didn't you? *Didn't* you?" His hand closed with bruising strength on her forearm.

Pain shimmered in her liquid eyes as the woman nodded bleakly.

"I did not plant the devices which killed your men, but I am as responsible for those deaths as if I had done so. My crime is in not having been swift enough."

Anger simmered in Matt's eyes. "So, now I'm here. *A prisoner.*" He spat out the hated word. "Do your worst, but you'll get nothing from me."

She yanked her hand away, regret flashing in her eyes. "I want nothing from you, Commander Raleigh."

With that choked declaration, she ducked out of the tent and was gone. The air shimmered in her wake. Matt lay staring at the fluttering door flap, confusion wrinkling his brow. What had she meant? And how did she know his name, let alone a rank he hadn't heard used in nearly six years? Matt scowled. Great. Another mystery.

Three hours passed without a single visitor. As darkness set in, apprehension flooded him. Where was the Arab woman? He'd not seen her, nor heard her musical voice, since her hasty exit earlier. Matt shifted uncomfortably. His wounds pained him, and he was hungry and thirsty. He snorted, forcing his mind from the discomfort. Those were creature comforts, and he'd done without them plenty of times. He'd survived worse in the jungles of Panama and his desert prison in Somalia.

What stung him worse, refusing to be dismissed, was guilt. In the woman's absence, he'd studied what he could of the tent and determined that it was certainly no prison. He lay on a bed of lush pillows, and the ground beside the bed was covered with a beautiful, if somewhat worn, Persian rug. Low, exquisitely crafted pieces of wooden furniture stood at various intervals in the tent. Every piece looked as if it came apart for easy transport. Beauty and practicality surrounded him on all sides.

Matt swallowed back shame. He'd bet his life that this sparse but perfect tent belonged to his equally perfect angel of mercy. Matt felt like a bastard for saying the things he had. He hadn't even thanked her for saving his miserable hide, either.

The sound of shuffling movement outside the tent snapped Matt from his self-recriminating thoughts. He reached for the closest weapon at hand – oddly enough, his own Beretta—and aimed it coolly at the tent flap as the thin material parted. A soft gasp of surprise left the wide-eyed woman who stood paused in the entrance.

## Chapter Four

Matt's hand trembled for the first time in his life as he stared down the gun barrel in numbed relief. The woman recovered first, stepping into the tent with brash assurance to set the tray she carried carefully on one low table. She smiled, a brief, heart-stopping flicker of her lips that made Matt suddenly crave more than he was sure that smile offered.

"I see your reflexes are unhindered by your injury, Commander." Her words held a humorous lilt impossible to resist. "Please, allow me to treat your wounds before you sate your need for vengeance upon my person."

Matt swallowed reflexively, the gun dropping from his suddenly numb hand. He opened his mouth, and then closed it, unable to think of a single reply to her flippant barb. Finally, clearing his throat, he weakly said, "Sorry."

She glanced at him, one dark eyebrow lifted quizzically. "For nearly shooting me, or for *not* doing so?"

Matt cleared his throat again, nervous in spite of himself. "Neither. I was... rude, earlier. I shouldn't have said what I did."

She shrugged as she knelt beside him. The combined movements sent a cascade of silky hair strands swirling onto his bare forearm.

"What is said in the past remains unaltered by more words in the present. Do not apologize for what has already been said. Just remember to think well before you speak in the future."

"Yes... uh... well." Matt felt his throat close as she bent nearer. An exotic, spicy fragrance wafted through his nostrils. She was intoxicating, so unlike the simple women he'd confined himself to in the past. This woman, with her cryptic words and benevolent nature, was an enigma he was certain he would never completely solve if he lived to be older than Methuselah. He forced his mind to another, more pressing, concern. "Where are my men? You said some survived..."



The compassionate gray eyes she turned on him were nearly Matt's undoing.

"As I have already told you, they are near and being very well cared for," she reassured him in her soft, lilting voice. "When you are well enough, you may see them. However," she added, a stern note settling in her tone, "you will not be permitted to wander after darkness settles."

"But you were just..."

"A woman moving about the camp will not get shot. My guards, however, know to shoot any man they see in the camp after dark. It is for our safety."

Matt latched onto a single word. "Safety?"

Heat stained her cheeks a dusty rose color as she ducked her head away. "We are a camp of women and children. The few men who reside within our camp know and understand our rules, and why they must be so. These are dangerous times for a woman, Commander Raleigh."

He studied her averted face for a long moment. Then, in a quiet voice, he sought his first answer to the enigma kneeling at his bedside. "You're not an Arab, are you?"

Her eyes snapped to his face, and then flew away again, before he could read the emotion swirling in their gray depths. "Why would you think that? Are you not in Arabia?"

His half-smile was wry. "That wasn't an answer, lady, and we both know it. Where are you from, originally?"

"Everywhere," she replied firmly, briskly reaching for one of a series of small jars on the tray beside her. "And nowhere."

With a swiftness that startled him, she flipped away the blankets over his chest and peeled away the bandages. Glancing down, Matt frowned. It didn't look so bad, but it had probably been worse when she'd brought him here. Wherever here was.

"Where are we?"

"The desert," she replied tightly, and then smeared a generous measure of stinging ointment over his chest. Matt hissed with pain, drawing a look of mock apology from his nurse.

"Forgive me," she murmured, her voice betraying no emotion. "I did not mean to cause you pain."

Like Hell she hadn't, Matt countered silently. She'd deliberately slathered that hellish stuff over him, and he knew why. She was trying to forestall further inquiry about herself. That ointment, whatever it had in it, stung like a hornet's nest and she'd damn well known it would.

The sharp, stinging scent of it brought involuntary tears to Matt's eyes, and he roundly cursed her for applying it. Her warm touch softened his resolve to hate her, as she expertly smoothed away the sting with small, circular motions that brought a sigh of relief to his lips as his eyes closed. Hazily, Matt wondered how a woman who acted like the very devil could possess an angel's touch. Unbidden, the image of those small, capable hands moving over him assaulted his weary senses. Images of her lips, the slow glide of her hair through his fingers, her warm body against his, wove through the fatigue in his body, re-energizing him. The burning pain in his chest disappeared, replaced by a clawing need so long denied, roused once again by this mysterious beauty kneeling beside him.

Eyes closed, he felt her move to fold the blankets back from his wounded thigh. The answering response of his body was instantaneous, striving for other, more vital contact. Matt heard her tiny gasp, then a soft laugh. His eyes flew open, meeting dark gray pools overflowing with mirth. Her smile was breath-taking, transforming her face from beauty queen to goddess. Those eyes, alight with laughter, pierced the walls around his heart, ensnaring him.

"So, you are human, after all," she teased, laying one hand softly against his bare hip. "I had been led to believe you were invulnerable to human emotion."

Her words snapped him from his randy thoughts in an instant. His look of enchantment melted swiftly into a suspicious glower.

"Just how the Hell do you know so much about me?" Matt demanded, his fists clenching angrily. "I don't even know who *you* are!"

"Sleep," she said quietly, reaching to lay one warm hand on his brow. Instantly, Matt felt the tendrils of sleep closing around him. He fought the sensation, but couldn't withstand the assault of weariness. With a sigh, he succumbed, drifting toward much-needed sleep. As his breathing evened, he felt the woman's soft hand brush over his face and, from the edge of oblivion, heard her murmur, "You will learn the truth when you are strong enough, Matthew, and not a moment sooner."

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*Al-Mawsil residence, Beirut, Lebanon*

Ra'id Al-Mawsil looked up from the *Qu'ran* in his hands as the door opened, admitting a slight frame draped in caftan and *hijab*. A smile touched his face as he tucked the small book into the pocket of his Battle Dress Uniform.

"You honor us with your presence, my dear," he said silkily, smiling into her exotic eyes.

Her *hijab*-covered head lowered briefly. "It is an honor to be here."

"Indeed it is." He gestured toward one of the two chairs in the room. "Please. Sit. Enlighten me."

She nodded again, and her dove-gray eyes twinkled. "I have done as you asked."

He moved quickly to her side. "Sweet Black Widow!" He touched her veiled face with one finger. "Where are they now?"

"In my camp," came the quiet reply. "You will have them soon enough, Ra'id. Do not push me."

He chuckled, taking the chair opposite hers. "I could have them, and your beautiful head, with but a snap of my fingers, of course. What could you do to stop me?"

She smiled sweetly as she let the veil fall from her face. "You could. But then, you would not have me."

With that, she rose smoothly from her seat and crossed the space between them, straddling his lap, even as she slithered free of her caftan. Smiling seductively, she ran her hands over his chest. "And aren't I so much more appealing than a dead man?"

## Chapter Five

*Mukarramma* Manara Binte Alzena frowned as she ducked out of the samite tent and glanced up at the night sky, where bright stars winked down at her. Shivering, she rubbed her arms to ward away the night's chill and glanced toward the tent uncertainly. Looking back to the stars, she sighed heavily, her confusion overflowing.

"This man... *troubles* me, *Inana*," she admitted in a fervent whisper. "He sees no middle ground, no place between reality and belief. I cannot even be certain he would not mock us both if he knew. Why have You chosen to send one such as this? What good can come of it?"

A surge of warmth formed of love and joy spread through her blood, filling her with tingling awareness as a voice deep within her whispered, *Love cannot exist without War, Daughter. Only when Our Sargon walks the temple halls are the two truly united to one cause. Serve Us without question in this, and your service shall be richly rewarded.*

Manara's head bowed in acquiescence, though her lips remained pursed in doubt.

"I hear and obey, *Inana*." No one said she had to be *happy* about it, Manara reminded herself as the rebellious feelings she thought she'd overcome burbled at the edge of her awareness. She'd once demanded of her mother to know why she alone was held from the joys of life. While her friends and age mates had joined the ranks of the temple women, enjoying the fruits of Ishtar's blessing and populating the temple with masses of adorable children, *she* had been strictly confined to the lore of medicines and herbs and the study of noble ways and literature. That she was expected to wait out the best years of her youth, purity intact, for some Chosen King who seemed little more than an ancient legend had been unbearable. To be the Poet-Priestess and unify the power of Ishtar with the Warrior-King had seemed a preposterous explanation. Her mother's assertion that it was the way of things, how it had always been done, had reeked of stagnation and tedium to a younger, more restless Manara. So, foolish child that she had been, she'd run away, only to realize that her life was not her own, had never

*been* her own. Even free of the temple, she could not break the stringent laws to which she had been held. They were the core of her beliefs and her being.

Manara gnawed the inside of her cheek fretfully. Her beliefs. Here was this man, this leader among warriors who bore the sacred mark of Ishtar upon his shoulder, and Manara was afraid. His gruff manner and snarled accusations had stung her to the quick, while his soft eyes, like a clear riverbed, had hinted at a man far removed from the hardened soldier of fortune she had studied in the months prior to his arrival. However, it had been his muttered words, in the throes of pain-induced delirium, which terrified her. This was a man of stubborn, unbending views, and his view did not extend beyond what he could see. He would never understand.

Manara swallowed hard as she moved toward the large temple tent at the camp's center. Whatever else happened, Matthew Raleigh must never learn of her part in the terrible actions that had initiated this meeting between them. That, she was certain, he would never forgive her for.

With a heavy sigh, Manara came to a stop, glancing anxiously back at her tent. She'd spent so much time near Matthew these past few months that she felt a strange hollowness whenever her duties took her away from him. As if she left a part of herself behind.

"You look like a lass with a problem." The deep, accented voice had Manara whipping about in surprise to find herself face-to-face with a mercenary.

He was lounging against one of the low stone walls that formed the only remnants of the abandoned village where they'd set up camp. His dark hair gleamed like crow's wings under the starlight, and his gray eyes were shadowed by both the night and his questions.

"You should not be here," she said quietly. "You were told the rules. No men about after dark."

Those gray eyes narrowed as he straightened. "And if you people would give me a bloody straight answer, I wouldn't be out here."

She took a wary step back, her breath sticking in her lungs. This man was very different from the one sleeping in her tent. Matthew Raleigh was a tormented man with only half of a soul. That, she could handle, even if she didn't quite understand its source. But this giant before her now was a man who had *denied* his soul. He embraced the world of the unseen that Matthew fled, yet this man considered himself already dead and damned. He was both dangerous and perhaps her strongest ally in reaching Matthew's heart and healing his soul.

“What is your name, mercenary?”

His scowl abated slightly. “Peter Talladay.”

Recognition dawned in Manara. This Irishman was Matthew’s right hand. Small wonder, then, that Peter Talladay knew no fear. “And what is it that you wish to be told?”

He drew a deep breath and said, “When we were brought here, there were three of us. Now, there’re only two of us in that hospital of yours, so I figure you’ve got Matt stashed elsewhere. Just tell me if he’s alive and okay.”

Manara smiled as she saw the genuine concern in Peter Talladay’s eyes. Matthew’s mission might be to seek out and destroy evil, but Peter’s destiny was to protect and preserve life. Two sides of the same destiny; already, she could see how they were linked.

“Matthew Raleigh is alive and healing rapidly. If you wish, as soon as he is healed enough to walk on his own I will bring him to you, so you may see his health for yourself, Mr. Talladay.”

A smile crossed Talladay’s face at that, and the radiant light she sensed about him grew blinding. “You do that, lass.”

And, before she could caution him to not return to the hospice unescorted, he was gone. Swallowing hard, she realized the truth of why he had taken the risk of seeking her out after the sun had set. To Peter Talladay, the night held no risks, no dangers. He believed himself a dead man, and the dead have no fear of dying.

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Blood dripped from the woman’s hands, and words as ancient as the stars filled the air, drawing her into her power trance.

“*Maradon Athan, Urasat abd Ereshkigal. Cletuo shatrevat, demomaur helid Husamperos.* Immortal Lord of the Underworld, give me the power to destroy your ancient enemy and visit your wrath upon the world.”

Energy, like a live current of electricity, filled the room and charged the air, and the woman flung her head back, laughing, as she absorbed the humming power. And, eyes closed, she stretched out the fingers of her mind and slowly closed an iron fist around the soul that would never be safe from her.

Matt tossed in fevered dreams, the explosion which had turned his unit into desert particles echoing in his pounding head. And, again, he tasted blood in his mouth, heard shrieking words batter his ears in a language he didn't understand as a dark-faced man in desert camouflage towered over him, raining blows and kicks on his tortured flesh. The sight of men turned to heaps of flesh and bone and the sensation of sweat and jungle rains washed through him. Like a collage of torment, the memories paraded through his dreams repeatedly, running together until he could no longer separate one nightmare from the next. Helpless, he watched his men gunned down, blown apart, and rotted away. He had failed them. His men, his comrades, even his parents.... "No!"

Matt bolted upright in bed, gripped by an unnamed terror that lodged in his gut like a glacier. For a moment, he was disoriented by his surroundings, before reality rushed back over him. He was in the tent of a woman who mystified him, somewhere in the desert, and all but two of his men were dead. Once more, the gripping need to see his men surfaced. The woman hadn't even told him which two men had survived. There had been twelve men in his unit, including the only man Matt had the honor of calling his best friend. Not knowing which men lived was hell.

His expression grim, Matt shifted to rise, only then realizing that he wasn't alone in the bed of cushions. He froze, glancing toward the bed's other occupant. His eyes stopped, riveted, and his breath halted in his lungs. Curled up beside him was a vision made to tempt even the most driven of men.

The Arab woman lay beside him, sleeping with the abandon of a child. Her face, bathed in soft moonlight, was achingly beautiful and touched by a tranquil smile that twisted his gut. Her dark hair, bound up in a single lush braid, looked like spun silk, and he itched to run his hands through it. A few wisps of hair had escaped the braid to run tantalizing lines over her neck and breasts. She was clad in a caftan of some filmy material that left little to the imagination as it clung to peak of breast and swell of hip indiscriminately. In sleep, the flimsy garment had twisted about her, the hem riding up to expose a generous portion of calf and thigh.

Matt gulped in a breath of air infused with her subtle, spicy scent and felt his body react violently. She was a vision, almost unreal in her beauty, awash in moonlight. He licked his lips nervously, unable to recall any reason for this woman to be in his bed. No, he checked himself, *he* was the one in *her* bed. A quick scan of the semi-dark tent confirmed that there was no other bed. He knew,

from long acquaintance with desert conditions, that only a great fool or a desperate man slept on the open sand, with its multitudes of poisonous denizens.

Still, Matt conceded as he studied the woman again, it was disconcerting to have such a beautiful woman sleeping so close beside him. Particularly since he had no right to touch her. Not that she suffered under the same restraints, he acknowledged wryly as she shifted in her sleep, bringing one thigh up to brush and curl against his, snuggling closer to the warmth of his body. A murmur—or was that a whimper?—from her had his gaze flying to her sensual, ripe lips. He imagined tasting those lips, drinking of them slowly, and felt desire spike again. Curbing the inappropriate thought, he watched as she settled after a moment, her eyes fluttering in the depths of REM sleep. Whatever she was dreaming obviously disturbed her, even if Matt's presence in her bed didn't seem to.

"Mother!" The word emerged in a quiet, agonized plea and her head tossed slightly, small lines wrinkling her forehead. Matt's heart constricted at the bleak loss in that single word. Suddenly, she was no longer his captor, and her mystery was no longer one of suspicion. She was a victim. Wrapping his arms securely around her, he soothed her gently.

"Shh," he whispered against the soft hair at her temple, breathing in her drugging scent and wondering if he had truly lost his mind at last. "It's all right, sweetheart. It will be all right."

Her whimpers died away, and she snuggled closer in her sleep. Matt groaned inwardly, cursing himself roundly. He was definitely certifiable. He didn't know this woman. He didn't even know her name, or whether she meant him harm. Yet, as her lips gently nuzzled his collarbone and her hand came to rest on the hard planes of his stomach, every fiber of his being responded with desperate, groveling *need*. He wanted her. Like he had never needed or wanted anything in his life.

Matt grimaced in disgust, clamping down on his runaway libido. Hadn't he left a long enough string of broken hearts and promises? He'd left Sharla literally standing at the altar, for Christ's sake! If any woman had ever deserved his love and commitment, it had been sweet, undemanding Sharla Granger. But he hadn't been able to bring himself to live a lie then, and he certainly wasn't going to repeat that mistake now. Maybe, he mused, it was because he couldn't love. Since Rachel, the only thing he'd ever given a damn about had been his job. He loved the thrill of the hunt, the swift, decisive blow of a silent war. It always made him feel as if he was actually in control of his own fate.



The woman beside him sighed. Her hand drifted up his chest as her lips moved down his shoulder. He groaned inwardly, keenly aware of her thigh resting across his groin and her soft breast pressed warmly against his arm. Whoever she was, this woman was a master of the art of seduction. She was definitely sending all the right signals. Foggily, he replayed the events since he'd first awakened, and it all made a strange kind of sense. Her unabashed observance of his body, her immodesty for a Moslem woman, even her refusal to talk about herself. She had to be a whore!

He'd heard scuttlebutt, back when he'd served with the SEALs, of small moving brothels in the Middle East. They didn't stay in one place long, since Moslem law denounced them, which would account for the tent, and her admittance that the camp was made entirely of women and children. Her soft hand brushed downward, over his abdomen, in a move only a woman with sex on her mind would even think of making. Matt drew a relieved breath. She must be awake, to be making those moves. Closing his eyes, he relaxed, no longer worried about imposing himself on this fiery young woman. She was definitely interested, and she would think nothing of a brief, no-strings liaison, judging by her actions. That thought in mind, Matt let his control evaporate, capturing the woman to himself as he fused his mouth over hers in a kiss meant to exorcise all his lustful demons.

As soon as he began, Matt realized his mistake too late to amend it. This woman might be a whore, but she would never be cheap goods. The taste of her lips was like the sweetest wine, drugging his senses until he could think of nothing except her scent, her touch, her taste. His kiss gentled instantly, and his tongue savored the soft line of her lips until she moaned softly, opening to him like a desert flower given water.

Suddenly, it wasn't enough to hold her or kiss her. He wanted all of her. His need was a primal, savage beast that saw in her its salvation. His hands slid down to her waist, drawing up the length of sheer caftan as they went. In no time, he'd divested her of that single garment, her only piece of clothing.

Her eyes were closed, and her breathing came in panting gasps as she whispered words in a strange, melodic language. Gently, he reached to loosen her long braid, freeing the silky falls as he tangled his hands in her hair, bringing her mouth back to his. He traced the line of her lips again, and worried first her bottom lip, then the top, then dipped inside to taste, drinking in her sweet response, as hesitant as if she'd never kissed before. With a groan that rumbled up from his chest, Matt skimmed his

hands down her bare back as he settled her on him, naked flesh to naked flesh. His hands cupped her bare buttocks, pressing her against him, and he caught her moan in his mouth, feeling her squirm in his arms as if she wasn't sure if she wanted to push him away or press closer. Running his hands back up her sides, he circled her full, rising breasts, drawing her up along his body as he massaged her warm flesh. He transferred his mouth from her lips to her breast, laving her taut nipple with his tongue, and drew a small moan from her as she squirmed again. Her moan turned to a gasp, as his fingers probed the soft delta of her thighs.

Matt's eyes flew open at that sound, most certainly not one of pleasure, as the woman scrambled awkwardly away from him, clutching that ridiculously thin garment in an effort to cover herself. The single word that issued from her lips like an imperial edict plunged Matt into total confusion.

"No."

"No?" He stared at her as if she'd just declared the desert wet. "Lady, I don't know who you are or where you're from, but where I come from, a woman doesn't make moves like you did unless she *wants* something. What did you expect me to do?"

She swallowed hard. "I was...was..."

"Draped all over me, just for starters," he supplied tiredly. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? I thought you wanted it, too. Contrary to some opinions, I can control my impulses. I won't touch you again, if that's what you want."

As much to prove his intent as to hide the proof of his interest in her, Matt rolled to his side, with his back to her, and closed his eyes. Inwardly, he cursed his randy hormones for getting him into this mess. He should've woken her first. Damn it, would he never learn? He could still feel the woman's gaze on him, as palpable as a touch, and his body responded with another surge of desire. Matt clenched his jaw against the almost painful needs spiraling through him, fighting the urge to beg. God help him, he still wanted her, more than he ever should have. More than he'd ever needed anyone. Well, he'd blown that idea all to Hell. And, worst of all, now he'd probably never even learn her name.

"Manara." Her soft voice startled him as it abruptly broke the strained silence of the tent. Willing himself under control, he rolled to look at her.

"Excuse me?"

"My name," she said, her eyes gazing levelly back into his, "is Manara."

“Manara.” He rolled the syllables on his tongue, liking the sound of it. It was soft, mysterious, and altogether feminine, like her. “My name is Matt.”

“I know who you are, Matthew Raleigh,” she said in quiet exasperation. “What I do not understand is how you came to maul me in my sleep!”

“*Maul*...? Jesus Christ, lady!” He snapped, launching himself into a sitting position in spite of the pain that lanced through him at the sudden action. “I. Did. Not. Maul. You. You get all of that?”

She clutched the caftan closer, a frown marring her lovely features. “But... I was asleep! How could I have acted as you said I did?”

He released his breath in a frustrated sound. “I don’t know, but that’s how it happened! I mean, why’re you surprised? I’ve heard of a lot of whores who—”

“*Whore*?” She exploded from the bed, cutting him off, her face engulfed in rage. “How dare you presume to call me by any such name, Commander Raleigh! You toss that label around like filth, and dump it on me like an ill-fitting coat. Is it not your own profession to accept pay for services rendered from he who offers the most? *If* I were a whore, at least it would be my own body I would barter, and not men’s lives! Live with your own sins, *mercenary*. Do not saddle me with them, as well!”

Matt sat frozen, stunned by this impassioned oration from a woman whose words and actions had, until this moment, seemed frugally used. She was glorious in her fury, like some willowy warrior-queen, and power buzzed around her like a live wire, so intense he swore he could actually *see* it. Her dark eyes flashed with a fire that kindled a desire in him vastly different from the lust that had ridden him before. He wanted, more than anything, to know what had brought this willful, breath-taking woman into the middle of the unforgiving desert.

“Who *are* you?” he asked in awe, before he could halt the words. “Why are you out here in the desert? Why, if you have such a low opinion of mercenaries, did you save my life?”

Manara’s eyes lowered. She stood, clutching that thin robe to her breasts, her head bowed as if in prayer. Finally, in a voice so faint he barely heard it, she replied, “Because you were injured, and the fault was mine.” Her eyes rose to meet his then, dark and pleading. “I do not believe you a monster, Matthew. However, what happened...what we nearly did here... it must not happen between us again. I am still... untouched.”

His jaw went slack as her meaning sank in. “You mean you’re...?”

She nodded, glancing away briefly before her eyes returned to his face. “Until now, I have been as pure of a man’s touch as is possible. I was delivered of a woman, by a woman, and raised, tutored, and attended to by women. I may not know a man until the appointed time.”

Suddenly, Matt felt awkward and ashamed, like a randy boy caught peeping in the neighbor girl’s window. Manara’s anger had been entirely justified. He’d called her a whore, when she was a virgin. Why she’d curled into him the way she had was a mystery, but he found, when he examined the events logically, that her actions could have been entirely innocent. In the desert, nights were freezing, and she could’ve subconsciously sought him as a source of warmth, or comfort from her obviously painful dreams. Even now, ramrod-straight at the end of the pile of cushions, she was shivering violently from the cold.

“I’m sorry,” he said apologetically, knowing the words were small consolation. “I promise, you’ll be safe with me. I won’t harm you, or let anyone else harm you. But, please, come back here and get warm. You’ll freeze standing there.”

She eyed him warily as she yanked on her caftan and edged slowly back across the cushions. After a time, she slid beneath the thick blankets, drawing them up to her chin as she lay shivering uncontrollably. She nearly leapt away when Matt drew her close against him, tucking the blankets more securely around her.

“Shh,” he soothed, rubbing her shoulder lightly. “I wouldn’t harm you for the world, Manara. I promise, you’re safe here.”

After several long, tense moments, she finally relaxed against him and drifted off to sleep. Matt sighed, tucking her snugly against himself to add his warmth to the blankets. He had told her the truth. As badly as he wanted her, he wouldn’t harm her for anything in the world. With her quiet admission of innocence, she had bound him more securely to her side than any sexual liaison could ever have. He wouldn’t leave her to this cruel, barbaric world. He would protect her from all the predators that stalked the night, himself included. Yet, the secrets that glimmered in her liquid eyes whenever she looked at him tortured Matt with doubts. Just what did this beautiful innocent have to hide?

## Chapter Six

Ra'id scowled at the woman, naked and supremely smug, on his bed. For the umpteenth time, he halted in his restless pacing, always at the front window, to gaze out on the empty street below.

"You swore they would be here, woman! Where are they?"

The woman smiled languidly, stretching seductively.

"You're too impatient," she purred silkily as she slid across the sheets and rose smoothly from the bed, unabashed in her nudity as she struck a provocative pose. "And far too tense."

He wasn't about to be swayed by her lascivious posturing or suggestive comments. His face turned beet red in rage. "You swore to me on Holy Qu'ran!"

"And I won't be made a liar of." Her seductive mood evaporated as she yanked on her clothes with more force than necessary. "I said *noon*, dammit. I meant that!"

Ra'id glanced at the pocket watch in his hand, his temper unabated, but at least controlled again. "You have two minutes more," he muttered darkly, "and I see no one."

"They'll be here!" Her eyes flashed angrily as she crossed the room to the window. Scanning the surrounding area, she pointed. "There."

Two men, clad in desert BDUs and carrying Uzis, were making their way down the narrow street, each laden with a bulging sack. The woman's tanned face turned toward Ra'id, her eyes glittering triumphantly as her ruby-tinted lips formed a cold, calculating smile. "You'll soon have what you asked for. Now, I believe you have something for me."

Ra'id nodded sharply, his jaw clenched. Walking to a cabinet along the outside wall, he withdrew a small, dark stone disk and a burlap pouch.

The woman's eyes fixed on the items, and she wet her lips greedily. "You're sure they're the right ones?"

His smile was as dark and cold as the grave. “You may inspect them once I have seen my merchandise and verified its authenticity.”

“Verified its...” Angry heat rose in her face, and her eyes turned fiery with rage. “You bastard! I’ve spent half my life and every penny to my name securing those damned tablets! How *dare* you—!”

“I dare because there is nothing to dare,” he cut her off coolly, his gaze unyielding. “You admitted to me, when we first met, that you would do anything to get these.” He brandished the pouch in his hand. “I am not besotted with you, nor am I foolish enough to believe you would never cross me. You want these?” Again, he displayed the items, an icy smile on his face when he saw the naked hunger in her eyes. “You will get them when I am certain you have not crossed me, and not a moment before. If you have played me for a fool...” Ra’id left the threat unfinished, knowing that she could well imagine what her fate would be if she tricked him.

The fury dropped abruptly from her face, though a chill still clung to her dove-gray eyes. “Why would I play you? We’re partners in this. We have to trust each other.”

His answering smile held no warmth. “Partners. Trust. Fine words from *you*, Black Widow, but I trust no one with my mission. Allah has deemed my path, and it is mine alone. I make only a temporary alliance.”

A dark, feline smirk spread over her face as she turned away, and Ra’id would have sworn Black Widow knew something he did not. From an agent of the Brotherhood of Spiders, this was not a comforting turn of events.

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Manara entered her tent on light feet, carefully removing her dark cloak as she moved to stand beside the bed’s sleeping occupant. Soft snores confirmed that he still slept, and a tender smile curved on her lips as she studied him. Matthew Raleigh was a man easy to look upon, even if the weathered lines on his face told a story she didn’t yet understand. Though he unsettled her, his was not a difficult presence to tolerate.

Truth be known, she actually looked forward to the times when her duties permitted her to be by his side. Since the night she’d admitted to being a virgin, he’d been nothing but proper toward her, even

though her heart cried out to be ravished in just such a way again. She wanted him. Manara had no illusions about her physical desires, but she had long since put aside such needs. No matter how much she wanted him, he was beyond her reach. She could not love, or make love with, such a man.

Manara reached to tug the blankets gently back over his bare chest, unabashedly aware that it was merely an excuse to touch him. She stopped, however, as her eyes fell on the thin, crisscrossed lines of the scar on his left shoulder. It was a perfectly shaped four-pointed star, ringed by an equally perfect circular pattern. Almost as if it had been carved there. *He will appear as if touched by the Goddess Herself, and he will do Her bidding in his time.* Manara swallowed hard against the memory of the Temple Oracle's prophesy. Instinctively, her hand went to her neck, where the silver necklace of her station lay, life warm, against her skin. They were a perfect match, her necklace and his scar. Duty and Pain. When she'd first discovered his scar, after rescuing him from the canyon, her reaction had been one of fear and dismay. She was not ready to take up her destiny yet, though she felt it continually pulling at her.

Manara reached to trace a finger lightly over the mark on his skin, feeling the smooth flesh beneath her fingers and the answering curl of desire within her own body. However, desire, she reminded herself with a frown, was not reason enough to cast aside her destiny, no matter how little she might look forward to her duties in the future. She was more than her animal passions, and duty had been drummed into her from the moment of her birth.

Even as the thought crossed her mind, the movement of her fingers slowed to a dreamy, seductive pattern. It would be so easy to give in to him, and so wonderful to finally know for herself what she witnessed so often. But she knew about regrets, even if she was aware that Matthew would not understand her reasons. She could not offer him so little of herself, knowing that he would not be aware that it would only be a night and nothing more. Reluctantly, she moved to withdraw her touch, but a strong, warm hand closed over hers, stilling her. Startled, Manara yanked away, and a gasp escaped her as she looked down into muddy eyes that had turned nearly midnight black with desire.

"Hey," he said softly, his voice clouded with recent sleep. "What's the matter, gorgeous?"

"N-nothing," she said in a shaky voice. "I was... merely wondering how you got that scar."

He reached for her hand, now clenched in her lap, and placed it back over the marred patch of skin. Looking up at her, he smiled gently.

“It’s okay. That’s one of the less painful memories I carry. I got it trying to save people I loved.”

Her head hung, her eyes lowering at the equally strong surge of love and bittersweet agony that radiated from him.

“I...I am sorry,” she whispered, upset that she had caused him more harm.

Matt squeezed her hand lightly. “Don’t be. They would never have asked for or wanted anyone’s pity. They wouldn’t have wanted anyone’s grief.”

She glanced up and saw the misty pride in his eyes. Whoever had earned that respect had been truly special, she knew. “Who were they?”

His gaze was unfocused and his response hoarse. “My parents.”

Manara’s heart clenched at this new common ground between them. Unbidden came flashes of a defiant flight from a temple in Syria, a remorseful return, and regrets. So many regrets. Ashes, blown by the desert winds, scattered in the desert sands. Silently, tears traced her cheeks.

“How... How did they die?” she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper. Inwardly, her heart cried, *please do not let it be the same way!*

Matt had to clear his throat twice before he could speak.

“They died in a car accident, when I was a kid. I should have died, too, except that Mom threw me clear of the car just before it tumbled down the hillside. I must have rolled for quite a ways. I don’t remember much, except struggling to get that car door open, trying to get to Mom. Afterward, the doctors said they cut a chunk of rock from my shoulder and stitched me back up. All I remember is the fire, and Mom screaming.”

Manara started violently, and the memory of a prophetic dream rushed through her. *Fire. Screaming.* Her eyes went to the scar on his shoulder. He had received a brand of courage, a mark of Ishtar’s esteem for his act of selfless love. They had something else in common, then. They had both become orphans through the most destructive elemental force in the world. That much, they shared. But, while he had struggled against unforeseen catastrophe to rescue those he loved, *she* had run from her destiny and failed everyone she claimed to love in an act of selfish rebellion. Manara felt her cheeks burn with shame. He was not the one who ran from change or duty. Matthew Raleigh was not the one unworthy of love.



Suddenly, unable to face him in her shame, Manara leapt to her feet and fled the tent, oblivious to the freezing desert night. She deserved no comfort for her shameful acts; she was unworthy of comfort, honor, or love. She was the worst kind of coward.

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Matt lay staring at the tent flap, his brow wrinkled in concern. Manara confused him. She seemed so fragile, so uncertain and naïve to the ways of the world, yet he saw strength in her eyes that belied her fragility and a world-weariness that wiped away all thought of naïveté. The woman had a core of steel, he was sure of that much. She said nothing so often, revealed nothing but more mysteries. She acted as if she were hiding; yet, she'd stood up to him with righteous pride and fury the other night. Which was the *real* Manara, and how did he get through to her?

Matt shifted impatiently, sighing. He hated mysteries; he lacked the patience necessary to solve them. He was a doer, not an investigator; a man of action, not reason. Manara fascinated him in a way no human being ever had before. Matt wanted nothing more than time he didn't have to unravel a mystery he was deeply afraid to solve. He desperately wanted to know the secrets behind those changeable eyes. Somehow, he had to learn why she kept running from him.

## Chapter Seven

Black Widow smiled eagerly as she emptied the contents of the burlap pouch Ra'id had given her into her hand. Avidly, she studied the thin slivers of metal in her palm. Copper, bronze, gold, and silver. With these four keys, and the obsidian mirror to locate the buried Temple of Atlantis, she had everything the Brotherhood of Spiders needed to bring the five Powers together.

She heard a snort of disbelief from her companion, and looked up into Ra'id's skeptical face.

"I still do not understand why you would want those," he said. "Four slivers of metal and a stone are worth risking your life for?"

Her dove-gray eyes turned cold and her face curled into a scowl. "Does it matter to you?" Her eyes fell to the tablets on his table. "Did you find what *you* wanted?"

Ra'id laughed. "Yes. The manuscripts of Ashurbanipal have revealed the entrance to the last of the heathen temples. Soon, everything will be cleansed of their vile touch!"

As she turned back to her keys, Black Widow smiled coolly. Yes, Ra'id Al-Mawsil would open this Temple for her, but he would find himself a captive, not a conqueror. She needed something to distract the creature in that labyrinth, and Ra'id's little obsession would be just the thing. He'd get rid of that annoying little sister of his and free her path into the Temple. Touching the stone reverently, the woman saw a lifetime of dreams coming true. Once the Brotherhood had all five Temples, the power that slumbered at the core of the world would be theirs to control! Only one man could stop them, now. Black Widow smiled darkly. She'd just have to make certain Matthew Raleigh was disposed of quickly.

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Matt roused to the soft touch of a woman's hands. Groaning, he covered the offending hands with his own, stilling them.

“Manara...”

“Hush,” she interrupted sternly, her fingers probing the flesh on his left side again. “I must examine your wounds again. Infection can start so quickly.”

Matt’s eyes opened then, and he studied her intent features as she examined his wounds, fascinated by the play of light in her eyes. A wry smile inched across his face as he considered the irony of being so casually surveyed by a virgin.

“How is it that a woman who has never slept with a man can look at a man’s anatomy so easily?”

She glanced up at him. “We have shared this bed for a long while, now.”

“Don’t be obtuse. You know what I mean.”

Her gray eyes sparkled with laughter. “I am a Healer, Matthew. It is my duty to care for the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of all who seek me out.” She grinned then, her eyes boldly perusing him. “Seeing and feeling are two separate sensations, Matthew.”

Just the way she said his name had Matt’s blood heating. Viciously, he suppressed a shaft of pure lust and smiled languidly up at Manara. “Seeing is quite nice, as far as I’m concerned.” He reveled in the sight of her rosy blush against all that sandy skin. “Will I live?”

She laughed then, the cascade of musical notes filling Matt with a hunger for more of these moments of simple pleasure. She really should smile more, and laugh more. He would make it his mission to see that she did.

“With my salves and your own stubborn nature, Commander Raleigh, I believe you will be more than adequately healed within the week.”

Matt frowned. “Which brings up another question. How long have I been down?”

Manara shrugged awkwardly, her smile and eyes falling simultaneously. “I... I...”

His glance was sharp with alarm. “Don’t you know?”

She nodded. “Matthew... you must understand... there was so much debris, and you were so injured...”

Matt didn’t like the way this was heading. “You make it sound like I’m dead.”

She swallowed hard and forced her eyes up to his. “Many gave up hope of saving your life, and I prayed so hard for your safe return from that place you had gone, deep inside. I could not reach you, there. There was so much anger, so much pain, so much... so much *hate!*”

She was babbling, Matt decided with shock. What she was trying to tell him eluded his grasping mind.

“*How long?*” He caught her by the shoulders as she shifted away, her eyes averted.

“N-nearly two months.”

Matt went numb, staring at nothing. *Two months.* He *was* dead! Maybe not physically, but officially, he’d ceased to exist. Bile rose in his throat, and he shuddered in dawning horror. He was a dead man walking.

“So it’s over, just like that,” he said darkly. “And,” his eyes fell to his hands, dark with the reality he had never allowed himself to imagine before. In a tight voice, he finally managed, “And no one even came looking.”

Manara glanced away at the pain and bitterness in his voice. She couldn’t tell him how many people had come looking for him, or that she’d turned them all away. She couldn’t explain about the messages, demanding information, which she’d ignored. To do that, she would have to lay open all her sins before him, and she wasn’t strong enough to do that. Hers was, she decided bitterly, the greater betrayal, and she selfishly still needed him.

“The man you were seeking... he is an evil man, yes?”

Matt glanced at her, as if surprised to find he wasn’t alone. His eyes narrowed, then, and she cursed her errant tongue. She’d nearly given away her secret; she certainly wasn’t going to escape the suspicion brewing in his eyes.

“How do you know I was looking for anyone?”

She glanced at him, then away. “The canyon where I found you. There had been many men through there, before you. Digging and covering. I thought.... Perhaps you were looking for those men?”

Matt studied her reactions closely. She seemed sincere. So why did every instinct he possessed tell him she was lying? He sighed, closing his eyes. He had to get out of this tent, have a look around, before he could hope to distinguish the truth from lies.

“How soon can I leave?”

His question startled her, bringing her gaze up sharply. “Leave?”

“Get up, move around. You know,” he said, looking innocently at her.

“Oh.” She relaxed a little. “A few days, perhaps.”

“Great,” he said, shifting in an attempt to sit up. He winced as dull pain throbbed in his side and leg, grateful for Manara’s warm, capable hands as she helped him into a sitting position.

She smiled at him. “There. You are certainly improving. Now, if you do not object, I have some work to do.”

He nodded, watching her rise from his bedside. He was mildly surprised when she didn’t leave the tent, as he’d expected she would, moving to sit on a low stool beside a table where various chunks of what looked like clay bricks were scattered.

Matt sat watching Manara as she bent over the thin clay bricks. Her head tilted slightly to the left, spilling dark hair down the right side of her body, and her bottom lip was caught lightly between her teeth. A small smile tugging at his lips, Matt took this opportunity to really study her.

Her beauty was breathtaking, completely lacking in artifice. Her face was softly oval, with exotically high cheeks and ears tantalizingly delicate beneath dark strands of hair. Small golden rings glinted from the lobes, reflecting sunny flashes of light against the warm hollow of her neck. Her features were evenly spaced and classically beautiful. Her nose was dainty, her eyebrows thin and delicately arched. Her eyes were large and the dark, impregnable gray of smoke, sparkling with flashes of light, and midnight lashes fell long and thick against her skin. Her only apparent acquiescence to cosmetics were the dark smudges of kohl she applied to her lashes each day, though even that seemed done more of habit than vanity. A tiny, star-shaped mark next to the crease of her right eye was the only marring of her features, but its presence added to the mystique of her beauty, enhancing her appeal. Her lips were full and sensual and, like her eyes, a good indicator of her emotions. His gaze fixed avidly on those lips, remembering their softness and sweetness, and desire stirred deep in his belly.

Matt’s gaze moved on, to her slender neck and delicate shoulders. Her body was softly curved beneath that nearly sheer dress she wore. Hers wasn’t the thin, fragile beauty of a model, but a fuller, womanly figure Matt found hard to resist. She was athletically fit, but still soft and womanly, and the combination turned him on like nothing ever had. He shifted slightly to ease the discomfort of a desire he couldn’t slake. She was a virgin, and she had made it quite clear to him that she had no desire to be

otherwise. And, since Matt had always believed in the right of a human being to make his or her own choices, he couldn't very well violate her choice, no matter *how* she made him feel.

Matt shifted again with a small groan, causing Manara's head to lift from her study. Immediately, she was by his side, her knowledgeable fingers examining his wounds.

"Are you in pain, Matthew? Where do you hurt?"

*Nowhere you'd be willing to help*, he acknowledged wryly, even as he reached to remove her hands from his body. "Manara, I'm fine. You can't be jumping up at every movement or sound from me. I was just... thinking. I didn't mean to disturb you."

She smiled shyly, withdrawing her hands from his. "It is my duty to care for you, Matthew."

He didn't want to hear about duty. Shifting his eyes to the table, he changed the subject. "Do you mind if I ask what you were studying?"

Her smile blossomed. "Of course not!" Rising, she moved back to the low table, scooped up the clay slab and returned to his side. "These are medical texts."

"*These* are medical texts?" he asked as he took the slab she held out, studying the series of wedge-shaped characters on it. "And I thought Latin was bad!"

She laughed, and then sobered as her hand gently touched the clay tablet. "These are very special texts. Very few survive like this, today."

He nodded, impressed. His mother had been an antiquities professor, and he'd grown up with an appreciation of history's rare and precious treasures. "I've never seen anything like it. What language is it?"

Manara's hand traced a line of characters. "This is Sumerian. It is an ancient language, virtually lost today. Only my people keep it alive, passed from mother to child."

He was intrigued. "Can you teach me?"

She shook her head. "We do not teach our language to outsiders. Our laws forbid us to speak the ancient language to any but each other. If I taught you, you would be unable to leave. Ever."

Matt looked into her solemn eyes, her beautiful face, and thought that being near her everyday didn't seem like that much of a hardship. Gently, he reached out to smooth her silky skin with his fingers, cupping one hand against her cheek as he said, "To be near you, it would be worth it, Manara."

Her eyes met his, full of shock, and she'd never looked more beautiful than she did with that stunned expression on her face. As she yanked her gaze away, the faint tinge of a blush creeping over her cheeks, Matt swallowed hard. What was it about this woman that touched him so easily? He'd never offered to give up his freedom, before; he'd never met anyone worth that sacrifice, until now.

"It would be an empty trade, Matthew," she whispered hoarsely, struggling to make him understand. "One you would quickly grow to resent. You are of the outside world, a part of upheaval and changing alliances, while I was raised within closed walls, unaware anything existed beyond them. I have duties which forbid me what you know intimately, in both love and violence." She looked up again, her eyes pained. "You would gain nothing and grow to hate me, Matthew. I cannot allow you to do that."

She shivered as he enfolded her in his arms, drawing her against the warm, solid wall of his chest.

"I already have nothing, Manara. I'm a dead man walking."

With those murmured words, he angled his head and captured her mouth in a kiss he couldn't have halted had he tried.

Manara's eyes widened in shock at the first touch of his lips, then closed on a soft sigh as the kiss deepened, sending her entire reality reeling. All the cosmos opened before her in Matthew's tender assault, and no sensation had ever felt so right in her entire life. With a sigh of pure pleasure, she melted against him, her hands coming up to explore his chest even as she felt his hands along her back and sides. Then, as realization of what she was doing broke over Manara, she pulled away, breaking his grasp and retreating to the far edge of the bed.

"Matthew, we cannot..."

He frowned, then sighed, nodding. "All right, Manara. For now." His eyes raked over her, each heated glance searing her with longing. "But mark my words; one day, I'm going to find a way through that damned wall of yours."

And, with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, Manara knew she was hearing the voice of prophecy. Matthew Raleigh was the only man alive with the power to breach her defenses, and she just

wasn't ready for the assault. She was, she decided with a tremble, more terrified by that quiet statement than she would have been by any violent threat to her life.



## Chapter Eight

It had been over a week since he'd awakened, and other than the couple of hours a day when Manara helped him walk around the confines of tent to rebuild his balance, he was still stuck in this damned bed! Matt stirred restlessly, chaffing at the physical restrictions that kept him bedridden most of the time. He wasn't used to this inactivity, and he detested being wounded. It reminded him of prison, and he had a severe aversion to that particular memory. Looking over at Manara, calmly reading one of her clay tablets, he scowled. He envied her that serenity and how comfortable she looked with stillness. He hadn't been able to sit still long enough to read more than a few pages in years. Ever since Muqdisho.

"What's your secret?" he asked suddenly, breaking the silence between them for the first time in hours. Manara started, and then glanced over at him with a carefully schooled look that didn't manage to hide her moment of terrified panic from him.

"What secret?"

He smiled disarmingly, even as he wondered what had put that panic into her gray eyes. "How can you sit still like that? I don't think I've ever seen anyone sit quite that still before."

A sad smile flitted across her face. "It took a long time and a lot of pain to learn. I was once very restless. In fact, I once ran away from home because I was bored and angry with my life." Her eyes fell. "That was only the first of many mistakes."

Her grief and pain were almost palpable, and Matt had to clear his throat against the sudden tightness of emotion in his chest. He shifted, uncertain why her words had affected him so deeply, but anxious to take away her anguish. Awkwardly, he changed the subject.

"More ancient medical texts?"

Her eyes rose, bemused, before following his gaze to the clay tablets. It was grateful relief that flashed across her face before she smiled and shook her head.

“No. These are legends which my mother...” The flash of sorrow was back, then swiftly and deliberately swept away. “She passed these on to me. They are ancient tales, some of the greatest to ever be written.” She lifted one, which appeared to be only the bottom half of a tablet, its upper edge jagged and broken. “This is one of the legends of Sargon.”

He offered her a wry smile and a lifted eyebrow. “It appears incomplete.”

She nodded. “The first half of the legend of Sargon’s Adoption has been taken away by archaeologists who sought only treasures and had no idea what they held. Fortunately, they are not aware that this half still exists.”

The shaft of desire that stabbed through him as he watched her hands moving lovingly over the clay tablet disconcerted Matt, and he found himself wishing she’d touch *him* that way. Suppressing the inappropriate urge, he asked, “So, who was Sargon?”

Her eyes lingered on the tablet, though Matt suspected she knew the tale by heart.

“Sargon was the first True King of Mesopotamia. As a young man, he lost all that he held dear. He wandered, lost, in the open desert, for nearly a moon’s phase. Eventually, he stumbled into Ishtar’s sacred gardens. Sargon was a man easy to look upon, and soon captured the attention of Ishtar with both his beauty and his courage. She took upon Herself his tutelage in all things concerning battle and law, and in time became so taken with him that She adopted him as Her own beloved son.”

The open adoration in Manara’s eyes and voice as she recounted the scrap of mythology filled Matt with restless frustration. If only she would look at *him* that way, speak to *him* in that tone of voice.... Instead, she treated him to her fear and denial, while the name of a centuries-dead corpse, *if* this Sargon had ever even existed, gained pure, devoted love from her.

“Sounds like a real prince of a guy,” he said bitterly, turning his head away and effectively ending the conversation. He heard Manara’s confused murmur and was glad he couldn’t hear the words. Closing his eyes, he struggled against the unfamiliar beast of jealousy. What was happening to him? He’d never been jealous a day in his life! None of his liaisons had ever given him a moment’s bother—not even Christiana, who had flaunted her infidelity during their year and a half relationship. He’d just shrugged it off, completely unconcerned where she spent her time, or with whom. Yet this beautiful, mysterious virgin—the antithesis of everything he’d ever sought in a woman—had turned him inside out in just a few short days, leaving him aching and possessive. Maybe, he mused inwardly, Sharla had been

right. Maybe he *did* only want what he knew he couldn't have. If that was true, then he was in very big trouble, Matt realized, swallowing hard. This past week had taught him that Manara was a woman who could not be possessed. Even if she eventually did give into him on the physical level, he knew, with a sinking feeling, that on a level he didn't even understand, Manara was far beyond the reach of the likes of Matthew Raleigh.

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The Black Widow stood with her back pressed to the cool wall, a sardonic smile on her face as she watched Ra'id examine his most recent prize—the second batch of tablets the Brotherhood had secured from the British Museum. With a calculating gaze, she assessed him, trying to see what the Brotherhood of Spiders saw of use in this man.

Ra'id was handsome to a fault and charismatic to boot—qualities many men had. Except it wasn't simple charisma behind those dark eyes. Her smile turned cold as she studied his face closer. In Ra'id, beauty and charisma were a lethal mix. Had she needed proof, those poor idiots milling about in the courtyard would have been it. The force of his personality and his passion ensnared them, and they were willing to die for whatever cause he extolled. The sign of a true leader.

Leader! She scoffed inwardly at the mere thought. Ra'id was as dim-witted and easily led as those sheep in the courtyard! He honestly believed his visions to be a mandate from Allah! She would have laughed had Ra'id not been so nearby. What would the God of Abraham want with the contents of Ashurbanipal's priestly library? The mere thought would be sacrilege to a true Moslem or Jew!

The woman allowed herself a scornful smirk. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, Ra'id Al-Mawsil and his little *Jihad* were frauds. His holy war had its roots not in the laws of Islam, but in something very different and millennia older. And, if she completed her own mission correctly, Ra'id would soon find himself at the heart of a cleansing storm meant to bring a power into the world that only a god could hope to control!

## Chapter Nine

Matt winced as he carefully put weight on his right leg, testing it, before leaning on the cane Manara had given him. He turned his head to smile at his dubious nurse.

“You should not be up, yet,” she said, her expression morose. “I told you it was too soon, but you do not listen.”

Matt smiled at the censure in her voice, reaching out with his free hand to catch hers lightly. “I know. But I’m a horrible patient, and I needed the fresh air.”

Manara’s mutinous expression had Matt battling his desire to pull her soft curves against him and taste those petulant lips again. He groaned inwardly, turning his eyes quickly away. The past two weeks had been more torturous than the three months he’d spent getting beaten to a pulp in Somalia. Matt sighed, all too aware of why he’d needed this freedom. Watching Manara move around the tent and feeling her gentle, capable hands on him tested the limits of his control severely. However, it was the nights, with her soft warmth cuddled trustingly against him, which nearly drove him insane with need. Matt swallowed hard, viciously suppressing a shaft of longing so sharp it sliced deep into his soul. Since when did he even want to be entangled with a complex woman? He liked his women tough and easy, simple, or at least with simple desires; nothing which extended beyond a single night. His only two lengthy relationships in the past had been built on the understanding that his heart wasn’t part of the bargain. Yet, just a week ago, he’d offered to give up everything for this woman. In cool reflection, he couldn’t believe he’d been so impulsive. She wasn’t his type.

*Besides*, Matt reminded himself harshly, *she’s hiding something*. For all he knew, she could be just like his foster mother.

Matt snorted derisively at his own thought. As hard as he tried, he couldn’t picture gentle, compassionate Manara ever hurting anyone. After all, hadn’t she called herself a healer?

Get a grip, he commanded himself with a scowl. She saved your sorry ass, so of course you want her. It's all mental.

But it sure as hell didn't *feel* mental, he conceded as his gaze riveted upon Manara's gently swaying rear as she started toward the tent where she'd said his men were. His mind might believe it was time to say thanks and good-bye, but his body had other ideas, all of which involved getting Manara naked and into his arms.

By the time they reached the billowing cotton pavilion at the camp's center, Matt was scowling from his effort to control his unruly libido. Manara cast him a worried glance before ducking through the entrance, and Matt forced his expression blank, wishing he could do the same to his heart, before following her inside.

Inside the tent, Matt stopped, his eyes wide in surprise. There were dozens of people of all ages laying on reed pallets along the walls and moving slowly through the large tent. Confused, he looked to Manara for an explanation. "What...?"

"This," she gestured around them, "is our hospice. Here, we care for the sick and wounded, regardless of their nationality, religion, or status."

"We?" Matt latched onto that word, then its meaning, as he watched a group of white-clad women moving among the wounded and infirm.

She nodded. "My women are very skilled at the healing arts. They attend to the people who come here. I aid them, when they have need of me."

"Amazing," he murmured, then glanced at Manara again. "Why wasn't I brought here?"

She glanced away, frowning. "There were... complications. Restrictions. I was the only one able to care for you."

She was lying; he'd bet his life on it. However, studying her distant expression, he realized that it wasn't worth the battle to find out why. She had saved his life. Let her keep her secrets, for now.

"*Mukarramma!*" One of the women was waving as she hurried toward them. As she reached Manara's side, she began jabbering in a language Matt didn't understand. It sounded a little like Arabic or Hebrew, but he didn't catch a single word he understood, though something in him recognized the cadence. Manara answered the woman calmly, and then turned to Matt with an apologetic frown.

“Forgive me, Matthew. I know I said I would take you to your men, but Shahdi needs my aid. If you want to wait here...”

He could, but some rebellious part of him didn’t want to let her go so soon. “Do you mind terribly if I tag along? I’d like to see you in action.”

She nodded her acquiescence, then followed the petite woman she’d called Shahdi toward a pallet set off to one side by itself. The pallet’s occupant was a girl, looking about only five or six, with eyes like death. Matt gazed at the child, feeling his heart constrict. Her face bordered on translucent, and her limbs were little more than skin and bone. She looked fragile, as if a mere jostle would shatter every bone in her tiny body. Her stomach was distended, and her face was lined and sagging in a manner more common to the elderly than the young.

“What’s wrong with her?” he asked Shahdi as Manara knelt beside the pallet and addressed the child in a soft voice.

“She has bilharzia, *Sayyid*,” Shahdi replied quietly. “Very advanced. Only *Mukarramma* can save her now.”

“*Mukarramma*?” Matt tested the unfamiliar word on his tongue. It sounded suspiciously like a name.

Shahdi nodded vigorously. “She has the Gift. She alone can save this child.”

Matt’s eyes settled on Manara, and a strange sense of *déjà vu* hit him. Whatever the title meant in her own language, it changed everything he knew about Manara. What had Sharla once told him? Names had power. Watching Manara now, he had to admit that was true. The woman kneeling beside the child’s pallet was a very different one from the innocent who slept at his side every night. A sense of command, an aura of complete capability and otherworldly strength, radiated from this woman. The woman who slept beside him was fragile and soft. This one was strong and controlled. Which was the real Manara and which the illusion?

A prickling sensation began at the base of his skull as he watched Manara’s hands float in the air above the child’s abdomen. Something was happening, and he didn’t like it. As his gaze fixed on her hands, then her face, he thought he saw light billow from her skin like a bright cloud, and his mind whirled away into another time and place.

The blonde woman looked up, her face and hands glowing red under the candlelight and her dove-gray eyes wild and unfocused. He stood frozen in the open doorway, horror and fear washing through him in waves as her gaze fixed on him. She laughed, the sound screeching in the stillness, broken only by the drip of blood from her fingertips to the floor.

“Matthew, darling, come and kiss me hello,” she sang out in a sweet, sinister voice. “Surely a big, strong boy like you isn’t frightened by a little blood.”

Matt wrenched himself from the memory with a shudder, drawing a deep breath and closing his eyes against the taste of bile in his throat. That was the past, and it was where Rachel Murray belonged, he told himself sharply. Whatever Manara was doing, it couldn’t possibly have any connection to Rachel’s depravity, could it?

Manara was rising from the floor, wiping her hands on the edge of her skirt, when Matt looked toward her again. She glanced at him, and the weariness shimmering in her dark eyes was almost more than he could bear. Whatever she had done had taken something out of her, something precious. That was all the answer he needed. She was only hurting herself. Reaching out, he caught her as she wavered unsteadily.

“What’s wrong?”

She smiled tiredly at him, giving her head a little shake. “I am just tired, Matthew. I will be fine in a moment.”

She took a breath, then a step, and nearly collapsed. Only Matt’s strong arms and quick reflexes kept her upright. Immediately, white-clad women surrounded them, all chattering in that melodious language he had heard earlier. Manara brushed away their concerns gently but firmly, her expression unyielding. Taking another deep breath, she stepped away from Matt again. She swayed ominously, then seemed to settle into herself and smiled reassuringly. The women eyed her dubiously, but Matt noticed that none of them seemed inclined to argue the point with her. Well, they might not, he decided darkly, but he sure as hell would!

“What happened?” he demanded as she turned to face him. “The truth, this time.”

Manara looked up into Matthew’s scowling face and knew she could not evade him this time. This was the face of the Warrior-King, and he would brook no untruths from her. Swallowing, she

looked into the roiling depths of the mighty Tigris, and knew she must either leap or flee. And if she fled? Manara sucked in a sharp breath as she remembered her moment of staggering weakness. If she fled him, she would face the demon that awaited her alone. With a drained sigh, she accepted her only course and leapt headlong into the tumult.

“Come,” she said quietly, looking into his eyes. “You asked where we were. You will know that first, and then the rest.”

Manara moved slowly through the camp, forcing her leaden feet to continue through sheer force of will. Weariness ate at her, but she knew this trip was a vitally important first step toward truce between her and Matthew. For her people’s sake, and her own, she would have that truce. Up until the moment he’d looked down at her with that tumultuous, muddy gaze, she had harbored doubts that this overly disciplined American was the one they’d been waiting for. Even his kisses and caresses had spoken of controlled emotion. But in the hospice, that fury had been free, violent, and focused directly at the wall of lies she had built between them. Now, she was sure, and now she must clear away the rubble of that wall and begin to build a bridge of truth. She only prayed he would trust her once it was completed.

“Where are we going?” Matt’s sudden query broke the silence that had hung between them.

“You wished to know why I rescued you from that gorge, yes?”

He shot her a surprised look. “Why explain it now? You’ve been denying me that, among other things, for nearly two weeks now.”

The sharp hurt in his tone stopped her, and she turned to face him fully. “I know I have not answered all of your questions, but I am trying. What else have you asked of me that I have not provided?”

His eyes took on a languid, heated look as intense as his fury had been but moments ago.

“You,” he said quietly, one hand reaching to trace the line of her face.

Manara jerked away, her heart hammering. “I have told you—”

“I know what you said, I heard it quite well. But I want to know why. I want to know when.”

“This is not a game, Commander Raleigh, and I am not a prize to be won,” she said, holding onto her resolve with trembling tenacity.



“It’s not a game for me, either, sweetheart,” he murmured, his eyes narrowing as he reached to finger a silky strand of her hair. “If it was, what you told me would have long since ended it. But I can’t end it, Manara. I can’t stop wanting you.”

Her breath clogged in her throat as she fought to keep herself from drowning in his muddy eyes.

“You promised....” she pleaded in a hoarse whisper as he stepped closer.

“I promised you’d be safe with me,” he said in that same sensual murmur as he drew her against himself. “And you are. Perfectly.”

Only, safe wasn’t how she *felt*, Manara thought as Matthew’s lips settled over hers in a kiss that defied sanity. She felt more alive, dizzy, and needy than she had ever felt in her life, but never had she felt less certain of her safety.

His lips were moving softly over hers, yet she could taste the barely-restrained hunger in his kiss, and something in her thrilled to that danger, bringing her alive with a gasp that was neither pleasure nor pain, but both intertwined. She longed to explore this realm he had opened with a desire that gnawed at her heightened awareness. Yet, she knew she could not step beyond that threshold. Not yet, and certainly not with him. Gently, she placed a hand on his chest and eased herself away from him.

“Matthew,” she said his name in a whisper that spoke every emotion in her soul. “We cannot do this. *I* cannot do this. Not yet.”

He shoved one hand through his thick, dark hair, frustration flashing in his eyes.

“You’re playing with fire, Manara,” he snapped testily. “You and your little camp are an open target for terrorists, and I promise you, no terrorist is going to stop long enough to even listen to your protests. I hope you realize what could happen...”

She regarded him gravely. “Not to me.”

“That’s what every innocent thinks. Manara, don’t be naïve. It *can* happen.”

“Not to me,” she maintained firmly. “It would not be allowed. I was spared the brutality inflicted on my... people. I know I am protected.”

He sighed. “All right. But I want you, Manara, and no matter what you say, I know you want me, too. How long do you think you can deny this?”

She bit her lip. “It must not happen. It *will* not happen.”

“It almost happened last week, Manara.”

She nodded, but said nothing. She could not give him the power of knowing that he was the only man against whom she had no protection. Only her own strength of will shielded her from him, and it was fraying dangerously under his gentle insistence and passionate kisses.

“Please,” she finally said, hating herself for the plea she heard in her voice, “Please respect my need to remain pure. I must be able to trust you.”

He sighed heavily, drawing her gently into a loose embrace. “It may kill me, Manara, but I *am* trying.”

She smiled softly as she pulled away. “Thank you. Now, come. There is much for you to see.”

Matt followed her until she stopped at the edge of the camp, gesturing.

“There.”

She watched his eyes widen as he followed her pointing finger and heard the muttered oath that flew from his lips. Matthew knew as well as she that those patrol units moving in the distance meant danger for both of them.

“Whose army?” he asked in a hushed voice.

“We are currently camped less than one day’s journey from the border of Iraq.” At his startled look, she added, “On the Syrian side of it.”

He spun to face her, challenging her with his expression. “You can’t mean to cross that border!”

“I most certainly do.”

“How? Unless you have an army stashed somewhere that I don’t know about...”

“Look there,” she said, pointing toward the camp’s perimeter where a group of women in the well-known “chocolate-chips” of desert warfare patrolled the camp, M-16s slung from their shoulders and their chests crossed with bandoliers.

“And there.” She pointed toward the hospice, where more women stood guard. “They are my army. Each one has been trained from birth to fight and die in protection of these people.”

His face was a mask of horrified disbelief that nearly made her cringe. “I don’t care if they’re trained SEALs, lady. A camp full of women and children crossing a border are easy targets. Those guys,” he flung an arm toward the border, “will slaughter you all on sight!”

She nodded gravely. “They would, indeed, if we attempted to cross in broad daylight and all at once. I intend no such stupidity.”

His jaw tightened. “How many, and when?”

She shook her head. “That, I will not tell you. No one except myself knows that.”

He stared at her as if she’d taken leave of her senses. “And what’s on the other side of that border that’s worth risking your life for?”

Her eyes met his, unflinching, as she came up against this next desperate truth. He sought that truth now, and she would not back away from him again. “Home.”

He blinked, the color draining from his face and mistrust brewing in his eyes. “You’re Iraqi?”

She laughed bitterly. “Iraqi? No. My people distinguish no such border. This is Mesopotamia, and it belongs to us, not these narrow-minded fanatics and their sheep. Now, shall we go find your men, so you may assure yourself they are alive and well, before I answer the rest of your questions?”

With that, she headed back for the hospice pavilion, leaving a bemused and troubled Matthew no choice but to follow.

The abrupt change in Manara when he’d asked if she was Iraqi had startled Matt. Her sudden reluctance to talk at all grated on his nerves. How could a woman who smelled so good and fit him so perfectly be so cold? She was a walking contradiction. Usually, Matt avoided women, or anyone for that matter, like her. He’d never liked mysteries or riddles, and his rule of thumb was that anyone who had something to hide meant him harm and was best avoided.

So why was he so fascinated by this woman? She was beautiful, sure. Breathtakingly, drop-dead gorgeous. However, he’d walked away from models and beauty queens without even a backward glance. She was sweet and gentle, yeah. But Sharla had been that and more, and he’d abandoned her when he realized how much she really cared. He hadn’t been able to care.

There was something else about Manara, and it drew him in a way he almost resented. Manara had a radiance unlike any woman he’d encountered, a wellspring of pure, burning light that drew him like a moth to a flame. And, for the first time in his life, he wanted nothing more than to solve the mystery behind this woman’s eyes. Matt sighed heavily as he limped along behind her, leaning on the cane. He hoped he wasn’t setting himself up to get what was left of his heart broken.

“So, what does *Mukarramma* mean?” he asked as he finally caught up to her.

She stiffened, casting him a sharp look. “Where did you hear that?”

“Shahdi, at the hospice. She called you *Mukarramma*.”

Manara relaxed then, shrugging as if the word meant nothing to her. He happened to know quite the opposite. “It is a title. Something I was given because of my Gifts.”

This was dangerous territory he was heading into, the memory of Rachel flashing through his mind. But Matt knew that he had to ask. He couldn’t stand the uncertainty of not knowing.

“Your, ah, *gifts*... what are they? Where do they come from?”

She glanced at him again, her dark eyes unreadable, but concern mirrored in the lines of her face and the slant of her brows. “I have the Gifts of Healing and Prophecy. They have always been mine, for as far back as I can remember. Why do you ask?”

He swallowed hard, and then opened his mouth to explain. To his surprise, the words refused to come out. They froze in his mind, and he knew he couldn’t tell her why he couldn’t believe in her gifts. He couldn’t harm this innocent by implying that she’d bought her abilities in the blood of others. He couldn’t even tell her about Rachel, or that he’d forgotten how to believe, or trust, in anyone. He’d forgotten, a long time ago, how to follow. But she wouldn’t understand, so he clamped his mouth shut on words that remained locked in his head, and his eyes went cold and dark.

Manara watched the tortured cascade of emotions flood his face, the pain that bubbled to the surface of his eyes, and knew. This man had suffered torments more horrible than death, ravages more costly than the most debilitating disease. Somewhere, in some other time, someone had stolen a piece of his soul. The eyes she looked into had gone cold and hard, reflecting only empty horror and pain, things even her Gift of Healing could not soothe away. He walked a dark path that only he knew, and only he could find his way back. She could not help him, but she could understand. Sadly, she recalled her friend, Hope MacKenzie, and realized that this man shared her friend’s world-weariness. And, like Hope, Matthew Raleigh chose to confront the demons of others, rather than facing his own. Reaching out, she touched her fingers softly to his cheek.

“It is all right, Matthew,” she whispered, her own voice thick with emotion. “You do not have to tell me, now. When you are ready to speak, I will be there to listen.”

Under her touch, the coldness left his eyes. Her words softened them as well, and cleared the pain from his face. Glumly, he nodded. “Sorry.”

“Come,” she said with a hesitant smile, lacing her fingers through his as she began slowly walking again. “Your men are as anxious to assure themselves you still live as you have been to see them.”

As she heard his muffled footfalls in the sand behind her and felt his hand wrap securely around hers, Manara buried the sting of pained tears behind a shaky smile. Matthew Raleigh must learn the value of peace, before he would ever be content in the role he was chosen to bear. She only prayed that she could teach him to trust her, before the dark secrets in his soul severed her from him forever.

## Chapter Ten

“Matt! Damn good to see you, man!”

Matt’s throat tightened at the exuberant greeting from the normally-reserved Trevor Watkins as the lanky black man hopped up from his pallet to grasp Matt’s shoulders in welcome. Matt forced a smile to his lips, wondering why he’d ever doubted one of the survivors had been Watkins. The man gave an all-encompassing meaning to the term “too tough to kill.” A former Delta Force operative, Trevor Watkins was a hardened veteran of more than a dozen armed conflicts and insertions, and Matt breathed a sigh of relief to see that he’d apparently come through this one reasonably unscathed, thus far.

“It’s good to see you, too,” Matt replied with fervor, returning Trevor’s broad grin. Then, as he turned to the tall, dark-haired man who sat, cross-legged and silent, on the next pallet, Matt felt tears sting his eyes.

“Pete.” The name rasped in his throat. He’d feared, from the moment he’d heard that terrible explosion, that he’d finally lost his best friend to the Banshee Peter had escaped once.

Peter Talladay’s eyes opened, and the slow grin that wreathed his merry features sparkled most fiercely in his laughing gray eyes. A scar, new since Sidon, bisected the man’s face from his right temple to his jaw. Matt winced to see it, aware of how painful it must have been.

“Well, now,” he drawled in his inimitable Gaelic brogue, “seems the beasties in these parts found you a tad too tough to chew, lad.”

Matt laughed, blinking away the tears that threatened to fall as he clasped Talladay’s hand in a firm handshake. “I guess they did, at that. How are you guys doing?”

Trevor shrugged nonchalantly. “I’m copasetic, boss. I was driving the last jeep, so I didn’t even catch shrapnel. I would have been fine, except I got debris dropped on me when I was searching for

survivors. I must've been pinned under that shit for a good three ticks before a sweet little angel lifted it away and dug me out."

Matt cocked one eyebrow skeptically, even as the memory of a sun-lit angel flashed through his mind. "Angel, huh? Sure you weren't hallucinating?"

"No." Trevor's face was set, unsmiling. Glancing at something behind Matt, he smiled and pointed. "There. There's my angel, boss."

Matt glanced over his shoulder, and the blood drained from his face. Kneeling beside a young woman's pallet was Manara, a compassionate smile spread on her ripe lips. He knew she'd been at the canyon, but... the image of dark hair and billowing white wings flashed deep in his mind. It couldn't have been her!

"Manara?" he asked, praying Trevor would deny it.

"Is that her name?" Trevor asked curiously, his speculative gaze resting on Matt's bloodless face. "She never said a word. Just smiled pretty-like and set me in the jeep next to this guy here." He thumped Talladay on the shoulder. "He was pretty fucked up, I remember. Compound fracture on the right arm and a nasty gash on his face and neck."

Matt's eyes flew to his friend and he studied the man's face again. "Bad?"

Peter shrugged. "I'm still livin', aren't I?"

Trevor's face was somber as he muttered, "You scared the shit out of me, Matt. I saw you, when she put you in that jeep. There wasn't anything left that wasn't bloody or bleeding. I was sure you were a goner, but when I tried to ask, she just gave me this look like she was Jesus Christ or somethin', and I wasn't about to argue with her after she'd saved my ass." Trevor shuddered at the memory. "It was really weird, boss. She never said a word, but she had this real strange look on her face the whole time. When we got here, she turned us over to some other women. They were all jabbering something about funerals and stuff, but she just turned that look on them, then climbed back in that jeep and took off, you still in there. Never said a word about you, either, until Pete confronted her the other day. Man, you had us both freaked! We were sure you were dead, but nobody was saying anything!"

Matt studied Trevor, stunned. This was the most he'd ever heard the usually silent Watkins say at one time, and... his gaze shifted to Talladay. This was the most sedate the normally verbose and

demonstrative Irishman had ever been in the decade Matt had known him. What the happy hell was going on around here?

“You two are aware that we’ve probably been officially declared dead, aren’t you?”

“Aye,” Talladay said quietly, his gray eyes fixed sightlessly on the sandy floor at his feet.

Worried, Matt moved to crouch next to his friend, laying one hand on the other man’s shoulder.

“Pete? What is it, man?”

Talladay’s sharp gray eyes lifted again, the characteristic spark of laughter eerily missing from them as they fixed on Matt’s with penetrating directness.

“This is the endgame, Matt. Only dead men can go where we’re about to. Pardon me if bein’ Bean Si bait don’t thrill me.”

Talladay’s piercing gray eyes held no condemnation, only resignation, and even a little fear. Peter Talladay harbored no illusions that his future would be anything more than a shadow of his past, or that he’d escape it alive. Unable to face that stark reality, Matt turned his eyes away and cleared his throat, glancing toward Trevor.

“Have you guys had a chance to do any reconnaissance, yet? What do you know about this place?”

Trevor snorted. “Yeah, we’ve had a look around,” he said in a low voice as he sat down between Matt and Peter. “Damn strange place, boss. They’ve been on the move since we got here. Must’ve covered a good three or four hundred clicks. Then, two weeks ago, they plunked down here, and haven’t moved a muscle since. We’re about three clicks from the Iraqi border, and they’re not moving, like they’re waiting for something. They don’t stop us from having all the look around we want during the day, but they put this place under lockdown at night, and *no one* is allowed to leave the hospice, nurses included.”

“Most of them have already buggered off by the time they lock things down,” Peter added quietly, still studying the floor.

Trevor glanced around to be sure no one could hear their exchange, and then said, “Pete and I have been hearing some strange shit at night, too. Something like singing or chanting, and something else so faint we can’t make it out. We were thinking... well, since you’re not in the hospice at night, maybe you can find out what it is. You’re probably not under the same restrictions...”



Matt nodded grimly, even as his heart sank. “I’ll check it out tonight. You two sit tight and be prepared to move. We don’t know what these ladies are up to, and even if it’s nothing, we’ve overstayed our welcome. We still have a job to do. But I want to know what they’re hiding around here, first.” And, his heart clenching, Matt had a feeling that, whatever was being hidden from them, Manara was up to her pretty little neck in it.

## Chapter Eleven

Matt lay still, willing his chest to rise and fall in a deep, even manner. Through slitted eyes, he watched as Manara moved quietly around the semi-darkness of the tent. Night masked some of her movements, but she seemed to believe he was asleep. His heart pounded as he watched her slip out of her standard white dress. Only sheer willpower stopped him from sucking in his breath as moonlight bathed her in naked glory. Disappointment flared in him as she turned away, slithering into a filmy, flowing gown of scarlet. Then, drawing a thick cloak across her shoulders as she crossed the tent, she ducked through the flap and was gone.

Instantly, Matt was on his feet. This was his chance to see where she disappeared to every evening. Shrugging into his heavy desert camouflaged shirt and grabbing up his Berretta and survival knife, he ducked out of the tent and scanned the camp for movement. A flash of red disappearing toward a large, lit tent at the edge of the camp informed him of Manara's whereabouts. Matt followed her as swiftly as his healing leg allowed, wincing whenever he stepped down the wrong way and set off fresh bursts of pain. He stuck to the shadows, praying his injury didn't cause him to stumble or draw his target's attention. For her part, Manara didn't appear to be aware of his presence at all.

Matt stopped a short distance from the tent, drawing a sharp breath as his heart pounded in dread. Even as he'd listened to the other man earlier, Matt had hoped Watkins was wrong. But, watching that tent, Matt knew the other man's suspicions were about to be borne out. Figures were moving among the flickering light inside the tent, and wisps of smoke rose around the edges of the tent and billowed from the entryway as it opened and closed. Chanting emanated from the interior, punctuated by cries and strange moans, and Matt felt his soul freeze in terror as images and sounds from his past rose to haunt him.

That had been Rachel. There was no reason to believe Manara or her people could possibly be as sick, Matt told himself, closing his eyes and drawing several deep, steadying breaths as he forced the

memory away. Slowly, fear still clutching his heart, he crept closer to the tent. Matt tried to dispel the fear, telling himself it was stupid to be afraid at this late date. Hadn't he already fallen victim to the worst tortures a living creature could suffer and survived with his sanity pretty much intact? He should be jaded to pain, to suffering. However, as cold sweat trickled down his neck, Matt knew he was not. Rachel's cruelty had hardened him. But to discover that Manara was that cruel would destroy him.

Matt reached for his survival knife, surprised that his hand shook as he drew it from the sheath. Willing the offending hand steady, he carefully cut a slit just large enough to see through in the tent wall. As he put his eye to the slit, however, Matt felt his insides turn to ice, and an entirely new fear steal over him. Whatever he had expected of Manara, it certainly hadn't been *this*.

He stared, agape, at what transpired inside the tent. Through the haze of some sweet-smelling smoke, he saw a small group of older women sitting stone-faced and unmoving on what looked like elaborate wooden thrones on a dais at the far end of the tent. Below the dais, a large circle of silk-draped cushions was spread, and younger women, accompanied by men he couldn't recall having seen before, filled the cushions, engaged in the most explicit sexual acts Matt had ever seen. He swallowed hard as his eyes moved among them, searching for a familiar face. As his eyes came to the center of the tent, where an elaborate, gold and silk bedecked altar sat, his heart stopped within his chest and the breath rushed from him.

Manara lounged on the altar, as bare as the day she was born, seemingly oblivious to the world. Her head was thrown back, her hair rippling over her bare arms and puddling on the silk altar draping. Her eyes were closed and her mouth hung open, as if frozen in a moment of divine ecstasy. Her body was arched in a provocative manner that made Matt's clench with need. She had never looked more desirable, or less accessible. A glow seemed to emanate from her very pores, bathing the occupants of the tent in a radiance brighter than sunlight. Matt felt an ecstatic dizziness rush through him, joy and peace racing in his veins, as the shaft of light reached out to caress him. It was soft and warm, like a lover's familiar caress, and it drew him seductively. He leaned forward, his hand reaching toward the wall of the tent. He had to... *No!* Matt jerked backward, shutting his eyes and shaking his head until the sensation left him. This was wrong, he told himself sternly. Manara was no different from Rachel, and she'd kill him if he gave her the chance.

Unerringly, Matt's gaze was drawn back toward the slit in the tent, where soft billows of smoke escaped into the cold night air. He was sweating, his blood pounding hot in his veins. But, God help him, it didn't *feel* wrong. It felt right, indescribably right, even if Manara was like Rachel. Even if she was deceptive and perverse, even if she was the same, he still wanted her, he realized with a sinking heart. Because, somewhere deep inside, he told himself she *couldn't* be that way. He'd die, if she were.

Desperate to believe he was hallucinating, or that he was misinterpreting what he saw, Matt placed his eye to the slit again. *Please let me be wrong.*

Manara, supine on the altar as the figures around her wilted into satiation, looked suddenly every inch of the innocent she had confessed she was. Gone was the seductress, arched in her divine ecstasy. This was the Manara he remembered, soft, fragile, and looking entirely childlike in sleep. But, as she stirred and sat up, he realized she was not asleep at all. Her gray eyes, normally so clear, were rolling with bright clouds of colored light, unfocused as they stared straight ahead. Then, as he watched, her mouth opened, and a voice like ocean waves rolled from her lips.

"We near the beginning, Children of Babylon. The Daughters of the Star of Heaven will be made whole, and Our Sargon will walk the temple once again."

Matt back-pedaled in panic, his throat closing off as he choked on bile-raising memories. God help him, it *was* happening again! Manara was not only involved in some kind of bizarre religious cult, but she appeared to be their leader. *Just like Rachel.* Except... Matt swallowed his next breath on a dry sob. Except he still wanted her. Badly. Matt's eyes flew open, the panic setting in full-force. He had to get out of here and get his men to safety before Manara got her clutches into them as well!

Matt ran for Manara's tent, his mind working frantically as he moved. If Star, his source in Sidon, had been at all reliable, then he was still on the right track. Ra'id Al-Mawsil was Iraqi, and he would likely have fled to safety in his homeland once he realized America was baying for his blood.

In the tent, Matt stopped, gazing around wildly. His eyes lit on a canvas rucksack—probably from one of the jeeps—and relief surged through him. He could still get away, as long as Manara hadn't taken his gear. Grabbing up the rucksack, he hurriedly began stuffing supplies into it as he tore apart the tent searching for his gear. The Berretta was safe in its holster at his hip, the survival knife tucked into the pocket above his right knee. A few moments into his search, he uncovered his M-16 leaning against the back of a low wooden chair along with his field survival kit, containing Meals Ready to Eat—or

MREs—and two canteens. A little searching produced some rope, a spare set of clothes, and a set of three hand-held radio units that looked capable of withstanding miles of desert travel. Shrugging into the now full rucksack, he slung the M-16 over his shoulder and hurried for the hospice.

Carefully sticking to the shadows to avoid detection by Manara's armed patrols, he came to a stop along the side of the hospice tent. The sounds of shuffling and the occasional cough or snore broke the silence, indicating all was calm within the hospice. Silently counting out the space and number of beds between the door and his men, he moved cautiously to where he was fairly certain his men were located. Using his survival knife, he cut a slit long enough for a man to crawl through in the tent wall. Instantly, a wall of warm, sickly air hit him in the face. Drawing a shallow breath of cleaner air, he stuck his head in through the slit and saw Talladay and Watkins sitting fully dressed and alert on their pallets. Each had a pack and their weapons, telling Matt that either the two mercenaries had been planning a breakout for some time, or the women hadn't seen the need in taking their gear away.

"C'mon," he hissed at them, jerking his head behind him. "We need to get out of here, ASAP." To Talladay's somber, confused look, he said, "I'll explain why later."

Under the cover of night, the three mercenaries made good time. Watkins and Talladay exchanged questioning glances as they crossed the Iraqi border, but remained silent until Matt finally called a halt two hours later.

Watkins broke the silence with a hushed whisper. "You *do* realize that we're now in a very bad place to be an American?"

Matt nodded, panting slightly and wincing as he rubbed his right leg. It still hadn't fully healed, and he'd just put a good distance on it.

"Yeah, I know. We're continuing on."

"To where, man? Why? We're *dead*, remember?"

"Yeah, and that's exactly what our mark thinks, too. We've got a chance to grease him now that we didn't have before. He won't be expecting us like he obviously was in Sidon."

Watkins was silent for a long moment, and then sighed heavily. "Okay, man. You've never been wrong about this shit before. I'll take first watch."

With that, he moved away to scan the surrounding area. Glancing after him before turning back to Matt, Talladay shifted over closer to his commander.

“Why are we really out here, Matt? You never cut out like that.”

“I told you —”

“Bollocks!” Talladay swore vehemently, his expression unyielding. “You know as well as I that one more day’d not make the difference.” His eyes narrowed then. “What’re you runnin’ from, lad?”

Matt shook his head, his expression bleak.

“I can’t tell you, Pete. I can’t tell anyone.”

Talladay’s gaze rested speculatively on the younger man. He’d seen a look like that on Matt’s face before, the one time Matt had come face-to-face with Sinead Talladay’s Irish superstitions. But there was other fear in Matt’s eyes now, and it seemed directed inward.

He shook his head sadly. “After all you’ve seen and been through, that pretty little lass terrified the good sense God gave a flea out of you. Was it because you didn’t like the truth, or because you never even bothered to ask for it?”

“I...” Matt stopped, turning to face Peter. “What are you saying, Pete?”

Talladay’s answering smile was bleak. Deep inside, he knew Matt’s blind side had brought him racing into the open desert on a wounded leg. “If you have to ask me that, then I already have my answer.”

And, as Talladay moved away, he shook his head sadly. Aye, he might have his answer, but he doubted Matthew Raleigh even knew the right questions.

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Dove-gray eyes narrowed in smug glee as the woman stared into the flame-lit surface of the obsidian mirror. It was working, just as she knew it would. A lifetime spent planning and moving in painstakingly methodical steps was finally coming to fruition.

She’d been afraid that Matthew’s escape would undo her plans; that had certainly been an unplanned event. But it appeared that escape had taught him to flee what he didn’t understand, which would ultimately aid her plans now. She licked her lips and tasted the shadow of familiar blood, tinged

with fear and pain. That was good; if he feared the Sumerian, he'd never discover the truth, and his power would be hers. If he fled now, he would forever run from his redemption.

Black Widow smiled to herself. She had known, from the moment she'd first laid eyes on Matthew Raleigh that he must never learn of the existence of Atlantis; he and his kind could not be allowed to set foot within the Temple of the Stars, or all her plans would be ruined. Then Joyanne Raleigh had uncovered the keys to the five temples at a dig site in Greece, and nearly succeeded in reuniting her son with his destiny. John and Joyanne Raleigh had needed to die, and Black Widow had seen to the task herself.

She leaned back contentedly, running her hands over her still-youthful figure. She'd learned the secret of true power years ago; the power was in the blood. Blood sustained youth and vigor; it could even restore power. The blood of an animal wasn't nearly as potent as human blood, and a child's blood provided more lasting effects than an adult's, particularly if that child held personal power. She licked her lips hungrily. There was one man's blood that could sustain her beauty and youth for all eternity, and she wanted that blood. And she would have it, now. As long as he continued to flee his redemption, Matthew Raleigh was running straight into her trap.

## Chapter Twelve

He is gone.

Even before she stepped inside her tent, Manara knew she wouldn't find Matthew Raleigh there. She didn't question how or why; that he was gone was telling enough. Righting an overturned table on her way through the clutter, she sank to the cushioned bed in defeat, falling back to stare up at the swaying ceiling as hot tears burned her cheeks. All those years of dreams, that lifetime of prayers, and this was what she received. Her future stretched before her, a hungry void that threatened to suck her spirit dry. Her life was empty, barren, and meaningless. Sargon would never return to the temple, and she would end her days bathed in her own blood as evil scourged the land she loved and killed the people she cherished.

*I should have told him.* The words were a painful, stark reality, too late to change. She swallowed back a sob as she recalled the lies, the evasions, and the way his eyes had clouded more with each answer she'd denied him. She should have told him everything. About Ashurbanipal. About her part in his being here in the desert. Every shameful secret. She should have pleaded for his aid, if it had come down to that. But maybe...

Manara launched herself upright, hope flooding through her. Maybe he wasn't the one, after all. Maybe it had only been her own wishing, her own desires, which had declared him the chosen one. Surely, bountiful Ishtar would not have let the one She'd chosen walk away now. Not when they were so close.

Walk away. Manara snorted a bitter laugh as she gazed around at the mess of strewn clothing and overturned furniture. Matthew Thomas Raleigh had not *walked* away. If this mess was any indication, he had *run*, as if all the *Galla* of the Underworld were nipping at his heels. The question was, why?



Her chin rose defiantly. Why he was gone no longer mattered. She was growing short on time, and, without a man to aid her, she would have a lot more preparations to make. She didn't have time to feel sorry for herself, or to pine for any man, let alone one who clearly couldn't stand the sight of her any longer.

Rising, she reached for the ornate wooden trunk she never traveled without. From around her neck, she drew her medallion of station, fitting it into the circular metal indentation on the box's clasp. Giving it a quarter turn, she smiled grimly as an internal latch clicked. Looping the necklace back over her head, she lifted the lid and drew out a neatly folded uniform in the tans and browns of desert camouflage and a man's desert headdress. Donning the uniform, she pulled out another, longer case with a hooked latch. Flicking the latch up, she opened this box as well. Inside were her weapons and a survival pack. She would need both to survive the desert and be in any shape to do battle when she arrived.

Manara slung the pack over her shoulders and turned, weapons in hand, just as Shahdi bust into the tent.

"*Mukarramma!* The mercenaries! They are...gone?" Shahdi's voice died off in an uncertain sound as her eyes ran over Manara's outfit.

"I am heading for the temple now, Shahdi. Tell the others that I will send word when it is safe. If you do not hear from me and I do not return before the summer sun has reached its apex, then all is lost and you must all return to your homes, or what is left of them, and hide your faith from the evil ones. Shahdi," she grasped her friend's shoulders lightly, squeezing to emphasize her next words. "What I am giving you is a command from Ishtar Herself. If the temple is not freed before the Festival Day, those lives not yet lost *must* be spared. She will choose another to serve in my place."

Shahdi swallowed hard, nodding under Manara's steady gaze. "It will be as *Inana* commands, *Mukarramma*. We shall pray for your safe return."

Manara's eyes narrowed as she turned and stepped from the tent, facing the Iraqi border.

"Pray for the ones who would destroy us," she muttered darkly. And, in the bleeding source of her soul, she cried, *Please let him forgive me!*

With a pained sigh, Manara felt her heart clench and had a terrible feeling that her own prayer came far too late to be granted.

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Matt sat up alertly, automatically sighting his weapon, as the sound of running water reached his ears. They were five days' hard journey by foot from the Iraqi border and deep in the open desert. Yesterday evening's scouting had turned up no oases in the area, either. That meant... silently, he moved to wake Talladay and Watkins, gesturing for silence as they sat up.

*How many?* Talladay mouthed, his gaze sweeping the dunes around them before returning to Matt, who shrugged in response.

Water. He signaled. Close. Eyes up?

Talladay angled his weapon up and in the direction Matt indicated and nodded grimly. Matt licked his lips nervously as he edged toward the crest of the dune. If there was more than one, they were screwed. They couldn't afford to have a fire fight here, in the desert. The sound would carry, and they'd probably call down whatever Iraqi patrol was out there.

As he drew closer, Matt heard the soft wicker of a horse, swiftly silenced with an equally soft, if sharp, command. He froze in his tracks, his brow furrowing. Iraqi soldiers didn't ride horses, and few nomads did, either, preferring the hardier and less expensive camels for desert crossings. Whoever was over there didn't want to draw any more attention than his own unit, which meant they were probably an enemy. Quietly fingering off the safety on his M-16, Matt willed his breathing silent and tried to ignore the loud pounding of his pulse in his ears.

Cautiously, the mercenary eased his head over the crest of the dune and quickly eyeballed the area before sinking down behind cover again. His blood had turned to ice, and only carefully honed battle reflexes kept his breathing shallow and his mind clear as he slid back down the dune and nodded grimly to his friends. They had a confirmed bogey. Desert cammies, a scarf wrapped desert-fashion over the head, and a bandolier strapped over one shoulder, their neighbor was definitely not out on a peaceful jaunt. Silently, Matt motioned his team to split up, fanning out to provide cover. He would go in, and maybe they wouldn't have to fire a shot.

This was it, Matt realized, his heartbeat kicking up, as he moved stealthily toward his target. This was what he lived for, what he did best. If they were lucky, and did their job right, they'd have a live prisoner, capable of feeding them whatever information they needed about Ra'id Al-Mawsil. If not, they'd still have one less terrorist. It was a win-win situation. His kind of odds, Matt thought with a dark smile.

Drawing his gun up, he vaulted over the dune and slid silently down the opposite side, his eyes never leaving his opponent. If the other man was aware Matt was there, he gave no sign of it as Matt edged up behind him and jabbed the muzzle of his M-16 between the much-shorter man's thin shoulders.

"Don't make a sound," he warned in Arabic. "You will turn around very slowly and not make any sudden moves, or I'll shoot you."

The slight form stiffened, he heard a quiet gasp he could have sworn was disbelief, before the figure carefully turned, and Matt nearly dropped his weapon in shock. He blinked hard, staring down into dark, liquid eyes and a face he knew better than his own. Instantly, his heart tripped over itself, and his tongue clogged his throat, making breathing difficult and speech impossible. Scowling to suppress a surge of jubilant emotion, he grasped the woman's upper arm in one hand, keeping the gun trained on her with the other.

"What the hell do you think you're doing out here?" he snarled, his breath fanning her hair in a hot growl.

Her delicate chin lifted determinedly, and her gray eyes flashed defiantly. "Doing what I must, for my people. What right do you have to question me?"

His grip tightened, bringing pained tears to her eyes as he lifted the muzzle of the gun into her face.

"Don't think I won't use this, lady," he warned darkly. "You and your *people* can go to blazes, for all I care! As long as I'm holding the gun, *I* am the one in charge, and *I*'ll be asking the questions. Now, get moving." And, with that, he unceremoniously dragged her back over the dune, aware that every step he took was one step closer to either Hell, or his salvation. With a scowl, he knew his money was on Hell.

Manara stumbled behind Matt, confused by this sudden hostility in the man who had, just days ago, declared he would give up the world for the chance of being near her. As Matt released her with a shove, she fell, only her quick reflexes keeping her from sprawling face-first into a small campfire. She hadn't expected this, she thought through bitter tears. She'd believed Matthew would be long gone, heading for the nearest coast and a ticket back to whatever life he'd left behind. She wanted to ask him why he had stayed, why he was here in Iraq, but knew she couldn't. Something had changed about Matthew Raleigh. When she'd looked into his hard, cold eyes, she'd known it. Gone was the gentle man whose fiery eyes had turned her insides to liquid heat. He had gone somewhere deep inside that dark, ugly, and tormenting place he had gone before. Her heart knew, as she looked up at him, what her mind was only just beginning to understand. She could not follow him where he had gone, or hope that he could see her; she could only pray he would see the path back from that horror and take it.

Glancing around, she noticed the other two mercenaries for the first time, standing silently just outside the light of the fire. Her gaze flew back to Matthew, however, as he hunkered down beside her and reached to grasp her face in his hand, his grip bruising and his eyes devoid of any compassion.

"Now, we're going to play a little game, Miss *Mukarramma*," he said in a deadly quiet voice. "You're going to tell me everything I want to know, and you're going to tell the truth, or I'm going to take you apart a piece at a time, starting with what you value most."

Manara gasped, tears rising in her eyes as she realized exactly what he referred to. She had never, in all her life, imagined it would come to this.

"Matthew, you cannot do this!" she pleaded with him, reaching up to grasp his wrist imploringly. "It is not in you—"

"Don't tell me what's in me, or what I can or cannot do!" Matt thundered, his grip tightening painfully. "You don't even *know* me, lady. Ask the people of Deng-Fan what I can do, if you can talk to the dead!"

Manara's eyes went wide in pain, staring into a soul more tortured than any she had ever encountered, more hardened against his humanity.

"No..." The single syllable left her in a distressed whisper.

"Yes. Now, why are you here?"

"I...I *told* you!" She sobbed, trying to wrench free. "I am going to reclaim my home."

“Matt...” Talladay’s quiet voice cautioned as fury engulfed the mercenary leader’s face.

“Yeah, man. She’s not the enemy.” Watkins edged a step closer, a wary look in his eyes.

Matt glared at them. “Back off, both of you. You didn’t see what I did, back there.” He turned his glare back on his victim. “Isn’t that right, *sweetheart*? Nice to know, now, how you get off. At least it explains why you’re still a—”

He never saw the slap coming. One moment, her hands were clasped imploringly around his wrist. The next, his face was stinging from the blow, and he’d released her in stunned disbelief. Manara was on her feet in a flash, and fury streamed from her like lava bursting from a volcano as she stood over him with fists clenched in pure rage.

“I warned you before, Matthew Raleigh: Judge me only at your own peril. I am above your petty prejudices and jealousies.” With that, she spun on her heel and started away. The click of his gun’s safety disengaging, however, froze her in place.

“I don’t care *what* you think you are, sweetheart,” Matt drawled in a quiet, dangerous voice. “There’s one concept you better get used to damned fast: I’m holding the gun, and you, whoever you really are, are the prisoner.”

“One day, I am going to see to it those words are crammed back down your arrogant throat,” Manara returned regally, remaining absolutely still.

With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, Matt had the distinct impression she knew something he didn’t. It was not a comforting notion.

Manara lay, handcuffed, near the outside edge of the firelight and pretended to sleep, secretly watching the three mercenaries through lowered lashes. Matthew was grim-faced and stoically avoiding looking her way, as if he dared not be caught observing her, even in sleep. Her heart cracked at that coldness, even though she’d resolved to hate him. Holding onto her hate was no easy task, when faced with his painful denial.

Trevor Watkins sat off by himself, his dark face obscured by the shadows where he’d retreated. No man was more of an island than that one, Manara decided sadly. Some great tragedy had locked him away within his mind and refused to allow him to truly feel the world in which he lived. As she studied the dark man with strange, dark amber eyes, Manara suddenly shivered, her chill having nothing to do

with the cold desert air, as a heart-rending wolf's cry lunged through her. It had been the same at the canyon; that cry had led her to him, and compelled her to save him even though she hadn't known his name. Trevor Watkins bore the Mark of the Wolf, and he was about to face his greatest trial; of this much, Manara was certain. What she feared was what that trial might mean for the rest of the world.

Peter Talladay was—*missing*, Manara realized with a start, nearly sitting upright. Where had he gone, and why had she not noticed when he left?

"Lookin' for me, lass?"

She opened her eyes completely and turned her head to find Peter crouched near her feet.

"What is it you want of me?"

He shook his head, offering her a disarming smile. "Just to talk. I'm havin' a problem buyin' this whole 'end justifies the means' attitude Matt's suddenly developed toward you. The man's besotted with you one moment and terrorisin' you the next. Why?"

"Perhaps you could tell me," she said, her eyes falling painfully. "What is it you wish to talk about?"

"Your beliefs."

His simple statement had her eyes rising in surprise, and she sat up to face him. "Why?"

He sighed, shaking his head. "Because Matt has a blind spot about the supernatural. Perhaps, between the two of us, we can figure out why he's reactin' to you this way."

Manara's heart sped up as she read the truth in Talladay's gray eyes. He wanted to help her, but he didn't know anything more about Matthew's past than she did.

"The only way you can help any of us now, Mr. Talladay," she said quietly, "is to let me escape. I must complete my mission."

His eyes dropped contritely. "I'm sorry, lass, but I can't be doin' that."

She nodded. She'd already known that would be his answer. Peter Talladay was the soul of loyalty; he would rather die than betray a friend. But Manara could not remain. She would bide her time a while, and then she would slip away the moment Matthew's guard was lowered. She could not chance remaining where Matthew's prejudices might destroy her only chance of fulfilling her destiny.



## Chapter Thirteen

She was gone. Even before he came fully awake, Matt knew Manara had slipped away. Scowling as his head cleared of lethargy, he knew *how* she'd gotten away, too. She'd snuck up on him, laid her cuffed hands on his face, and told him to go to sleep. Just like that. He'd been powerless to fight the suggestion, though he'd tried.

Rage darkened Matt's eyes. Manara could try all of her evil little magic tricks on him—Rachel had—he didn't care. She'd fail, just like Rachel had, in the end. He wanted answers, and he was going to have them! Grabbing up his M-16, Matt followed the wind-shifted prints of Manara's boots out into the desert. When he caught that no-good little minx...

Matt stopped abruptly as a scream fit to raise the dead ripped through the clear desert air. His heart lurched sickeningly at that sound, and he began to run, aware of nothing except that Manara was in danger. No matter what he thought of her, he couldn't allow her to fall into Al-Mawsil's hands! He already knew what that sick bastard did to women.

Matt came upon the scene and quickly dropped behind cover to scope the situation. And, just as quickly, admiration swept away his anger and distrust of Manara. Even handcuffed, she fought like a hellcat. There were three hulking brutes with knives and guns down there, and yet they were unable to subdue one woman. Matt watched in fascination as, with a dancer's grace, Manara spun free of one man's grasp and brought her clasped hands into swift, sharp contact with the second's throat. He doubled over on the spot, gagging, and Matt marked him down for the count. Within moments, the man was sprawled out, unconscious and heading toward suffocation. Matt's gaze flew back to the other two as he heard Manara cry out, and his heart stilled for one awful moment.

One of the men had managed to capture Manara, bending her shackled arms back over her head and kicking her knees out so that she fell heavily. The other remaining brute had freed his knife, the metal gleaming in the moonlight. Matt's breath stopped in his throat as fear for Manara's life slashed



through him. Gripping the M-16, he rose up from hiding, aiming for the man holding Manara. His focus closed on the man, and his finger tightened on the trigger, loosing several shots. The man stiffened as the first shot went wide of the mark, striking his shoulder. However, before he could recover from the shock, the next ripped through his throat. Releasing Manara, the man grabbed for his throat, even as he stumbled backward and fell, red bubbles frothing from his mouth as he drowned in his own blood. Manara, freed, dove for the feet of the man with the knife, her weight bowling him over and sending the knife flying. In a flash, Manara had it and was kneeling with the blade pressed against her attacker's throat.

"Where is Ra'id?" Matt heard her mutter as he hurried over to her.

The man looked up at Manara with frightened eyes. "I do not know who you speak of."

"Where is he?" Manara pressed harder with the blade. "Why did my brother send you to kill me?"

Matt stopped dead, staring at the back of Manara's head. Her brother? Ra'id Al-Mawsil was Manara's *brother*? The dread and mistrust returned with a vengeance. Just who was this woman?

The man on the ground was shaking fearfully before Manara's rage. "It was not a man who sent me, I swear! It was the Black Widow."

Fury leached Manara's face at those words, and she rose imperiously over her captive, the knife's point aimed directly between his eyes as in a deadly flat voice she said, "Go back to the Black Widow and tell her I will be watching her."

The man nodded and took the avenue of flight she offered before she could have time to change her mind. In a scrambling flash, he was gone, headed back out over the dunes.

Manara turned then and saw Matt. A gasp of fear left her, and she hurriedly stumbled backwards, trying to get away from him. Matt felt his insides clench at the wary hate that filled her eyes. He would never be able to convince her to return of her own accord, but there were questions he needed answered. So, even as a part of him resisted the action, Matt leveled his weapon at her.

"Let's go."

And, as she sullenly followed his command, Manara silently plotted her next escape. If there was one thing she was learning fast about Matthew Raleigh, it was that the man could not be trusted.

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It had been two days, and she still refused to talk to, or even *look* at, him. Matt prowled restlessly outside of the firelight, glancing occasionally at his captive—damn, he already hated that word!—where she sat, handcuffed and silent, staring morosely at the sand shifting around her feet. She still refused to sleep. She hadn't eaten or taken more than a couple sips of water since her fight in the desert, and she looked pale and gaunt. Guilt stabbed him, deeper than any knife could.

Matt winced as the flickering firelight caught the shadows of bruises on her pale face—the indentations of *his* fingers. He was mortified by his actions, which strained relations between them even further because he couldn't find the words to apologize. He'd never hit a woman in his life, and certainly never intentionally harmed one. Not even Rachel, who'd decidedly deserved a good thrashing. Now, he looked at the evidence of his cruelty toward this innocent and felt his heart shatter. He hated those handcuffs on her wrists, probably even more than she did. Seeing a free spirit like Manara's chained up was the bitterest victory he'd ever tasted.

He took a step into the light and felt sick with grief as he watched her shrink away from the sight of him, her eyes full of a disgust he feared no apology could erase. But, dammit, she'd *lied* to him! He tried, desperately, to hold onto that thought and the rage he'd felt just days ago. She'd made him believe she was some innocent beauty in need of protection, but she was really involved in some filthy voyeuristic cult... and he lost the thought on a swallowed curse as the light caught the deep purple marks branded into her skin.

With wrenching, brutal honesty, he faced his own mistakes. Manara had never actually said a word about herself to indicate she needed, or even wanted, his protection. He'd taken that responsibility on himself when she'd told him she was a virgin. And, if he was being completely honest, he had to admit his fears had embellished the events of that night at the pavilion. She couldn't have been watching anything, not with her eyes closed and her face turned upward. When he sought among his memories, he realized that the events transpiring around her had been linked to the light and emotion radiating *from* her. He'd felt it himself, and couldn't deny it was a power greater and more pure than any he'd ever experienced. It had been her words, that cryptic statement, which had panicked him. Rachel had often sounded like that, and the connection had terrified him. Pained by the realization that

this situation had been entirely of his own making, Matt turned his gaze on Manara's dark head, bent in misery. How could he make it right? *Could* he make it right, at all? Grimly, he knew he had to try, for Manara's sake, even if she was already lost to him.

"You have to eat," he started quietly, hunkering down beside her, an MRE packet in one outstretched hand and a canteen in the other. "At least drink. It's dangerous to not take water in the desert. You'll dehydrate in no time."

Her flashing eyes rose, dark with anger, as she pushed the offered items away. "I do nothing for your pleasure."

"Manara, your stubbornness is killing you! Now, eat. Please."

Her head shook sharply, her eyes rock-hard and ice cold. "Then I will die. At least then I will be free of you. Better to die by my own choice than live by your command. Eat, sleep, walk. You do not own me, Commander Raleigh, and I will not be ordered about any longer."

"I'm trying to keep you *alive*!" He bit out the words in fear and frustration. After their brutal pace these past two days and her lack of food and sleep, she didn't have the energy to be arguing like this. The chill in her voice terrified him as nothing ever had before. He didn't want things between them to end this way. "Damn it, Manara! What about your home? Your people? Don't you *want* to live?"

Her chin raised a notch, and her glare burned into him like a laser beam. "Why? So you can decide when I am beaten enough? So you can rape me?"

Those words stopped him cold. "I never—"

"You would take me apart a piece at a time, beginning with what I valued most. I did not misunderstand that threat, Commander."

He sat down hard beside her, feeling a wave of nausea wash over him. She was right. He had said it, and she hadn't misunderstood him. Worst of all, in his bloodlust, he had meant every word of it. He'd wanted nothing more, in those moments of agony, than to hurt her as badly as she'd hurt him. He'd wanted to bleed everything out of her that made him want her, everything that made him care. He'd wanted to be free. Now... now, he wanted to take back every damned word, because he'd finally realized he couldn't be free without her.

*Damn you, Rachel!* He cursed inwardly. If there was a Hell, that's where Rachel Murray was now, and she'd consigned him to live there as well.

"I won't say I didn't mean it, at the time," he said quietly, fiddling with the edge of the strap of the canteen, his eyes averted from her. "I won't lie to you, Manara. I was ready to kill us both, the other night. You, for what I thought was betrayal, and me, for wanting you in spite of what I thought you'd done. But, believe me, I'm more sorry than you'd ever believe." He drew a deep breath and faced his own demons. "You were right, when you said I had no right to judge you. You never lied to me. I lied to myself, from the very beginning. I created an image of you as perfect, beyond fault, because I wanted you and was afraid of reality. The truth was too terrible for me to face, when I saw it. I hurt you out of my own fear, Manara, and I am very, very sorry for that."

Her eyes had lifted as he talked, and their gray depths were no longer clouded with anger and hate. They had become piercingly clear.

"Why was it so terrible?"

He swallowed hard, forcing himself to speak the words that had never passed his lips before. He owed her this much. He owed her the truth. "Because I'd never wanted, never *needed*, anyone so badly in my life. It scared the hell out of me. I was terrified that the past I tried so hard to escape was becoming my future, as well, and that I wouldn't have the strength to walk away this time. I wanted to hate you, for making me remember, and for making me feel so much, but I couldn't! So I hurt you, hoping that if you started hating me, I could hate you back. It was stupid, and childish, and I wish to God I'd never done it. But, at the time, I couldn't see beyond my own pain, and in doing so, I've made my own nightmare come true."

She was watching him silently, her eyes filled with an emotion he feared to read too closely. He couldn't hope she'd forgive him. That was too much to ask any human being, after what he'd done. Silence stretched between them, long and torturous to Matt as he watched tears well in Manara's beautiful gray eyes. Then, after what seemed a lifetime, she lifted her cuffed hands and gently closed them over one of his. Her touch was miraculous, sending his heart ricocheting wildly in his chest, but her words sent waves of dread and agony searing through his veins.

"Who was she? This woman who hurt you so badly?" she asked quietly, compassion written in every line of her face. "Why have you let her evil spirit haunt you?"

His throat closed as he realized Manara had read the truth, or at least part of it, in his face. Drawing a deep breath to ward off panic, he shook his head slightly. “I can’t tell you. Not yet.” *Maybe never.* He pushed the thought away, looking at her with a hopeful smile. “Now, will you please eat and drink? I need you to be strong, now.”

Her eyes brimming with fresh tears, of acceptance rather than defiance, Manara nodded as she accepted the proffered plastic pouch and canteen. She would eat, for both their sakes. The past could not be altered but, Ishtar willing, the future could yet be mended between them.

## Chapter Fourteen

The Black Widow glared coldly at the man groveling before her.

“You let her *escape*?”

“P-please, Widow, we tried! She was too quick! She killed Haroun before we could get hold of her...”

Black Widow’s eyes focused intently on him. “She killed? With what? A knife, a gun?”

The man shook his head in surprise. “N-no... she struck him with her hands, and he fell.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed, and she cursed inwardly. If she’d been able to make that pristine little slut shed blood, there would’ve been nothing left to stop her plans.

“Then, there was the man... he came out of nowhere. He shot Fahd before we even knew he was there.”

“A man?” The narrowed eyes studied him shrewdly. “What did he look like?”

“He was an American. Tall, with dark hair.”

Black Widow’s tongue darted out to lick their ruby surface in anticipation. She could taste his blood. It had to be Matthew. She scowled. So, he was following Ishtar’s little slut across the desert, was he? Evidently, her plan to separate them hadn’t worked as planned. She refused to be discouraged by this turn of events, however. There was still time to divide them. All she had to do was make use of the power she’s been saving for the Temple. It would take nothing to rebuild that power, once she had Matthew firmly back in her grasp.

“Prometheus, indeed!” She grinned maliciously. Matthew had retained some of his early tutoring, apparently, but not enough to make a difference. True, Prometheus had been the Light Bringer; but he had paid a terrible price for his compassion. Prometheus had been cursed to endure the wrath of the Gods for all eternity, chained to his doom. And she intended to see to it that Matthew Raleigh ended the same way.

She laughed, dredging up Rachel Murray's memories. As Rachel, she knew Matthew Raleigh better than anyone alive did; she'd drunk his blood and possessed his soul. And she knew, without a doubt, that the only reason he'd follow a woman into the desert was if the fool was in love with the tramp. A cold, eager grin sliced across her face. It was almost worth losing the little slut to gain that little tidbit of information. It was high time she reminded young Matthew who *really* owned him.

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Manara watched the three men anxiously, studying their grave expressions as they sat around the fire. Unconsciously, she rubbed the chafe marks on her wrists where, up until yesterday, handcuffs had stripped her of her freedom. Now, glancing from one somber face to another, she frowned. Whatever weighed on these men of action affected her, as well. She could feel it. Her eyes resting on Matthew's dark expression, she finally broke the silence.

"What is wrong?"

Three sets of eyes raised to her, each full of conflicting emotions. It was to Matthew's worried hazel eyes that Manara's clung, reading a wealth of questions in their roiling depths.

"We're trying to decide what's strategically more sound—sticking together or splitting up."

Her gaze traveled to each of the other men, then back to Matthew. "How would you keep in contact if you split up?"

He flushed and refused to meet her eyes as he shifted uncomfortably. "I took some radios from your tent."

She wasn't surprised. He was a resourceful man, who would make use of whatever was handy. Shrugging, she nodded. "Those are good radios. We used them when traveling, in case of sandstorms. Each woman carries at least one, because they cover a wide range and do not get clogged with sand easily. It is good you took some."

Matt's eyes snapped up to meet Manara's, shock ricocheting through him. He hadn't expected her to be so forgiving about the radios, or his making off with anything in her tent, for that matter. He'd

expected annoyance, even anger. Her calm, pragmatic response underscored her generosity, and he flushed anew, remembering his own callous actions just days ago.

“Sorry. I should have asked.”

Manara smiled gently, a secret smile that made Matt’s body go on full alert. “You did not need to, Matthew. Anything I have to give is yours.”

Matt swallowed hard, thinking of the one thing he wanted more than anything. Manara. But she couldn’t give him that. She’d said as much when they’d first met. She could give him anything, but not that.

“Um...” He cleared his throat, shifting to hide his tension. “Do you, ah, think they’ll cover the distance okay?”

She shrugged again. “I see no reason they should not.”

Matt nodded, then glanced at Peter, whose eyes were dancing merrily. Scowling at his friend’s obvious delight in Matt’s predicament, he handed the man one of the radios.

“If these work, we should split up. Together, we make an easy target. Apart, we’ll be harder to track if anyone,” he glanced quickly at Manara, “even figures out we’re alive.”

Talladay’s eyes turned somber again. “We should set a rally point.”

“There are maps in my pack,” Manara said quietly, rising and moving to where she’d dropped the saddlebags before turning her horse loose with the command to head for home. She knew Shahdi would know the unladen horse’s return meant Manara was safe and had found allies.

Pulling the rolled map from the saddlebag, she returned to the fire, unrolling the wrinkled papyrus. Talladay whistled appreciatively, reaching to finger one corner.

“How old is this thing, lass? Never seen a papyrus map before!”

She turned that mysterious smile that always managed to reduce Matt’s brain to jelly on Talladay. Matt scowled to himself, aware of what a fool he was being, but he didn’t like that she’d turn that look on any other man.

“It is old,” she agreed, touching the map reverently. “How old, even I am not certain. It has passed through my mother’s line, mother to daughter, for many generations.”

Talladay nodded respectfully, even as he leaned closer to study the map. As he did, his gray eyes lifted, caught the murderous look on Matt’s face and twinkled mischievously. As he studied the



map more closely, however, those eyes widened, and another whistle left him, accompanied by a soft curse in his own tongue.

“I can’t believe how good a condition this thing is in! The papyrus is almost like new!” He looked to Matt, his eyes gleaming with enthusiasm. “We should split up, and soon, to judge by this map.” He pointed at a section of map. “If I remember my local geography right, and given the probable shifts in tributary patterns and landforms since this was made, the Tigris should be shallow enough to cross easily here, and there’s a ridge just to the east of our current position that could be used as a campsite for Al-Mawsil’s men.”

Matt leaned closer to study the map as well, but found it hard to concentrate for long with Manara so close, her subtle, spicy perfume infusing the air around him. Drawing a deep breath, to clear his head, he told himself, Matt nodded at Pete.

“You check out that ridge, Pete, and sweep from the east in to this point,” he indicated Nineveh on the map. “This is near enough to Mawsil to mean something to our boy, but remote enough to not invite visitors. That’s where Al-Mawsil’s probably heading. Make sure there’re no surprises coming our way from Iran. Last thing we need right now is to land smack in the middle of some border skirmish.” He glanced at the black man sitting silently to his right. “Trevor, you take the river. Try to get a fix on what our man is doing with the local populace. If they’re not happy about him being around, that will help us out. If they’re on his side, we’re looking at big trouble.” He glanced at the woman beside him. “Manara and I will head south, toward Nineveh. We’ll rendezvous about two clicks north of the ruins.”

The other two men nodded in agreement, grabbed radios and supplies, and swiftly disappeared into the darkness of the night. Manara watched them go, worry twisting through her. The desert was not a safe place at night.

“Should they not wait until morning, Matthew? It is dangerous to wander in the desert at night.”

Matt laid a hand gently on her shoulder and felt her trembling with the coolness of the night. Cursing inwardly, he grabbed up a thin thermal blanket and draped it over her shoulders, his hands lingering there as he looked into her anxious face.

“Hey, don’t worry about them,” he assured her quietly. “Pete and Trevor have clocked more desert time than camels. They know what they’re doing.”

He was rewarded with a small, wan smile, before she curled into his warm embrace, and he felt the shifting of her breathing against him. Matt's heart swelled fiercely as he held her trusting warmth, and he was aware of how close he'd come to losing her forever. Someday, he wouldn't be able to escape the truth any longer. He only hoped, when that day came, that his tarnished past wouldn't turn this gentle beauty against him again. He was very much afraid he couldn't live without her.

## Chapter Fifteen

It was two weeks before Matt gathered the courage to lay his past, and his crimes, at Manara's feet. They were huddled around a small fire in an abandoned Kurdish herdsman's hut. Manara had seemed to think it odd that the herdsman and his wife, judging by the feminine garments they'd found, had both left in such haste that they'd not even taken their clothing or the valuables Manara had found in the woman's clothes chest—a dowry, she'd proclaimed, her brow wrinkled in consternation. But Matt's reconnaissance of the area had turned up nothing. Nothing except his own ghosts, he thought, wincing. During his sweep of the surrounding area, Matt had come face-to-face with exactly how much uncovered ground remained between Manara and himself. She deserved the truth, if he could find a way out of the web of lies he'd built to protect himself over the years.

Matt glanced up from the fire, his eyes coming to rest on Manara, shivering even under the layers of heavy shirt and thermal blanket. He nearly smiled. It was beastly cold in the desert at night, though it never bothered him, anymore. After three months in a metal cage in the middle of the Sahara, Matt had grown immune to changes in temperature. It had been a survival trait learned at great expense, he thought, his good humor collapsing completely. A survival trait he was not about to force this woman to learn. He swallowed hard, his heart doing a slow roll in need as Manara reached to carefully push a strand of long, dark hair from her eyes.

Getting up, Matt moved around the fire, coming to sit just behind Manara. Gently, he drew her shivering form into the shelter of his arms, wrapping himself around her and adding his own body heat to the blanket's warmth. She stiffened in his grasp, as if she meant to pull away. Then, with a soft sigh, she sank against him, cuddling closer.

"I'm glad you decided not to be a martyr," he commented wryly against her ear. "I always knew you were a smart lady."

"You are warm," she murmured drowsily, snuggling into him. "Do you never get cold?"

He rested his cheek against her hair, closing his eyes as he breathed in her spicy scent. If she only knew just *how* warm she made him, she'd probably leap away in fright, he mused dryly.

"Not since Somalia," he admitted huskily, burrowing his face against her shoulder. He was surprised to find that the spicy scent clung to her skin as well as her hair, woven with a deeply mysterious scent that he knew was all Manara. "You smell good."

She smiled affectionately, reaching up to smooth a lock of his dark hair. "It is Frankincense. It purifies the body and the soul. The ancients used an oil made from frankincense to anoint Kings." She sighed softly, leaning contentedly against the firm wall of Matt's chest. "Is that when it happened? In Somalia?"

He knew what she meant. He didn't even try to pretend.

"No," he whispered, shaking his head slightly. "Somalia was just another hell hole, a little more memorable than others because of the *hospitality* I received there."

"Like Deng-Fan?"

He drew a deep, hurtful breath, and came face-to-face with the first of many crimes. "No. Deng-Fan was a goat fuck... a damned massacre that shouldn't have ever happened. When I was a SEAL, we were sent into Cambodia on an S'n'D..."

"S and D?"

"Search and Destroy. Someone at CIA got a tip that some communist Chinese guy was stirring up trouble in Cambodia. They'd pinpointed him at Deng-Fan, a little village near the Vietnamese border. So, someone got the bright idea to send the teams in. My team was point for the mission." He swallowed hard against bile as he fought the memories that paraded across closed eyes, his ears filled with screams. When he spoke again, his voice was barely a whisper. "We went in there with orders not to kill anyone. But no one told us the revolutionaries knew anything about bombs, or planting mines. Four of my team got blown to pieces when they tripped some hidden claymores."

Manara gasped, going rigid in his arms, as the memory of the canyon flooded over her. Blessed Ishtar, she'd let it happen again! No wonder he didn't trust her! She tried to pull away, sick with her own sins, but his arms were like steel bands around her waist, and his gaze, when she turned to look at him, was fixed in another time.

“I guess I just flipped out, or something. I don’t really remember. All I remember is turning the teams loose and telling them to waste every goddamned gook they saw.”

Manara saw the pain flash across his face, heard the hollow regret in his words. This, she realized, was but one of his demons, spawned from whatever great evil had torn loose that piece of his soul. Sadly, she knew his tale wasn’t over. Covering his hands with her own, she asked, “What happened?”

His gaze came back to her, and she felt him shuddering against her back. “They did exactly what I said. Afterward, we found out there weren’t any revolutionaries in that village. Just farmers. The claymores were leftovers from V.C. plants in the Seventies. They just weren’t uncovered until my men triggered them. I ordered an entire village wiped out for nothing. *Nothing!*”

Tears welled up in Manara’s eyes as she watched him struggle with that evil truth he’d held onto so long, a mistake such a good man could only suffer under.

“Matthew,” she said softly, reaching to touch his cheek softly. “You cannot blame yourself when the true fault lies with another. Who made that madman? What was her name?”

He swallowed hard, and she felt her heart breaking for him. To live with such painful secrets... His eyes met hers, and she saw surprise, and then gratitude, light within the depths of his darkness. He knew that she understood; perhaps that would make his tale easier for him to share. A sigh left him, and his eyes closed as the words flowed out.

“Her name was Rachel Murray, and I was all of fourteen years old.”

Manara’s head jerked up, bringing their faces within inches of each other, as shock avalanched through her. She had not expected the pain to run so deep within his past. “You were...?”

He laughed darkly. “Don’t be so naïve. Lots of kids do things they aren’t supposed to, even in Lebanon. It’s part of being a kid.”

She hadn’t. Wisely, she kept that to herself.

“But you did not want to,” she said instead, a statement rather than a question. He looked at her in surprise, but answered her with a shake of his head.

“Hell, no. Rachel was my foster-mother. I told you my parents were killed in a car accident when I was seven, right?” She nodded. “Well, the court let my father’s secretary, a close family friend named Rachel Murray, take me in until they found a decent foster home for me. Only, I got shuffled out

of the system, and no one ever came to check up on me again. I think Rachel had something to do with that. She was... ah, hell..." He stopped, as if searching for the right words. "I don't really know *what* she was, but she had some damned sick fetishes."

Manara closed her eyes to block out pain as she felt the rift between them widen. Small wonder that he had lashed out at her! As much as she knew he needed to tell her this horrible secret, she did not want to know more. She could only imagine the tale he would tell, and she knew she wasn't strong enough to feel that pain with him. But she listened anyway, silently and with a shattering heart, as he poured out a past so filled with pain and horror that it reeked of the bowels of Hell.

"Rachel liked to mutilate things. I guess the technical term for it is sadism, but that never sounded quite nasty enough to me. She was part of some weird group that thrived on gaining power from death and blood. I don't know if they had any kind of religion at all, but they practiced these really sick rituals." He swallowed hard and hugged Manara to himself, tightly, as if her presence could hold his demons at bay. "I was lucky enough to not know about it for several years. I saw Rachel as the sweet woman she portrayed to the rest of the world, a loving replacement for the mother I missed so much. I loved her, as a son loves a mother. Innocently. It wasn't until I was fourteen that anything changed, for me. I came home from school a little early one evening, to find Rachel in the basement, blood and animal parts all over the place. She was just sitting there, in the middle of it, naked and smiling, like some damned gargoyle." He shuddered violently, and she knew he struggled against terrifying memories. "She'd been bathing in the blood, I think. She was covered in it, and it was everywhere. The whole place looked like the Marquis de Sade's slaughterhouse. I nearly puked on the spot, it smelled so disgusting." He turned his head away, and she knew he was fighting the urge to be ill again; the memory cut so deeply into him. "I haven't eaten meat since that day; the mere sight reminds me of her." He grimaced. "I was a stupid idiot to ever think she hadn't seen me come in; she'd probably been waiting for me. When I tried to sneak back out, she looked right at me and said to come kiss her hello. There was no way in hell I was going anywhere near her, but a part of me was begging for a sign that it was all some horrible nightmare I was going to wake up from. I thought I could outrun it, but, when I tried to run, these two guys suddenly appeared behind me. They were both built like linebackers and scowling like monsters. They grabbed me, and I fought like hell to get away, which was probably as dumb as it was useless. One of them broke my arm in three places, keeping me still long

enough for the other one to strap me down on this table Rachel had in the middle of the room. It was sticky as hell, covered with blood and animal guts. I must have passed out, because when I came to, Rachel was cutting me, all over.” His lips curled in disgust. “She was lapping up my blood like some kind of damned animal. Then she said some words I’ve never understood. She...” he flinched away from the memories, and said, “There are things no mother should ever do to her child. It killed me, inside.” He choked out the words, his arms closing convulsively around Manara as he hid his face against her neck. She felt moisture against her skin and felt tears clog her own throat as he croaked, “I was locked up in that basement, smelling rotten meat and blood, for three days. I finally broke out through a basement window and took off. I ran away, and I never looked back. When I heard she’d died, several years later, I realized I was already dead. There was a part of me just gone, vanished. She took it with her, to whatever Hell she found.”

Manara squeezed his hands beneath her own, tears flowing silently down her face. He was wrong. He looked back, every day of his life. This was where he had gone, that night he’d captured her in the desert. It was the same place he’d spent two agonizing months, unconscious and pleading to be released in fevered sleep. She’d thought it was a prison memory he’d relived, but now—Ishtar help her!—she knew his prison was no memory. He carried it with him, worse than any hellish torture he’d endured since. And she had brought it all back to him! From the well of her memory, her own mother’s final words to her echoed.

*“The Gods test harshly the mettle of humanity. The brave and the wise do not stay the course. Only the strong and the foolish survive.”*

She had been a fool, she decided with a small sob. She had foolishly believed that she could have it all—her temple, her lover, and her destiny—without a price. But she’d paid the ultimate price for her folly. She’d betrayed a man already betrayed by life. She only hoped she was strong enough to set things right again.

## Chapter Sixteen

“There is something I must tell you, as well.”

The words were spoken so quietly that Matt thought he’d imagined them, at first. But the rigid set of Manara’s shoulders and the stark pallor of her skin told him otherwise.

“What is it?” he asked softly, squeezing her gently. “Please, Manara. I promise you I’ll never judge you again.”

She drew in on herself, her shoulders sagging in defeat.

“Do not be so hasty in your promises, Matthew. I have known for a long time that I would one day be judged for my crimes.” She turned, her sad gray eyes meeting his worried gaze. “I only prayed that I would never have to confess them to you.”

Matt’s heart clenched at the hollow tone of her voice and the stark misery in her eyes. What could she possibly have done that was so horrible she didn’t want him to know?

“My name,” she said quietly, her eyes averted from him, “is Manara Binte Alzena Abd Ishtar. I was, at birth, the sworn Priestess of Ishtar and the chosen Poet-Priestess—*Mukarramma*—meant to protect the holiest of Ishtar’s temples. I was raised and trained in the Temple of Ishtar in Syria, and it was all I had ever known, until my sixteenth year. Angered by the restrictions placed upon me and bored with temple life, I fled the temple at sixteen, swearing I would never go back.” A wistful smile spread across her face. “In the year that followed that decision, I met with a man named Percy Lannard. I discovered quite quickly that he was a spy for the CIA, but my association with him was to be very brief.” Pain touched her eyes, and Matt wished he could take that sorrow from her. She looked abandoned. “Within a few months of his tutoring, Percy was murdered by men who claimed to be part of al-Ashid, with whom I believe you are familiar.”



Matt nodded. Al-Ashid was a terrorist cell out of Syria, led by Ra'id Al-Mawsil. He also remembered that the CIA had lost a network with inroads to al-Ashid several years ago, and then suddenly picked it up again.

"When Percy was murdered, I was angry. Very, very angry. He was like a father to me, a wise and noble man who did his best to both protect me and show me the world. I took what he had taught me and opened a channel to his superiors in the United States. Matthew," her voice dropped to a whisper as her eyes fell again, "*I am Star.*"

The blood drained from Matt's face at that softly spoken confession. There had to be some mistake! Gentle, giving Manara couldn't possibly be the cold, effective spy he'd heard so much about! It was ridiculous, laughable... but it had the ring of absolute truth to it. Flashes of memory hit him. A woman in white at the docks of Sidon. Her dark, shocked eyes when she'd watched him get into the car. The flashes of white he'd seen as his team had headed into that damned canyon. Manara, framed by a setting sun, standing on the canyon wall before his world had gone dark after the explosion. It all made an eerie, Twilight-Zone kind of sense.

"Why didn't you tell us to be looking for a woman? Why didn't you warn us about the canyon?"

"I could not!" She shook her head sharply in frustration. "I did not know who I could trust. In one of the last conversations Percy and I had, he told me that he thought someone in his organization had sold him out. He did not know who, or why. When he was murdered, I informed his superiors, as Star, that I would be taking up where he had left off, but I refused to identify myself at all. I told them that it was safer for us all if they did not know who I was." She sighed. "I did not know who I could trust, and my work was twice as dangerous as Percy's had been. I would have placed not just myself, but also my mother and her people, at risk if al-Ashid had discovered I was Star. I am hated enough in this world for being neither a Moslem nor a proper woman. But for Ra'id Al-Mawsil, the hatred is very personal." Her eyes kindled with a blend of regret and rage that caused Matt's lungs to seize in dread. "You see, Ra'id is my brother."

Matt nodded. "I heard what you asked that bastard in the desert. Why would he want to kill you?"

She sighed heavily and turned her face from him as if, by doing so, she could avoid the unpleasant truths she spoke. "Ra'id and I share the same mother, but while he knew his father, I did not

know mine. Ra'id's father was deeply in love with my mother, and she could not get him to understand that she could love no man. He became bitter and vengeful. When I was but a baby, he took Ra'id away and filled his head with hateful thoughts." Her expression was so sad that Matt ached to kiss away her pain. He wanted to tell her to stop, that the past was unimportant. But her past, and her association with Ra'id Al-Mawsil, could mean the difference between life and death for them all. "Ra'id will do anything to destroy me, whom he sees as the one who kept our mother and his father apart. It has never been about religion, though he uses that excuse. After I ran away from the temple, his hate abated some, and he no longer saw me as a threat. He let me be, for those years. For Ra'id to discover that I was giving information to your CIA, I would have signed my own execution warrant, and Percy's vital work would have gone unfinished."

She met his gaze then, her eyes imploring him to understand, as she murmured, "When I realized you had been taken in by Ra'id's decoy, I tried to warn you. I followed that car as far as I could, but he made turns to throw me off, and I could not find your hiding place. I stayed outside the city, waiting for you, and saw his men planting mines. I planned to warn you the moment I saw you, but you did not come my route, and I failed to get to the canyon in time to stop you. Because of my weakness, those men are dead." She stared bleakly down at her hands. "These hands are as red with blood as Rachel Murray's." When her eyes lifted again, they were full of grief and self-loathing. "It is your right to despise me."

"No!" Matt's hands reached to clasp hers, his eyes clouded with rage and grief. "*Never* compare yourself to Rachel! She did those things because she enjoyed them, and never showed one ounce of regret or remorse for it. I know you haven't found any reason for pride in what you've done. You've tortured yourself over all those deaths."

Her eyes widened, surprised at his vehement defense. "How did you...?"

He reached to touch her face gently, his smile so tender it stole her breath away. "I can see it, in your face and eyes. I just wish I'd recognized it sooner, realized what it was. I should have seen it; I've been there, myself. Manara, yours was a crime of omission, an understandable enough decision, considering the risk you took. That took guts, lady. You stood to lose everything, but you did what you could to save people you didn't even know." The pride shining in his eyes was unmistakable and resurrected hope in Manara's heart. "You can't blame yourself for my mistakes. I was the seasoned

operator, and I knew something was wrong from the start, but I ignored my own instincts.” His brow wrinkled in worry as he captured her gaze, confusion clouding his eyes. “What I still don’t understand is why you’ve risked coming the whole way to Iraq. Didn’t you say your temple’s in Syria?”

Manara felt bitter pain close over her heart. This was her true crime, the one she could never forgive herself for, if she lived a thousand years. She knew she was showing him her most raw pains, but she was past caring, past hiding her shame. Better that he know it all, that he know exactly how bloody her hands really were. Better he realize now what a coward she was.

“Not anymore.” Sadness washed through her, and she felt Matthew’s arms enfolding her, but she refused his comfort and his touch, pulling away. “I was a restless, angry fool. I did not want my destiny, my heritage, or my responsibilities. I ran away from the temple, wanting nothing more than to get away. I did not want to face the future. I was content to let it happen without me, because I told myself my mother was deluded, that there was no danger. But, deep inside, I was terrified. I was afraid she was right, I was afraid of what she had accepted. I thought, if I could get far enough away, I could hold back the future. It could not happen without me, right?”

She laughed bitterly in answer to her own question. “I was a fool and a coward. Five years ago, on the night of my twentieth birthday, I dreamed a wave of terror and death so catastrophic that it shook the center of the world. It was, I knew at the time, the same vision my mother had been granted, just before my birth.”

She squeezed her eyes closed against heart-rending memories. How blind she had been! “I... I convinced myself it was just a dream that it could not happen if I was not there. But, deep inside, I knew it would find me, wherever I went. There was nowhere to hide. For two years, I continued to tell myself it was a dream, though it tortured me night and day.” She shivered as her mind flashed over those visions of blood and death. The tormented screams of the dying, whom she had abandoned in her selfish fear, echoed in her ears without mercy, even after all this time. The nightmares had yet to fade away, and the pain was as fresh as the day she’d returned to the temple. She sucked in a shuddering breath, and managed, “Finally, I could stand it no longer. I ran, quite literally, to Ishtar’s Temple near Sidon, and threw myself at the altar, begging Her to take the vision away.” She drew a deep, shuddering breath, her head shaking slowly. “She answered my prayers, after a fashion. In another vision, She told me that I could stop the wave of death. All I had to do was return to Her service and fulfil my destiny. I

had been raised, tutored, and protected as the Poet-Priestess. Only my sacrifice could save the temples from desecration.” She stopped, her shoulders quaking with silent tears.

After a moment, she managed to continue. “Chastened, I returned to my mother’s temple, hoping to reconcile the bitter words that had passed between us years before.” Tears burned her cheeks, and her heart cracked with the memory of that humbled homecoming and the horror that had awaited her at its end.

“It was not to be. I arrived to find the temple a smoking ruin. Ra’id’s rage had finally consumed him, and he had gone over the edge of madness. Men from al-Ashid had discovered who I was, and they fell on my mother’s temple with the blood-thirst of a barbarian horde. They...” she shuddered, sobbing aloud now. “They butchered my mother and her women, and left words, scrawled in blood, on the walls. Those words I see every night, when I close my eyes. Then they burned out the temple. I found...”

She buried her face in her hands, shivering uncontrollably, but not with cold. After a moment, she managed, “I found the children. They had been tied up in the altar room and left for the flames! It was...” she swallowed hard. “It was horrible to see, and worse to know that its cause had been me. Those innocent babies had paid for *my* sins!”

She was sobbing wildly, and Matt felt his heart break for her. He had called her an innocent, once. Now, he realized just how wrong he had been. She had witnessed the most violent brutality known to man and carried the weight of it as if it were her own crime and not another’s. She was a survivor.

“Shh,” he murmured, pulling her into the shelter of his arms. “It gets easier, with time.”

Her head snapped up, her eyes flashing with angry heat. “It never gets *easier*!”

“Manara—”

“Spare me your platitudes, Matthew,” she said as she pulled from his grasp, as regal as any queen. Only, Matt knew that aloofness was Manara’s defense mechanism, meant to hide pain she didn’t think she had a right to feel.

“I’m not telling you that the pain goes away, Manara,” he said gently, lightly grasping her chin as he turned her face back toward his and let her see the truth in his eyes. “But the memories do get easier to live with, in time.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and Matt loosed a tormented groan as he pulled her back into his embrace, rocking her as he asked, “What happened after the temple?”

She heaved a shuddering sigh. “I returned to Sidon, and my anger rode with me. I wanted blood. I wanted those men dead, at my own hands.” Her eyes raised, full of challenge. “Now, tell me you still think I share nothing with your Rachel Murray!”

She was trying to push him away with her words. She wanted to cling to her grief and guilt. Matt’s expression hardened. He’d be damned if he was going to let her shoulder weight she hadn’t earned. “You share nothing with Rachel. She wouldn’t have cared about those children. You wanted revenge. That’s human. But you didn’t do it. You didn’t kill those men, did you?”

“Ra’id Al-Mawsil still lives. Do you have any need to ask more?”

“There. You just proved my point.” He took her hands, rubbing them gently. “These hands are beautiful and clean. Did you ever think that maybe you left that temple so that you’d be spared when it came down?”

She swallowed, glancing away from his tender gaze. “If I had not left, those men would never have had a reason...”

“You don’t know that. Manara, I’ve dealt with these kinds of people, all over the world. Fanatics are fanatics, and they’ll make up a reason if they can’t find one. Besides, from what you’ve told me, your leaving probably saved your mother, for a few years, anyway. And I can’t help thinking that, if you hadn’t left that temple, neither one of us might be here today. You save lives, sweetheart. That’s got to even the score.”

She relaxed slightly, settling into his embrace, and Matt felt his heart ease. She was so innocent and so very precious to him. He couldn’t bear for her to see herself as anything but pure and good.

“So, why’d you go to Sidon? It couldn’t have been easy, crossing the border.”

She laughed darkly. “One woman, on horseback? I slipped across in the night. I went to the temple, to save what lives I could.” Her chin raised, satisfaction gleaming in her gray eyes. “I was not too late, that time.”

He knew. Those women in the camp. They'd been her priestesses, her faithful flock from Sidon.

"But why come to Iraq? Surely you don't expect religious tolerance here!"

"No," she admitted quietly. "I go to Nineveh."

"So you said. But what do you want with a bunch of ruins?"

She smiled that secret smile. "The city is ruins, true. But the true Temple of Ishtar was spared the destruction, buried beneath the ruins of the public temple."

He made a confused sound. "So you expect to just waltz in and set up housekeeping?"

She shook her head. "It is... *complicated*. The evil I had dreamed of? It bides its time locked inside the Temple. To reclaim the Temple, I must face Ashurbanipal's demon."

"What?"

Manara sighed resignedly. "Ashurbanipal was an ancient king of Nineveh and a priest of Ishtar, back when men were still permitted to officiate temple duties. He was a decent man and a good king, in his youth. Never more bloody or driven than his times demanded. Then, on the eve of a great battle, he knelt before the Temple altar and asked Ishtar to guide him to glory on the coming morn. Legend says he had suffered a nightmare of death and dishonor on the field of battle, and he would pay any price to see those events never come to pass. In the end," she shook her head sadly, "he was to pay the ultimate price."

"What happened?"

"As he knelt in supplication, a spirit appeared before him, guised as a woman of surpassing beauty. She promised him victory and eternal life, if he would carry her in his heart all his days. Ashurbanipal believed her to be Ishtar and joyfully accepted."

Matt could see where this was going. Personally, he thought Ashurbanipal was a fool. "Who was she really?"

Manara frowned. "No one is really certain. Some believe she was a succubus, tempting him with the irrational and toying with his sexuality, since he eventually began dressing as a woman and was undecided in his sexual preference. Others believe she was a *djinn*, jealous of his devotion to Ishtar. There are even legends which claim it to be an ancient power, trapped in the desert before humanity

arrived. There are many versions of who she was, but they are unanimous in declaring her a source of great evil.”

Matt shook his head in disbelief. “It sounds like some warped fairy tale!”

She turned somber eyes on him. “It is a very real and deadly, tale. Ashurbanipal went mad after he made his pact with the demon. He slew men by the thousands without cause to satiate the demon’s lust for blood and death. He shed human blood on the altar of Ishtar, defiling the most sacred Temple and rousing the Goddess’ wrath. He bled Mesopotamia like a slaughtered ox and claimed it all to be for the glory of Ishtar. Finally, the Goddess became so furious with him that She struck him down and destroyed the priesthood. From that day on, only women have been allowed to officiate Temple duties, with the exception of the one man She has chosen.”

Matt shifted uncomfortably. “Why do I get the feeling this story isn’t over?”

“Because it is not. The demon slumbered in the Temple after Ashurbanipal, and later Nineveh, was destroyed. It has taken many forms over the centuries, luring unsuspecting men to Nineveh, in hopes one will loose it upon the world again. Now, it has found just such a man.”

Her softly spoken admission closed Matt’s heart in the grip of icy terror, and he knew, as certainly as he knew his own soul, who she referred to. “Al-Mawsil.”

She nodded bleakly. “His madness, loosed as it was upon Ishtar’s temples, was all the proof I needed. He is nearing Nineveh, if he is not already there. If he releases the demon, humanity will suffer as it has not suffered in millennia.”

Matt stared morosely into the fire. He had believed Manara was sick, like Rachel had been. Without giving her a chance to defend herself or explain her beliefs, he’d condemned her as evil and self-serving. The truth was staggering. She had shown a selfless dedication that he had longed for and a goodness that gave him faith in humanity again. Did it really matter what god she believed in? He had never been a particularly religious man, and he knew, in his heart, that it wouldn’t have mattered if he’d been a devote priest. It didn’t matter what she called the face of Deity. She believed in *life*, in its sanctity and blessedness, and that was all that really mattered.

“I’ll help you, Manara,” he promised her softly, lifting one hand to brush back long strands of her silky hair. “I’ll help you get your temple back.”

## Chapter Seventeen

As Manara's eyes lifted, full of unshed tears and shining gratitude, Matt knew that no other woman on earth would ever compare to her in his eyes. Like a flash of heat lightning, he knew he loved her. When, or even how, it had happened was a mystery to him, but he suspected it wasn't a recent revelation. He'd been falling in love with her since he'd first met her eyes across that noisy dock in Sidon. Now, all he was aware of was the press of her softness against him, her deep, limpid eyes, and her soft, full lips. With a small groan, he surrendered to his heart's dictates, lowering his face toward hers.

"I'm sorry," he breathed, just before his mouth settled over hers, and he poured all the passion, need, and longing in him into his kiss.

Manara moaned softly, sinking against him, her face lifted to receive his probing kiss. She had longed for this, for his touch and his lips, for the love she saw lurking in his muddy eyes. She had feared, after that night he'd captured her, that his touch would never again be one of passion, only violence. She'd seen no love in that dark gaze, only fear, pain, and betrayal. The road back had been rocky, both of them hidden behind pride and private misery. That they had made it back, together, filled her with ecstatic joy. Now, as she gave herself up to him, she felt the gathering of power, and knew her time had finally come. Time to love, and to heal.

Matt's pulse thrilled to the sudden change in Manara. Gone were the walls, the almost primordial distance she had insisted upon maintaining since their first heated encounter in her tent. The woman in his arms now was the one he'd always suspected lurked behind Manara's walled gaze. She was pure fire, and breathtaking. There was no surrender, no simple obedience to the moment, or exhausted capitulation. Her lips clung and offered, freely, a passion deeper and more enduring than time itself.



Matt changed the angle of his kiss, rocking her lips open beneath his to plumb the depths of her mouth. She groaned in answering passion, her tongue meeting and returning his exploration as one hand circled his neck, pulling him closer. Then she was turning in his arms, kneeling between his thighs, her hands on his face as they lost themselves in a kiss that bound their hearts across centuries.

Matt brought his hands up, making short work of the buttons on her BDU shirt. He pushed the material away as he broke their kiss, his mouth moving against her jaw and throat. She moaned softly in response, and then suddenly pulled away.

Matt's eyes opened warily, afraid she was rejecting him again. He would let her walk away, if that's what she wanted, but he knew it would kill him. As he watched that softly seductive, mysterious smile cross her face, his heart nearly stopped, and he wondered hazily what she could possibly be up to now.

"In ancient times, the Priestess of the Temple danced for the King once every spring, to bring the power of Ishtar into the union of land and man," she explained softly as she rose to her feet. "It was meant to ensure prosperity and good fortune for the coming year."

Matt's breath stopped, and he stared, his gaze avid, as Manara's hips started to slowly undulate. He'd spent enough time in the Middle East, and he knew belly dancing when he saw it. This *wasn't* it. Manara's steps were woven with an intricacy that might have long ago spawned the subtle dance most of the world knew, but hers was more graceful, and much more provocative. Somehow, she managed to make the bulky BDUs seem more enticing than the sheerest negligee. Moving slowly on her bare feet, she rotated her hips in a motion that left him dizzy with desire. Her dance wove a spellbinding tale all its own of seduction, lust, and love. With each complex step, she grew less contained and more beautiful. Matt had never felt so deeply aroused, or so acutely aware, as he felt now, watching her supple body bend and weave to a rhythm he swore he could almost hear, pounding in his ears.

Slowly, her shirt disappeared, followed by the bulky pants. She wore nothing else, finishing her now-frenzied dance in bare splendor. Her final movements brought her directly over him, and she dropped, sheened in perspiration and panting lightly, so that she straddled his lap. Her eyes, locked on his, were full of heat and need that tripped his pulse over the edge and into pure ecstasy.

He reached to touch her bare shoulders, finding her skin as soft and supple as he remembered. Slowly, he slid his hands over her shoulders and down her back, tangling his fingers in her long, dark

hair as he buried his lips in the warm hollow of her neck. He heard her gasp and moan as she pressed closer, as greedy for sensation as he. He breathed in her scent, life-warm and feminine, touched with that spicy fragrance she claimed to be frankincense but he knew only as Manara.

Manara's eyes closed on a soft moan as she felt Matt's hands on flesh sensitized by her temple dance. She wanted his hands everywhere, his mouth on her skin. She wanted to touch him, to feel warm skin where there was only soft cloth. Frantically, her fingers pulled at the cotton of his shirt, the material tearing in her haste.

"Easy," Matt murmured as he lifted his head to look into her eyes, a slow, sexy smile inching across his face.

She didn't *want* easy, Manara thought rebelliously as her pulse kicked up another notch. She wanted fast and frantic. She wanted to know that nothing was capable of halting this, least of all her own foolish fears. Matthew must have read her intentions in her eyes, because his touch suddenly changed, softly stroking, calming even as he aroused.

"It's all right, sweetheart," he murmured as he trailed light kisses across her face and neck. "We're all alone out here. I checked everything when we got here, remember? And I don't have any other plans." His gaze narrowed on her face, uncertain. "Do you?"

Not if her life depended on it, Manara decided with a delicious shiver as Matt's fingers played gently over the peak of her left breast. Smiling tremulously, she reached to help him out of the ripped t-shirt, running her hands softly over the smooth, hard planes of his chest. He was built like she'd imagined a warrior would be, all muscles and angles and virile strength. His skin was sleek beneath her hands, his heartbeat flatteringly fast. His eyes were slitted in desire as he obligingly returned her playful explorations with his own more knowledgeable caresses. Manara felt tears sting her eyes as, in the half-light, she traced the thin ridges of old scars across his chest, knowing that each one cut straight through to his noble, loving heart. Hesitantly, she bent to press soft kisses along each scar, hoping to replace their pain with new joy. She heard his growling moan, felt his hands tangle in her hair, and knew she would do anything to release him from his nightmarish past. She loved this man, battered heart and all.

Matt gently drew Manara away as he felt his control fraying, drawing a deep breath of chilly night air to regain control of the needs and desires that clawed at him. He hadn't expected her gentle, loving kisses, and each sent a spike of pure, tender desire ricocheting through him. But he didn't want to lose control. Not yet. Staring into Manara's passion-glazed eyes, he knew he had to make this good for her. She might want him, heart and mind, but that didn't change the fact that she was still a virgin. Pulling her against himself, he covered her mouth with his own, pouring his passion into that tender assault as he rose up, lowering her swiftly but gently to the sandy floor.

Manara's breath exploded from her lungs on a small cry as Matt transferred his mouth to the sensitive peak of her breast, suckling and laving her tender flesh. She strained toward him, her fingers clenching against his head and shoulders as slick skin moved against and beneath her own. Her legs came up, anchoring around his waist as she tried to pull him closer to the aching, fiery core of her being. The barrier of his pants frustrated her, and she tossed her head in defiant need as he reached to gently disengage her legs.

"Easy, baby," he whispered, smoothing his hands over her bare thighs and hips. "You've got a ways to go yet."

"Matthew," she begged breathlessly, her body fretting in unfulfilled need.

"I know, sweetheart. I know," he murmured, trailing kisses down the inside of one raised thigh. Closing his eyes, he prayed for control as he'd never prayed for anything in his life. If he never did another thing right, he had to get this right. This woman owned his heart and probably his soul, and she was a virgin. Dear God, what was he doing? It was like some twisted test, pitting the darkest soul with the cleanest to see if one would taint the other. He'd never slept with a virgin before. Hell, he hadn't realized that they still existed, with all the teenage pregnancies out there. But, God help him, he wasn't strong enough to resist Manara; he never had been. He wanted to touch, to taste, to fill himself with her sweetness, her trusting beauty, while he could. As his lips reached the soft delta of her thighs, he felt her stiffen, then soften with a whimper of pleasure, and knew, no matter what, he couldn't fail her.

She'd never felt sensations like these. With his clever hands and mouth, Matthew was taking her somewhere she had never been, rising on a spiral of need higher than Babel's Tower, until she felt she

might die. She opened her eyes, staring into the flickering shadows of firelight that danced across the hut's ceiling as he took her over the edge of sanity and into soul-shattering ecstasy.

She had barely begun to recover when he rose over her and paused, looking down with a worried frown belied by the tender need in his eyes.

"Manara," he breathed her name through teeth clenched in painful desire. "I need you... but I don't want to hurt you."

She smiled softly, running her hands up his arms and over his shoulders, tugging lightly as she whispered, "I trust you, Matthew."

With that, she raised her hips and felt the first nudging of his flesh parting hers. He stiffened with a choked groan, and then sank into her in one swift, smooth slide. She felt a twinge of pain, then a completeness that bordered on all-new ecstasy as she shifted to take him fully.

"Manara," he gasped her name like a prayer of salvation, and she felt the tremor of their joining settle deep inside of her. His eyes opened then, and he looked down at her with a glazed, concerned look in his dark eyes. "I'm sorry, baby. So... sorry."

She shifted against him, feeling sensation flash inward even as he gasped and groaned. "Love me, Matthew."

His hands reached to grasp her thighs, lifting them as he slowly filled her again. She gasped, reaching for him, as he set a rhythm made to take them to the stars. Her earlier show was merely a dim shadow of this older, more primal dance. Their mingled breathing melted to moans and whispered promises and endearments that shuddered across the pages of time. Insanity returned to Manara as she strove toward ecstasy. Then, with a cry, she was there, and her eyes opened as her body embraced his, and she watched his eyes go blind for one shatteringly perfect moment in time. And, as Manara slowly melted into the cool sand, she understood at last why love was the greatest magic in the world.

## Chapter Eighteen

Someone was calling her name. With a soft smile, Manara recognized the voice as Matthew's. His warm fingers were gripping her shoulders, and he was gently shaking her. Languidly, she stretched, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him down for a sleepy kiss.

Matt broke away after only a second, bringing Manara fully awake. Opening her eyes, she stared up at him in confusion, noting brownish-red smears on his face.

"As much as I'd love to continue, sweetheart, we've got a...situation," he said wryly, his eyes remaining grimly worried. Her gaze sharpening, Manara identified the stains on his face and clothes for what they were—blood. Instantly, she was up, pushing him down.

"Where are you injured? Are you dizzy? Where —?"

"Manara!" He caught her hands, halting her frantic motions with his steady, reassuring gaze. "Calm down, babe. It's not *my* blood."

She stared at him, confused. If it wasn't *her* blood, and it wasn't his, either, then... "Where —?"

"Get dressed. Much as I hate to do this, it's better if I show you."

Manara's brow remained furrowed as she followed his instructions. She didn't like the sound of what he'd said. He'd called it a situation. What kind of situation bloodied a man's face and clothes while sealing his lips?

A few moments later, Manara had her answer and wished she'd never asked. Standing beside Matt, her eyes filled with tears and her face frozen in horror, Manara viewed the carnage laid out before her eyes and felt ill. Unsteadily, she groped for Matt's arm, clinging to him with all the strength she possessed.

"I found them this morning, on the other side of the ridge. It's not pretty, over there."

Her eyes snapped to his grim face as he spoke those quiet words. Her stomach heaved as her mind painted grotesque pictures, but she forced herself to ask the question she really didn't want answered.

"There are more?"

"Just goats and sheep. Animals," he reassured her quietly, placing a protective arm around her as she swayed violently. Squeezing her gently, he asked, "Are you okay?"

Manara felt her stomach heave again. *Okay?* Anything but, she thought queasily as she stared at the mutilated bodies of a man and woman, both dressed in the remnants of sensible clothing common to the Kurdish herders. She didn't have to ask who they were, or who had brutally dismembered them both. She already knew.

"It was... it was like this at the temple, too," she whispered weakly as she clung to Matt's steady support. "Bodies torn apart as if by some terrible beast."

She took a shaky step toward the bodies, but Matt caught her, pulling her back. His eyes were tender and filled with concern as he gazed down into her face. A shadow touched those muddy eyes, and she realized that the demon that had done this evil thing had already reached across the span of oceans and polluted another heart with such vileness it had been driven to butchery. The horrible memory of Rachel Murray had never left Matthew, though he had hardened himself against its influence over time. But there was fear, beneath that hardness. Fear for *her*.

"I want you to go back to the camp, in Syria," he told her quietly. "I don't want you here."

Her gray eyes turned steely. "You cannot send me back. You will need me, Matthew. What if you get hurt?"

"I'm a trained paramedic, Manara. I can deal with almost anything." His eyes pleaded with her, even as he said, "Things will happen. Things I don't want you to see."

She had a terrible feeling she knew exactly what kinds of things he referred to, and she was damned if she was going to let him die in some foolish quest to prove himself a better person than Rachel Murray. She had to make him see that he already *was* a good man.

"There are wounds no modern medicine can heal, Matthew. And even if you should get through without wounding at all, you will not find the Temple without me." She faced him down staunchly, her chin lifted bravely as she looked directly into her fate. "Do not attempt to shield me from my duty,

Matthew. No living creature, man or beast, can halt what must happen. I learned that at great cost to myself. I will not run now, when I would stand to lose everything I love. I will go on, with or without you.”

His eyes flashed in frustration. “Would you open your eyes and face reality for once? Goddammit, Manara, this isn’t about your temple, or some mythic demon, anymore! This is about a madman who’s slaughtering everyone and everything he can find! I don’t want him anywhere near you! How would you defend yourself?”

She snatched the Beretta from its holster at Matt’s hip, brandishing it determinedly. A tight, humorless smile inched across Matthew’s face, and she knew he wasn’t happy about what she’d done. His eyes spoke more eloquently than words ever could have, and she saw that he was afraid for her.

“Manara,” he tried softly, reaching to clasp her shaking hands as she pointed the gun at him. “Have you ever fired a gun before?”

“Yes.” She expertly disengaged the safety and nearly smiled at his startled expression. Clearly, he’d once again managed to underestimate her. “Percy taught me how. For my safety, he said.”

“Ever used one to kill a man?”

She drew a sharp, trembling breath. “No.”

Her head rose in the next moment, and her eyes were firm. “But that does not mean I could not do it. I was not permitted to, nor did I have cause, before. My blood innocence was as much a requirement then as my virginity. I was to remain untouched by conflict until the reclamation of the Temple began.”

His eyes grew worried. “Last night...?”

She smiled, her face softening as she lowered the weapon. “Was the beginning. It is a long and dangerous journey I have undertaken, and no one is more aware of its many dangers than I, Matthew. However, I will not be turned back now, not by you or anyone else. To do so now is to admit I am not strong enough, and any weakness now will lose me the Temple and the lives of those I love. Matthew, I *must* go on.” She regarded him levelly. “Every step I have taken since I crossed the border has been tied to my Temple. This butchery is the work of a mind consumed by evil.” She gestured to the bodies. “If you think it is not connected to the demon within the Temple, then you have not heard a word I have been saying. Only I can stop this, now, Matthew, and I need your help.”

His eyes stayed on her for a long moment, and Manara's heart tripped in dread. To have come all this way only for him to reject her or turn her away... Her heart nearly stopped as he finally nodded, very slowly.

"All right. We'll do this thing together."

Relief poured through her, and Manara felt her knees quake with the force of her gratitude as her eyes filled with thankful tears. Her hands shook as she held out the gun to him. He studied it a moment, his eyes moving between the gun and her face, and then frowned and shook his head.

"Keep it. I have a feeling you're going to need it more than me."

As he walked away, she realized she would willingly sacrifice her innocence, and her life, to keep him safe. Somehow, in the months since that explosion in Lebanon, Matthew Raleigh had breached the defenses meant to keep her blissfully detached from the passions of men.

*Ishtar, help me!* She pleaded as she realized, with a pained heart, that she had fallen in love with a man she would soon have to let go.

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They were nearing Nineveh. Black Widow glanced at the man driving the battered old sedan and felt triumph bubbling through her. When she'd told Ra'id that his slut of a little sister was on her way to Nineveh, she'd had his complete attention and cooperation.

"They're on foot, Ra'id," she reminded him wryly as she steadied herself with one hand on the dashboard again. "I think it's safe to slow down."

He shot her a scowl. "If you had done as you were told and sat in the back—"

"I'd be laying back there in the sand somewhere. Don't give me that crap about a woman's proper place," she snapped. "This *is* my proper place. And you don't have to break land speed records to get there. She's not going to beat us to the temple."

His face twisted derisively. "You do not know these women as I do. Especially not the little virgin. They all have evil powers that they use to ensnare men, and they can appear suddenly, far from where you believe them to be, to torment any man they choose. My father told me this."



Black Widow bit back a laugh. Ra'id believed that the Daughters of the Star of Heaven were evil! What would he think if he knew he'd made a pact with the Devil, a pact to *become* the Devil?

"She's not a virgin anymore," she said instead, taking glee in the darkening of Ra'id's scowl. Apparently, the desire to murder one's sister was immaterial when it came to her interaction with the opposite sex. Ra'id looked protective as all hell.

"How do you know this thing?" He demanded sharply.

She smiled mysteriously; she wasn't about to let him know the truth. "You have your spies; I have mine."

He cast her a disgusted look. "If she is no longer a virgin, then she is no longer a threat."

"You fool!" Black Widow hissed, sitting upright sharply. "As long as she remains alive, the Poet-Priestess is a threat. Didn't you *read* those incantations on the tablets?"

"Fiction," he dismissed her words with a condescending sneer. "All that is of any value in those tablets is the location of the hidden door."

She laughed darkly. "Keep telling yourself that, sugar. In the meantime, we need to remain alert. Even if you don't believe your sister is a threat, the man who travels with her *is*."

His attention snapped to her. "What man is this?"

"A man you've already killed."

As Ra'id's face paled, Black Widow sat back, satisfied that she'd at last convinced Ra'id of the danger ahead. She needn't tell him that she could control Matthew if she wished. Ra'id wasn't going to live long enough for that to make a difference to him.

## Chapter Nineteen

The darkness was his ally. He had lived there for centuries, and he walked easily through the night hours, into the depths of humanity's nightmares. His kind were the genesis of nightmares, the true terror that brought even the strongest of men to their knees.

But there were those who could cage his power, and him, if they wished. A deep growl echoed in the dark corridors as he sought the minds of five who could destroy him and all of his kind. Two were far away, one in the grasp of an evil that would aid him. However, three were a danger to him, and one was more a danger than all the rest combined.

There. Another mind, powerful but unprotected from his assault. She came to him, a willing sacrifice. She hoped her purity would destroy him and save the one she loved. Foolish child.

Gold eyes gleamed in the gloom. This woman-child would be his way to freedom; with her blood, he could walk within the light of day and feed freely. Moreover, without her, the Warrior would surrender; she was his strength, and his source of salvation. The Warrior could not see his way clear to live, without her.

With an echoing laugh that rang with the horror of the Underworld, a terror that could kill stepped from the depths of time and into the dreams of the innocent who was his enemy's only salvation.

Manara writhed in her sleep, muttering in a language Matt didn't understand. He wanted to shake her awake, but couldn't dismiss the feeling that waking her would be unwise. This was no ordinary nightmare. That much, he knew beyond doubt. Her hands were frozen in a clawing position, occasionally swiping at the air around her, and the tears which had accompanied her nightmares the night after they'd found the two Kurds were eerily vacant from her face now. A determined scowl was etched on her face, and she looked as if she were fighting for her life.

That thought clenched around Matt's heart with icy fingers as he watched bloody slash marks open across the back of her hand, as if invisible claws raked her flesh. Whatever she was dreaming, wherever she was in her mind, it had the capacity to kill her! He had sworn, deep in his heart, that he'd protect her, but how did he shield her from her nightmares?

As Matt reached to wake her, Manara suddenly released a long, shuddering breath, and went limp in his arms. Panic seized Matt as he stared down into her pale, expressionless face. Damn it, no!

"Manara!" His heart clenched in dread, he shook her, hard. When she didn't respond, he raised quaking fingers to her throat, and nearly choked on his relief as he felt the strong, sure thud of her pulse. Trembling, he gathered her close, burying his face in her fragrant hair and pressing his lips to her warm, steady pulse. That she was alive was the only thing his grasping mind could latch onto. Nothing else mattered.

"Matthew?" Her sleep-clouded murmur drew his attention to her weary, hollow-eyed features, and his heart skipped another beat. What the hell...? Gone was the life-warm beauty that had first captured his attention, replaced by the waxy pallor he'd only ever seen on corpses, before. Her eyes, once bright and flashing, were dull and hollowed, sunken into dark pits on her face. They'd taken refuge in this cave to escape the chill of the night wind, because he'd been afraid she'd take ill after the last nightmare she'd had before this one had left her wheezing when she'd awakened. Now, he wondered if he'd only been prolonging the inevitable. Drawing a ragged breath around the fear clogging his throat, he smiled gently at her.

"Yeah, baby?"

"Why are you shaking?" she asked, confused, as she snuggled against him. "What is wrong?"

What was *wrong*? He groaned quietly as her breasts, covered only by the thin cotton of her t-shirt, pressed against his chest, her nipples already taut. What was wrong was that she was wasting away before his very eyes. What was *really* wrong was that, merely by being alive, she turned him on, even in this fragile, weary state. Fearful of discovery by the terrorists and aware of the dwindling time, they'd been pushing on hard, unable to snatch more than a few sweet, stolen caresses in the week since that night in the goatherd's hut. He was dying to lay her out and love her all over, but he was too worried about her. She was so fragile, now...

“Nothing, baby,” he lied softly as he slipped his hand beneath her shirt to fondle one breast lightly. Gently, he kissed her lips, then her neck, hating himself for even that one small lie. “You were having a nightmare.”

She moaned softly, pressing against his hand. Breathlessly, she murmured, “Do you think we could...?”

“I’d like nothing better,” he whispered with every breath of honesty in him, “but we need to be ready to move at a moment’s notice. Those bastards could be anywhere out there.”

He started to remove his hand, but she covered it through the shirt, stopping him. “Matthew, are you afraid of me?”

He stilled, his hand against the soft warmth of her skin, his expression frozen. “Why would you think that?”

“Because you are. You want me, you may even love me, but you are still afraid of me. You are afraid to do something wrong, something inappropriate. Why?”

He sighed heavily as his hand slid to rest against the soft dip of her waist.

“Manara, you’re an innocent. I’m not. I’ve done a lot of things, a lot of horrible, bloody things. And I know, better than anyone, that I’m capable of doing worse. I don’t want—”

“To tarnish the image you have of me?” She challenged, vitality flooding back into her face with her rising anger. “That is what you see, after all. An image. You have placed me on some high pedestal of purity and confined me there, to make yourself remember that I was a virgin before you. Matthew, by the old laws, no matter what happens, I am still a virgin, as long as I make my own choices. I may have physically been untouched before you, but I was never innocent of the act. My innocence was of blood. Brutality. As long as it is my blood which is spilt, I remain innocent, yes, but it is an act of prophetic necessity, not maidenly virtue.” She leaned up, planting a burning kiss on his lips. “Have you not realized yet that nothing you do is inappropriate to me? I will accept your desire, even your love, but never your guilt.”

Matt groaned, feeling her kiss sear through his soul. She was right. He had let his code of honor, his belief in her utter innocence, cloud the truth between them. She had been raised in a world where all acts of love and desire were sacred acts, as long as the emotions behind them were pure. He had assumed her virginity to remove her from that life, rather than place her at its center. He groaned

again as her fingers found and released the buttons on his pants, delving inside to caress burning flesh. Slipping his own hands down to undo her clothes as well, he covered her mouth with his own, swallowing her soft moans as she writhed against his stroking hands. Shifting, he settled her against him so that his hard flesh sank into the enveloping softness of hers. She gasped against his mouth, and then shifted to draw him deeper. Their union was frantic and needy, pulling them unerringly toward soul-splintering rapture. As it rocked through them, their hands and mouths locked with equal force, and two souls fused in one awareness.

## Chapter Twenty

“They should have been here by now.” Matt’s eyes anxiously scanned the empty desert. “Trevor may be a bit lax about details, but he’s never late. Nor is Pete. They should’ve been here when we got here.”

“Perhaps they are in hiding,” Manara suggested weakly as she settled herself on the sand with a small sigh of relief. Whatever the cause, she was grateful for the respite. Weariness throbbed in every muscle, and pain lanced every cell of her body. Stifling a gasp of agony, she stretched out her aching legs.

Instantly, Matt’s eyes were on her, worry darkening them almost black.

“Are you okay?”

She smiled wanly, unable to muster the energy for more than that action. She couldn’t tell him what was wrong. He’d override her desire to finish this mission and send her back to Syria, post-haste. No, she had long since decided she couldn’t tell Matthew about her power struggles with the demon. She could feel it already, its evil battering her day and night. Especially night. It was strongest then, and she fought for her very life in her sleep, getting very little actual rest. Only when Matthew held her in his arms did she truly sleep, unmolested by the demon’s torments. But Matthew had been acting guardsman, always alert for trouble, leaving little time for him to be by her side. Lack of true rest was making her weary and making it harder to fend off the attacks. So far, she had managed to cover the evidence well enough, with long sleeves and her camouflaged shirt buttoned high and tight around her neck. However, with each step she took closer to Nineveh, the demon’s presence grew stronger, and she grew weaker.

She looked up from her musing to find Matthew kneeling beside her, his face a mask of concern and his eyes roiling with fear.

“Manara?” He touched her cheek gently. “Are you okay?”

She forced herself to nod, though every pore of her being resisted lying to him. “I will be all right, Matthew. Just get me to my Temple.”

He nodded, leaning to brush a soft kiss over Manara’s lips. As he did, a hand fell heavily on his shoulder and a deep voice behind him announced, “Now see here! We’ll have none of that here, laddy!”

Matt spun to face his assailant, gun raised, even as Manara laughed weakly.

“You are a shade late to preserve my honor, Mr. Talladay,” she informed him lightly, even as she watched Matthew visibly relax when he saw his men.

Trevor Watkins grinned at her, a flash of white in the darkness. “I’m sure the boss has been doing a fine job of that!”

“Enough!” Matthew growled, but she knew he was more embarrassed than angry. “Why don’t you two report in properly, instead of making snide remarks? What did you learn?”

Peter Talladay grinned, and Manara could see that he, too, saw through Matthew’s gruff manner. He was clearly pleased that they had patched up their differences, and she felt the acceptance radiating from the taller man. Then, as her vision wavered, she thought she saw new grimness in Peter’s eyes. His words confirmed her fears; he had uncovered another of her secrets.

“I dug up Lazarus, while I was having a look about. He says there’s a group of radical extremists camped near the ruins of Nineveh. Quite a group, and growing by the day, according to Lazarus. From what he’s heard, even the Iraqi government was keeping a careful eye on our friends in al-Ashid. Apparently, even Saddam thought these lads are casting a little short of the pond.” He turned a thoughtful eye towards Manara, then looked back to Matt. “There’s more, but I don’t think now’s the time or place for it.”

Matt felt his heart sink as he watched Talladay’s troubled gaze shift again to Manara. What was it? Matt looked at the woman, his own gaze thoughtful.

“Wonder if there’ve been others like that herdsman?” He watched her blanch and saw Talladay’s expression grow even more grim. Quickly, Matt filled the two men in on what he and Manara had found. Trevor let out a low whistle as Matt finished.

“Damn, man, that’s not even terrorist activity! That’s just plain sick!”

"I think we all agree on that," Peter said quietly. "The question is, *why*? CIA never claimed he was more demented than the average terrorist. Even Hitler left his victims in one piece."

"Ra'id Al-Mawsil is not Hitler. Nor is he any longer in control of his own thoughts or actions," Manara said quietly, her eyes downcast. When they lifted again, those dark eyes were filled with fearful tears. "We must hurry, now. Our time is almost gone." She gave Matt a terrified look. "Soon, even I will be powerless to stop this madness."

And, with that, Manara slumped to the ground, her eyes closed. Matt, watching her, was filled with an unnamable fear. As a single, salty tear slipped from her shimmering lashes, he knew that, whatever lay ahead of them, he could not fail Manara. He couldn't bear to lose her, now.

"There's something you should know, Matt," Peter spoke in a murmur near him, drawing Matt's attention.

"What is it?"

"About the lass... Lazarus told me something of her. I mentioned that she'd saved us in Lebanon and brought us to Iraq."

Matt felt the fist of fear close around his heart. "And? What did Lazarus tell you?"

Peter's gaze rested on the unconscious woman, his gray eyes troubled. "He said she moves in circles many people can't. That she was the protégé of Percy Lannard, and that she went a little nuts after Lannard was killed. Lazarus said she even came to him, threatened to expose him if he didn't help her get into al-Ashid."

Matt started, turning to study Peter sharply as he rasped, "She wanted *into* that mess?"

Peter nodded. "Lazarus said she was hell-bent on revenge. He tried to talk her out of it, but she was having none of that. Said she'd get in one way or another, and she'd kill Al-Mawsil if it was the last thing she did." He laid a hand on Matt's shoulder companionably. "I'm sorry, Matt. I thought you should know."

Matt swallowed hard as his gaze rested on Manara's unconscious, muttering form. Finally, he understood that look he'd seen in her eyes and her need for this journey, and its end. Before, he'd thought it was misplaced zeal, even a little bit of crazy superstition. Now, he saw the woman underneath that controlled façade, and she was a terrified, guilt-ridden girl, unable to reconcile her own actions, or her survival, with the horrors she'd witnessed in Syria. Hunted by her only family, she was a



pariah to most of her world, and she felt that as keenly as a knife to her heart. Tears stung his eyes, and he wanted nothing more than to cradle her against him and promise her that nothing would ever hurt her like that again. Unfortunately, he couldn't make that promise. He'd long ago learned that life was pain. Only Manara seemed to ease his pain, to give him any hope, and he was powerless to offer her the same.

"I know why she did that," he admitted hoarsely to his friend. "It's not what you think. She wasn't in love with Lannard. When he was killed, she returned to Syria to find her home, and her mother, destroyed. She lost everything in one fell swoop. I'm not surprised she wanted to kill Al-Mawsil. I would have, too."

Peter studied Matt for a moment, and then, nodding slowly, muttered, "I'll say a prayer for the lass, then. Aye, and for us all, if we face that lot in the morning."

She had lost her way. She was struggling through suffocating darkness, a high-pitched squealing echoing in her ears and driving her closer to madness with every step she took.

As silence fell sharply, leaving her even more disoriented, Manara sucked in a deep breath to contain her sob of fear. She had been searching for something in this blackness; only, she could not remember what it was, and now the stillness was closing in on her.

"Poor little girl," purred a silky voice from the shadows. "You know you can't escape me, and you know you can't free him. You know all this, and yet, you still keep getting in my way. You're going to die, you know. You'll die, and for what? Nothing. Your precious Warrior-King already belongs to me."

"No." She fought the darkness as it closed around her. "I will free him."

A sinister laugh echoed through the space, and she felt ancient spells shackling her. "You are a sacrificial lamb; nothing more. What makes you think he even cares?"

And, as gold eyes gleamed from the shadows, a scream escaped her lips, and she knew she was about to die.

"Manara!" Matt shook the woman in his arms gently, trying to rouse her. He'd been patrolling the perimeter when he heard her cry out, the fear in her scream shooting bolts of pure terror through

him. Trevor was patrolling the perimeter now, and Pete crouched near the fire, alert to be of assistance if needed, but his gray gaze trained on the flames to give the couple privacy.

“Manara, wake up,” Matt tried again, fear clutching in his belly. “C’mon, baby.”

She stirred, and the relief that hit him had Matt sinking to the cool sand. With a quiet murmur in what he assumed was Sumerian, she turned into his embrace, and he started as he felt her hand come to rest at his waist.

“Sweetheart,” he warned against her ear, so that only she could hear. “We’re not alone.”

Her deep gray eyes blinked open, and her soft, sleepy beauty caused his breath to stall somewhere around his lungs. After a long moment, he finally remembered how to breathe. Raising a hand to stroke her dark head gently, he asked, “Are you okay? You screamed in your sleep.”

“Matthew,” she murmured brokenly, burrowing against him. “It was terrible. The demon...It knows who I am. It knows I am coming.” She clutched his shirtfront in her gloved hands, her eyes filling with terrified tears. “And there is another danger. One I cannot fight; one which wants your life-blood.” She swallowed hard, her hands tightening convulsively. “I sensed the bloodlust, and it... it was terrible, Matthew!”

“Shh.” He rocked her gently, pressing soft kisses to her hair. “Don’t worry about me, sweetheart. I can protect myself.”

She sighed shakily. “I am so weary.”

“Sleep,” he told her softly, shifting her weight against him so that she lay more comfortably. “I’ll be right here. I promise.”

He watched as her eyelids fluttered closed, and his throat tightened. She was so beautiful, and so very precious to him. So why did he have the feeling that he was about to deliver her into the hands of death? It was a feeling, and a future, that Matt would gladly sell his soul to prevent.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Something was wrong. Drastically. Matt frowned as he watched Manara's slow, weary steps. Ever since that night on the ridge when they'd last made love, she'd been slowly slipping away. Now she was tense, withdrawn, and moody. Whenever he touched her, she looked ready to burst into tears, and she avoided him whenever she could, agony and uncertainty burning in her deep, smoky gaze. Lately, Matt's dreams had been haunted with images of her dead, battered to a pulp and gushing fountains of blood.

His nightmares weren't far from the truth, Matt decided as he glanced at Manara again. She'd taken to wearing gloves and long sleeves, even in the heat of the day, but he'd still caught glimpses of flesh so discolored by bruises that it had been agony just to see. He hated to think of the pain she must be enduring, but he was hesitant to broach the subject again. The last time he'd mentioned her nightmares, she'd closed down, refusing to speak to or look at him for days. He couldn't risk that again. Not now. They were only a week away from the ruins of Nineveh, and he needed her cooperation. So, he held his fears inside and tried not to notice how every step was causing Manara pain.

From the corner of his eye, he watched her sway dangerously and tensed to be of assistance should she need it. As she took another step, Manara stumbled, and only Matt's quick reflexes stopped her from plummeting headfirst down the sandy slope of the dune. A pained cry was torn from her as his arm caught her, and he saw the tracks of tears coursing her face.

His heart breaking, Matt eased the woman to the sand with infinite gentleness and called out to his men.

"Pete! Trevor! Help me, here!"

Manara lulled into semi-consciousness now, her eyes glazed and unfocused and the pupils dilated. As Talladay and Watkins rushed to help, Matt carefully eased gloves and over-shirt from Manara, and his stomach convulsed in bone-chilling terror.

Manara's hands and arms were nearly black with bruises, the discolored patches broken only by the browns of scabbed slashes and the scarlet seeping of fresh wounds. The cuts were, remarkably, clean and uninfected, but Matt imagined a woman of Manara's obvious medical knowledge would know to keep the cuts washed and covered. Was that why she had worn the sleeves and gloves? Deep inside, Matt knew that was only one part of the reason.

Talladay whistled quietly through his teeth as he dropped down on Manara's other side, gazing at her arms, then up at Matt's pallid features.

"What d'you suppose the lass has been up to, Matt? How'd she come by these?"

Matt shook his head slowly. "I don't know, Pete. They've got to be recent. She's been covering up like this since we regrouped, but I saw some of the slashes on her hands before. They just *appeared*, while she was asleep. She's been having terrible nightmares..."

Talladay's gaze sharpened. "Think it's self mutilation?"

Matt blanched, remembering how the cuts had opened, as if by magic, across the backs of her hands.

"No," he answered, quietly but firmly. "I... I watched them appear. They just opened up, while she was struggling in some nightmare. I don't think she's been hiding them out of shame, either. There's got to be another reason."

"What other reason could there be, Matt?" Trevor asked quietly, from where he hunkered at Manara's feet. "This doesn't look like anything healthy."

"She said a demon..." Matt began quietly, and then trailed off, shaking his head. "No, that's just superstition, a bunch of legends she keeps talking about. There's got to be a *logical* explanation."

"Maybe not," Talladay replied softly, studying Manara's face with a pensive look. "Sinead believed in Faeries to her dying day. Swore she heard Bean Si wailin' the night before Da and Paddy died. Superstition can be a powerful thing if you believe in it, and even more so when it terrifies."

Matt frowned down at Manara's muttering, semi-conscious form. "Yeah, maybe, but we're never going to know if she doesn't wake up."

The three mercenaries and their unconscious charge stayed put that night, camped along the side of the dune. It wasn't the most secure spot, Matt knew, but he wouldn't risk moving Manara any

further. He sat next to the small fire Pete had built and cradled Manara in his lap as uneasiness and fear ate at him. This was the first time since he'd been strapped down in Rachel's basement that he'd felt totally helpless before the unknown. All he knew was that something was bleeding the life from the woman he loved.

"Fight, Manara," he pleaded against her ear for what had to be the hundredth time. His head rested against hers, as if through physical contact he could somehow pour his strength, his life, into her. "Come on, babe. You can fight this."

"M...Ma...thew." That single word seemed to take a supreme act of will power, but it filled Matt with newfound hope. She could hear him! Wherever she was, whatever held her under, she could hear him.

"That's it, sweetheart," he murmured encouragingly. "Follow the sound of my voice. Come back to me, Manara. Please. I can't do this without you, remember?"

The flicker of a smile touched her parched lips.

"I...re...member," she managed, and Matt nearly choked, torn between laughter and tears.

"You've got to come back, baby. Someone's got to keep me honest." He took her hand gently, raising it to his lips, and then placing it on his chest, where his heart pounded hard in fear. "What would I do without you?"

"T-trouble," she murmured, that faint smile back on her lips. Slowly, as Matt watched with bated breath, her dark eyes opened and looked up at him, brimming with grateful tears and emotions Matt was afraid to hope for.

"Welcome back," he whispered, stroking dark hair away from her face. He managed a tremulous smile, for her sake, even though the paramedic in him knew she was still far from well. Touching his fingers to the tear streaks on her cheek, he softly teased, "Where've you been all my life, beautiful?"

"Right... here," she breathed, her voice husky with disuse, as she flattened her hand over his heart. Matt's hard-won control nearly shattered at the soft, certain look in her eyes, and he gathered her closer, swallowing back tears of joy and fear.

"What's happening to you, Manara?"

"We...are...close."

"Yeah, I know. We've got less than a week left."

“What...date?”

He blinked at her. “The date?” She nodded. “April fifteenth. Tax day, back home. Why?”

Manara’s eyes filled with panic, and she struggled to rise. “Have...to...keep...going. Reach...temple...before...”

Matt’s eyes darkened. She was still too weak, too fragile. He’d be damned if he was letting her go racing off into the darkness now.

“Like hell you are, honey. You look like George Foreman’s been using you as a punching bag.” He softened as she gave him a hurt look. “You need to rest, right now. Rest and heal.”

She shook her head stubbornly. “No... time.”

Damn, but she was hardheaded and persistent, Matt thought admiringly. It was part of what he loved about her, but it drove him nuts at times. Like now. Swallowing his annoyance, he forced a lopsided grin. “Since when are you on a time table?”

She gave him a dark look and struggled against his restraining grasp. She was stronger than she appeared, Matt discovered with relief as she twisted in his arms. “Let me go.”

Biting back a smile at her furious tenacity, Matt tightened his grip, pulling her gently back against him to murmur in her ear, “Where would you go, and how would you get there alone, Manara? How can you reclaim anything, like this? Remember the goatherd.”

She froze in his arms, and the color drained from her face. Silently, Matt cursed himself for bringing that painful subject back up. Twining a strand of her glorious dark hair around his finger, he said, “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. But, Manara, you can’t sneak past these guys we’re up against. Especially not if you’re right about Al-Mawsil. They’ll be watching for you.”

“Matthew,” she turned to face him, her expression unyielding, “I have always been on a ‘time table,’ as you called it. I must reclaim the Temple by the Festival of Ishtar, in exactly seven days. If it is opened by anyone except Ishtar’s servants before that day, the demon held within will be released and become much more difficult to halt. Only I can awaken the Temple’s protector, and if I fail, death and destruction will rule the temple. Should that happen, my soul will be forfeit. I will be the demon’s first sacrifice in three millennia.”

And, as he studied her unflinching but frightened eyes, Matt had the sinking certainty that, whether he believed it or not, Manara spoke only the truth.

“That’s not going to happen,” he said darkly, clasping her close as if to shield her from that very future.

“Then *help* me, Matthew. Get me into the Temple before the Festival.”

He looked into her pleading eyes and nodded grimly. “How do we get in?”

Manara relaxed, relief playing across her face. “In the ruins of the public temple, there is a false tile. It leads to a series of tunnels that form the maze Sargon built. Only I and the demon know the way through to the altar. That is where we must go.”

“So why hasn’t it escaped on its own, if it knows the way?”

She shook her head. “It cannot. The demon of Ashurbanipal was chained to the Temple millennia ago. It cannot wander above the ground without a human host.”

Matt frowned, not liking the sound of that. “Does that mean it’ll possess whoever opens the entrance?”

She met his gaze staunchly and smiled softly. “Do not worry over me, Matthew. The demon cannot harm me, or you. It cannot reside in any but the body of one whose bloodlust rules his reason. A person like—”

“Al-Mawsil,” Matt finished for her in a rasp. Finally, he understood how their two journeys had come together. Manara had needed him, and his men, to help her gain the vengeance she’d sought. She’d saved their lives, so that they could save her from the death that had awaited her here.

Manara was nodding when his eyes moved back to her.

Matt swallowed hard as something else registered in his brain. Looking at Manara, he prayed his hunch was wrong. “This is pretty much a suicide mission for you, isn’t it? You never planned to make it out of the temple alive.”

She glanced away, her action more telling than any words could have been. Matt’s heart sank and his stomach clenched violently. How long had he dreamed of something pure, of a love untainted by Rachel’s act, or his own sins? He’d spent a lifetime searching for salvation, for something larger than himself that would make him feel once again worthy of living. With Manara, he’d found more than he’d ever dreamed. She was his salvation. With her trust, her gentleness, and her innocence, she had washed away the stain on his heart and soul. He swallowed hard, very much aware that he stood to lose

all of that, and more, in this. His heart rebelled at the mere thought of living without Manara. He couldn't do it. Not if he let her go to her death in that temple. There had to be another way.

"I'll get you in there, but you will *not* do anything foolish. Are we clear?" Manara opened her mouth to protest, but Matt cut her off with a scowl. She stared into his narrowed eyes for a long moment, and he watched her swallow hard as he repeated, "Are we clear?"

Captured in Matthew's unyielding eyes, Manara was unable to speak, aware that the man who held her would not let her go until he had his answer. This was the Warrior-King speaking again, and he would brook no argument. Resignedly, she nodded, lowering her gaze. She couldn't bear her own lie, but she would, because she knew there was no other way. She hated her deceptions, hated not being able to speak the words her heart cried whenever she looked at him. She was the Poet-Priestess of Ishtar, and she belonged to no man but one, and that wasn't Matthew Raleigh. Not now, and maybe never. So she would accept his aid, and his love, and then, once the Temple was clear, she would find a way to make him walk away from her.

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"It's that one." Black Widow indicated a ruin to the left of their position, grinning as she glanced at the man beside her. "That's the Temple of Ishtar."

Ra'id Al-Mawsil nodded shortly and turned a commanding frown on her. "You will remain here. This task is mine, and mine alone, to complete."

She ducked her head demurely, knowing he wouldn't see the gleam in her eyes this way. "Don't worry. I'll stay here, out of your way."

A satisfied expression that nearly made her laugh spread across Ra'id's face as he nodded again and strode toward the ruined building. Little did he know, she didn't intend to go near that temple, or the labyrinth beneath it; not until the demon she'd released from its sleep was distracted. Let Ra'id have his moment of glory; she intended to gain the power to control the world, and the secret of eternal youth.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

The mercenary team approached the ruins of Nineveh under the cover of night, as silent as thieves. When they were within a kilometer of the site, Matt sent Watkins to have a look. The dark man returned with news that made Matt scowl and curse the ineptitude of the CIA's spy networks.

"There's a camp down there, all right. Looks like our friend Lazarus was right, too. There's probably about forty or fifty of the bastards hanging around down there."

"Is Al-Mawsil down there?" Talladay asked, frowning.

Watkins shrugged. "Dunno. Didn't see him, if that's what you mean. That's not to say he's not in one of the tents, though. The whole lot of them seem to be waiting for something."

Matt shot Manara a significant look. "Think he's found it?"

She shrugged. "I do not believe so, but it is hard to say. The demon could have led him there, but I would like to believe that we would know if he had found the tunnels."

"Me, too," Matt muttered. "Okay, folks, if we're going to do this, we'd better do it now. Pete," Matt held out his hand, and Talladay dropped the straps of a duffle bag over the outstretched palm. Manara shot him a confused glance, and Matt smiled tightly. "A gift from Lazarus. Smuggled vodka and gasoline." He opened the bag to show her several bottles of two clear liquids, each plugged with a yellow clay-like substance and thick cotton strips.

"What—?"

"It's called a Molotov Cocktail. Hurlled into a group of tents, these'll lay waste to the terrorists' camp faster than a claymore mine. We added a little extra incentive, just in case," he fingered the yellow substance gingerly. "Plastique. Adds a good measure more explosive power. If we're lucky, these'll take out a good number of the terrorists, as well."

Manara's eyes widened in horror and she paled visibly. "But that is... that is..."

“That’s war,” Matt said simply, his gaze steady and dark on hers. “I won’t apologize for this, Manara. War isn’t a civilized game, but it’s my end of the field. I can’t make it clean for you. It’s always dirty business.”

Manara swallowed hard, tasting bile and fighting the urge to be violently ill. Inwardly, she cursed her own sheltered youth and her inability to reconcile the man who treated her so tenderly with the iron-faced soldier before her now. What had once protected her could now harm her, and if she couldn’t continue to trust Matthew, she was lost. Oh, why had she expected her journey to be a simple one? *Ishtar, let me be strong. Do not make me a fool.*

Seeing the stark horror of realization dawn on Manara’s face clenched icy talons in Matt’s heart. Again, he was stripping away her innocence, and again, he would have to continue to play the bad guy. He had no time for sentiments or coddling now, and he couldn’t reassure her that everything would be okay. He wouldn’t make her any promises he couldn’t keep. This was the nasty side of his world, and he would make no apologies or excuses for it. Gesturing to Talladay and Watkins, he handed them each a third of the stash of crude grenades.

“Lighter check.”

The men pulled out butane lighters, made to survive even immersion in water, and flicked them on behind the cover of their hands, nodding when they worked.

“Pete, you’ve got the left, Trevor, the right. Manara and I’ll go right up the middle.” Glancing at Manara’s pale face, he added, “Disarm where you can. We may need information out of them. Understood?” Both mercenaries nodded. “All right. Let’s move.”

Manara clutched the pistol Matthew had given her as she cautiously followed the man down the sandy slope. A short ways from the camp, Matt stopped her, flashing her a brief, reassuring look as he pulled out his lighter and reached into the duffle bag for one of the bottles. Swiftly, before Manara could even blink, he’d lit the crude grenade and hurled it toward the edge of the tents.

Manara jumped, her heart pounding harshly, as the edge of the camp burst with explosions as Matt’s grenade hit simultaneously with Talladay’s and Watkins’. Shouts of surprise and confusion erupted from the cluster of tents, underscored by the agonized cries of men on fire or blown apart by the

blasts as Matt lobbed more of the deadly firebombs into the burning camp. Gunfire from the right and left of the camp told Manara that Matt's men had begun their run.

"Come on!" Matt's terse command startled Manara, bringing her back to her own location. Her heart hammering in her throat, she willed her fingers to close around the pistol Matt shoved into her numb hands. Blinking, Manara became aware that she must have dropped it at some point. Following him closely, Manara shuddered at the change in Matthew Raleigh. Gone was the gentle man who'd tried to protect her even when she hadn't wanted his protection, the tender man who'd taken her in his arms and loved her until her soul ached. This man was a hardened warrior, immune to the suffering he caused and oblivious to her own pained heart. *War isn't a civilized game.* Those were words Matthew Raleigh, the mercenary, believed in with his very life. Manara shuddered and wished she had never had to ask this of him.

Matthew cleared a wide path through the camp's center, dropping men right and left as he went. Grateful for his order to disarm rather than kill, Manara went for arm and leg shots when she was forced to defend herself or Matthew, disabling men with wounds she promised herself she would treat, once this was over.

They were halfway to the ruins of the public temple when a shadowy figure to her right caught Manara's eye. Shock and terror held her rooted in place, as the shadow became a woman, covered in black, with ruby red lips and dove-gray eyes.

"Black Widow!"

Matt's eyes whipped around at that startled exclamation from Manara, and followed her gaze. Manara felt him tense, and a soft string of expletives left him. His face, when she flashed a glance at him, was wreathed in horrified disbelief as he stared at the woman standing unaffected in the midst of the fiery camp.

"Rachel!"

Matt couldn't believe his eyes. He *refused* to believe his eyes, damn it! Rachel Murray was dead and gone...wasn't she?

“Matthew, *darling*,” her voice dripped honeyed sweetness. “Where have you been? I’ve been waiting for you.”

Matt tasted bile, his jaw clenching and his teeth grinding as he fought the urge to be ill. He’d always known this day would come. So why was he so surprised? Rage thrummed to the surface of his mind, and only the grip of Manara’s hand on his arm stopped him from emptying the entire clip of his weapon into Rachel.

“Shouldn’t you be rotting in a hole somewhere, Rachel?” He bit out the words, hoping the force of his hate alone would kill her.

She laughed, the silvery affectation sounding sinister rather than sweet. “That’s what I always liked about you, Matthew. You never let anything surprise you.”

Even his own name sounded vile to Matt’s ears, coming from those lips. Hate ground down into hate, frothing in his mind. “What do you want, Rachel?”

She smiled coolly. “Why nothing much, darling. See if you can’t extricate yourself from your...*girlfriend*, there and come help me.”

Matt felt Manara stiffen next to him, even as he scowled at Rachel. “The only place I’ll ever be helping you, Rachel, is into a grave.”

“Matthew,” Manara’s quiet voice drew his gaze to her pale face. “*This* is Rachel Murray?”

He nodded, hating to admit it, hating the rage and grief he saw reflected in Manara’s dark eyes.

“This woman is the Black Widow, an agent of an ancient organization known as the Brotherhood of Spiders, whom Percy once warned me about.” Her gaze, dark with loathing, turned on Rachel. “She killed three of Percy’s couriers.”

Rachel laughed darkly. “Oh, you poor, deluded little girl! I am much more than that.” Her eyes gleamed red in the firelight. “I’m also the one who killed your darling Percy, or did no one tell you that?”

At the pallid look on Manara’s face, Matt could tell no one had, and Rachel’s laugh told him she’d seen as well. Mercilessly, the woman twisted her daggers into Manara. “I was also the one who sent those two little girls back to the embassy. Chip, chop, and they were just the right size to fit in a box!” The gleam brightened as her gaze shifted between them. “The lovely part of it all is, you can stop

me, but you can't stop the Brotherhood, and you've no idea what's begun. Nothing can stop the future." Her keen gaze settled on Manara, her grin malicious. "Only cowards run, remember?"

Manara was shaking, her face white with rage.

"It was *you*!" she rasped, her gaze narrowing on Rachel. "You're the one who turned Ra'id loose on my mother's temple!"

She aimed the Beretta straight into Rachel's smug face, and Matt feared for a moment that Manara had snapped. God knew, he didn't blame her; he wanted to kill Rachel himself. But Manara wasn't a killer. Apparently, Rachel knew it, too. She laughed scornfully.

"Don't be an idiot, girl. We both know you can't shoot me. You do that, and you'll never get your precious temple back."

Matt looked between the taunting grin on Rachel's face and the trembling, trapped rage on Manara's face. God. As much as he hated to admit it, Rachel was right. Manara's training had prevented her from giving up her innocence even when she'd defied her religion. There was no way she'd break it now. Hot fury poured through him as his gaze turned back to Rachel. For two decades, he'd lived in terror of this moment, and his memories. He damned sure wasn't going to let Rachel win again.

"Maybe she can't," he said grimly, raising his own weapon. "But *I* can."

Rachel turned those mocking eyes his way. "I own you, Matthew Raleigh. When I say—" Suddenly, Rachel stiffened, and a red spot appeared in the middle of her forehead, even as Manara cried out in surprise. Matt whipped around, to see one of the terrorists crouched in the shadows, his weapon training on Manara. Whether he'd missed his target on the first shot or not, Matt wasn't about to give him the chance to correct his error. He swung his weapon around and fired in a move that was pure instinct, dropping the shooter.

He turned back to Manara, to find her staring mutely at Rachel's corpse. As the flames of a nearby tent licked at the dead woman's body, Manara staggered backward, the pistol dropping from her hand as if it burned.

Matt caught her before she fell, holding her tight as she sobbed out bitter tears for everyone who had been taken from her.

“C’mon, baby, don’t give up, now. We can’t stay here.” Over her head, he studied the burning corpse of Rachel Murray, and knew he should feel glad the woman was dead. So, why then did he have this dreadful feeling the horror was only just beginning?

Half an hour later, Matt and Manara were deep in the heart of the ruined city, standing before the crumbled ruins of an ancient ziggurat. Manara’s heart tripped as she studied the entrance. She was nearly there, nearly to the home she’d spent the last decade seeking, and suddenly, she was uncertain. As much as she craved the Temple’s salvation, as much as she knew it must happen, she feared she wasn’t strong enough to finish this fight she’d begun. She wasn’t sure she could just walk away from the life she’d found.

“What’s wrong?” Matt murmured near her ear.

“I am... frightened,” she admitted in a hushed voice, turning to look up at him.

He squeezed her shoulder with a soft chuckle. “Nothing wrong with that, sweetheart. Just proves you’re human after all.” He turned her to face him completely, looking down into her eyes with gentle compassion. “You can do this, Manara. I have faith in you.”

Her heart soared at those softly spoken words. No one had ever had faith in *her*, before. Even her mother had abandoned that as a lost cause. Though she knew she couldn’t let Matthew’s words affect her, Manara felt her heart flutter at the emotions that crossed his muddy eyes. Drawing a deep breath, she summoned all of the courage she possessed and smiled bravely up at him.

“All right, Matthew. In we go.”

Turning, she stepped through the archway and into the dim interior of the temple. Here and there, crumbled pieces of wall let in shafts of moonlight, and their breathing misted on the frigid night air. Uneasily, Matt glanced around, feeling as if he’d entered a tomb. Broken pottery and crumbled statuary littered the floors, but little else remained. Any gold or silver the temple had once possessed had been stripped away by fortune hunters in the century and a half since Sir Austen Henry Layard had begun his excavations of the site.

In a massive enclosure at the building’s center, Manara suddenly stopped, her breathing hushed as she excitedly whispered, “Is this not the most beautiful sight you have ever seen?”

Matt glanced around the room, seeing only heaps of sandstone and marble. Then, as he watched in amazement, the scenery melted and shifted around him, and he caught glimpses of a brightly lit hall, resplendent with flashes of gold, silver, and precious jewels. Marble pillars and floors flowed into elaborately painted walls and cypress-timbered ceilings. An altar, overflowing with gold, grain, and exotic fruits, shone from the room's center, only to disappear into a dark, cold-looking slab as the vision passed.

"What the hell...?" he muttered.

Manara laughed, her joy as free as a child's for the first time since he'd awakened in her tent in Syria. "This is a place of power. It still remembers its glory days, before Ashurbanipal released the demon. That means we may yet be in time to save it! Come."

On light feet, Manara crossed the altar room and knelt behind the altar. Carefully, she ran sure fingers along the underside of the slab, until they encountered a hollowed-out hole just large enough for a single human digit. Pressing her finger into the hole, she rotated it a series of turns, listening to the deep clunking noises emanating from beneath her. Then, with a rumble, the altar began to slide forward.

"How...?" Matt's voice faded in an awed whisper.

"After his adoption by Ishtar, Sargon had a magnificent palace for his adopted mother erected on the site of his adoption. He was a master of hiding things, and devised a labyrinth beneath the palace, to hide Ishtar's golden treasures from the greedy eyes of men. When Sargon died, Ishtar flew into a weeping rage for the son whose body had proved more fragile than his soul. She destroyed the palace he had built, entombing him at the center of his own labyrinth, where she decreed only the worthy would be able to seek him out. After the temple was constructed on the site, only the Priestess of Ishtar was permitted beneath the altar room."

"Then the demon...?"

"Ashurbanipal was a man of two spirits, and he believed himself worthy of entering Sargon's resting place, to better reach the ear of Ishtar with his plea. But he awakened the demon that slumbered beneath the labyrinth instead, and Sargon has known no peace since that night. Legend says that only the pure heart of Ishtar's Poet-Priestess can restore peace to the Warrior-King's heart and rid the halls of Ashurbanipal's demon."

With that, Manara lowered herself gracefully through the opening in the floor and disappeared into the inky blackness below. The motion ran icy fingers down Matt's spine, and he felt bereft, as if she had disappeared forever from his life in that instant. And what the blazes had she meant about "the pure heart of Ishtar's Poet-Priestess" being the only way to reach Sargon's heart? Matt's jaw clenched, and he scowled darkly. He'd be damned if he was going to step back now and let some ghost have her. Still scowling, Matt dropped down into the hole as well, even as he heard footsteps echo in the emptiness of the altar room.

The labyrinth was lit with rush torches, which surprised Matt, and felt colder than the grave. Ahead, he could see Manara's shadow, his pistol still gripped in her hand. Swiftly, he dug out a roll of twine from his BDU shirt pocket and tied it to the brass ring just below the trap opening. The last thing he wanted was to get lost in this godforsaken place. Then, following the sound of Manara's hurried footsteps and the flash of her shadow, he started down the narrow passageway. As he went, he had the distinct sensation of eyes on him, and it chilled his soul. He could hear the echo of booted feet dropping from the temple above into the passageway, then the mutter of voices, too indistinct to make out the words. Briefly, he hoped they belonged to his men and not the terrorists. Then he blocked everything out except Manara's flickering trail. Nothing else mattered, because nothing else would ever matter again if he lost her.

Before long, Matt found himself in a large chamber full of gilded pillars. At the far end rested a long, gleaming sarcophagus that looked carved of solid alabaster. Looking at it, Matt recalled Manara's tale of Ishtar's adopted son, and knew, with a certainty he'd never possessed before, that this was the tomb of the man Manara had called Sargon.

The woman was standing before the sarcophagus with her head bowed, as if in suppliant prayer, and he could hear her breath trembling in the stillness, and knew she was crying. What the hell...?

A snuffling sound, like a large creature lumbering about, startled Matt out of his confusion, snapping his eyes quickly to the left, where a large shadow caught his eye. No, it was a man, he realized with surprise as the shadow lengthened and separated into distinct limbs. He swallowed hard, however, aware that it was no ordinary man, as glowing golden eyes peered from the darkness, intent upon the oblivious form of Manara. Matt's breath halted and his heart heaved in dread as he realized this could



only be the demon Manara had spoken of. Silently, he closed his hands tighter around his M-16 and eased it up, praying the demon hadn't yet noticed him, and squeezed off a short burst.

The sound echoed deafeningly in the quiet room as the rounds struck the shadowy figure right between its glowing eyes, sending it flying backward with a howl of surprise. Matt waited tensely for the glowing eyes to reappear. When they didn't after several moments, he breathed a sigh of relief, though he had to admit he was surprised it had been so easy. Manara had made it sound like that thing was indestructible. It appeared, however, that evil and chaos weren't as bulletproof as Manara claimed...

Matt's next breath froze in his lungs as taloned hands closed around his throat with bone-crushing strength. He felt himself being lifted from the ground and stared down into the ghastly, disfigured face of Ra'id Al-Mawsil. Yet, Matt realized hazily, it wasn't Al-Mawsil. It wasn't even a man. Fear froze his heart in that moment, as he stared into the face of all humanity's evil.

"You thought to kill me," the voice that rolled from the creature's lips was deep and quiet, like the rumble of shifting earth, yet echoed in the stillness like a gunshot. "Puny mortal! I shall crush the life from your bones!"

"No." The voice that issued that simple command was one Matt recognized, but the ring of absolute authority in it was unfamiliar to his ears. Manara stepped bravely forward, her eyes as hard and dark as obsidian chips as she stared fearlessly into the face of evil. Matt, his lungs bursting with the need to draw air, could only marvel at her courage and fear for her life. She was beautiful, fearless, and compassionate, and he loved her more than life. He struggled uselessly against the demon's grip, intent on saving Manara from her own foolish ploy. She paid him no attention whatsoever, her gaze fixed with deadly calm on the demon. "You are the prisoner here, chained by my words and will. You will obey me. Now, release him."

The demon laughed, the sound grating with the screams of the damned and the creak of the gates of Hell itself.

"Who are *you* to command me, little girl? I am the Destroyer of Nations, Conqueror of Worlds, Emissary of Ereshkigal and Hunter of Men. And you," it continued mockingly even as it released one of its thick hands from Matt's neck, "are disturbing me."

Matt twisted in the demon's grasp, wrenching himself free. Dropping to the ground, he drew gasping breaths, filling his lungs with air, and watched in horror as Manara stood unflinching before the demon's growing wrath.

"Manara," he croaked in warning, and then cried out in horror as the demon's hand flew toward her, as if to swat her like an insect. Without thought of his own safety, Matt threw himself toward her, tackling her to the floor just as the demon's hand struck, hitting empty air in their wake.

"What *is* this thing?" Matt asked as he pulled Manara toward the shelter of the pillars at the chamber's far side while the demon howled in rage.

"Urasat the *Galla*. It is a creature of ancient evil. Legend does not even say how old, just that Ereshkigal fashioned it from the deepest bowels of the Underworld to avenge Her, and that it was imprisoned in the deep desert eons before man took his first breath," Manara returned quietly, studying the creature intently. "Apparently, that is not entirely true."

"No shit. So if this thing's been here for all that time, why does it look like Al-Mawsil?"

"Because it is Ra'id, after a fashion. It is a *ghul*, and it may take the form of anything it devours. However, since it was bound here in the Name of Ishtar, only the offering of one of Her servants can free it from its captivity, just as only the sacrifice of one can destroy it. Unfortunately, that law does not say that one must accept Ishtar's will as Law; only that one must be of the blood of Her chosen line. My brother has the bloodline of the temple, and he offered himself as its host. Urasat merged with him, which will permit it to leave the labyrinth." Her gaze never wavered from the creature as she spoke. "The only way to keep it from getting loose is to keep distracting it until it can be destroyed."

"Great." Matt snorted. "More wasted bullets." He brought his gun up. "Oh, well..."

"No!" Manara hissed, slapping the gun's barrel down with the palm of her hand. "You cannot kill it with weapons of war. Evil begets evil. The people of Nineveh tried to kill it, centuries ago, and look what happened to the city."

"All right, then. What to you propose we –" Gunfire cut off the rest of Matt's question, and his stomach lurched in dread. He recognized the cadence of M-16 automatic fire only too well. Pete and Trevor!

A low growl echoed in the chamber, even as Matt leapt from hiding, and he knew it was too late. A flash of fiery light illuminated Trevor Watkins' terrified face for a split second before striking him full

in the chest, flinging him back into a pillar with earthshaking force. The black man crumpled to the tiled floor, his chest still glowing dully, even as Urasat reached to swat Talladay away, sending him sprawling headfirst into a stone wall.

Rage boiled over in Matt, and he flung himself toward the demon with a howl of bloodthirsty revenge. The monster spun, its face contorting in mockery as it lifted one hand toward Matt.

*“Nooooo!”* The cry from Manara was followed by the hurtle of a body into the space between Matt and the demon, as the world disintegrated in a wall of flames.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Matt came around to the low sounds of pain and shallow, labored breathing. There was a warm weight draped across half his body, and, in a rush, the events prior to his passing out returned. He shouldn't be alive, but in the last instant, Manara had taken the blast meant for him. Panic clutching his heart, he sat up, shifting Manara's head against his chest, his eyes scanning the darkness for the glowing gold of continuing threat. There was nothing. An eerie feeling trickled along his spine. Where had the demon gone? He refused to accept that it'd just decided to leave them alone. He looked closer at their surroundings, and surprise jolted through him. The flames on the torches didn't so much as flicker, and the shadows weren't moving. Everything had a surreal quality, as if they'd stepped into an alternate reality, where none of the rules of nature and physics he knew so well applied. Just what the hell was going on around here?

*My heart to make yours whole, my life to give you life. My blood to love and serve your cause.* The words echoed in his head, an oath of fealty from a time long past. With it came images that flashed before his eyes, of a woman draped in rich fabrics and dripping with golden jewelry, kneeling in homage. If only he had a clue what it meant.

A moan, low and full of pain, snapped his attention back to the present. *Manara!* His gaze shifted quickly to the woman in his arms, and the panic closed off his throat for a long moment as he stared at her too-pale skin and slack features.

"Manara," he rasped, cradling her close as he stroked her head and face lightly. She was still breathing, thank God, but her shallow, labored breaths were far from reassuring. "Oh, God, Manara.... Why did you do it?"

"Matthew..." Her voice was faint, barely more than an exhaled breath. "Y-you... must..."

"Shh," he soothed, kissing her brow lightly. "Don't talk, now. Save your strength."

“You... must...believe...” she managed, groping blindly for his hand. “ Promise...me...”

Turning his hand into hers, he squeezed it gently. “Shh. I promise. Just rest, baby. I promise everything’ll be okay.”

“No...” Manara’s entire body shuddered with the force of that single word. Whatever she had to say, she found it extremely important. Afraid that she would agitate herself into cardiac arrest in this fragile state, Matt soothed her gently.

“What is it?” he asked as he studied her dilated eyes. Her respiration was growing fainter by the minute, and her pupils were huge. “What’s wrong?”

“You...must...” She shuddered, struggling to draw another breath. “Believe... something...beyond...death. Only...way...to...help...me.” Her body stiffened in his arms and her hand clutched his spasmodically, before she went completely limp, a sigh of surrender breaking from her lips. Matt’s heart froze in terror. He had heard that sound before.

“No! *Manara!*” He shook her, her limp body flopping like a rag doll in his arms. She was still, all color drained from her face and her chest no longer moving with the effort of breathing. She looked asleep, but Matt knew better than that.

Numbness set over the man. What had he done? He had failed this courageous, innocent woman, that’s what. He had promised to protect her, and he’d failed. Tears, abandoned so long ago, blurred his vision at the thought of never seeing her smile again, or hearing that angelic laughter. They overflowed at the thought that this was the last time he would hold her in his arms. He’d wasted so much time on arguments and distrust, and now he regretted every moment of that wasted time. The clunking sound of metal against stone reverberated in the stillness as his Berretta slipped from her limp hand. Matt stared at it despondently. He’d killed her, as surely as if he’d used that damned weapon on her. She’d taken a blast meant for him. His hand shook as he scooped up the cold gun. He should use it, now. Take himself out of the picture. His life was worth less than nothing without Manara. He’d failed his men not once, but twice, yet he could have lived, could have gone on, with that failure. But the thought of living without Manara was one he couldn’t take. He’d vowed he would give his life for her, but he’d sacrificed her for vengeance, instead. Then, as he stared down at the weapon, Manara’s last words tickled the edge of his memory.

*Believe in something beyond death.* Matt closed his eyes, drawing a deep breath to steady his thundering heart. He couldn't accept that there was anything beyond death; *could he?*

His head shook as he fought impressions, the haunting images of a crumbling city and burning skies that had plagued his dreams in childhood. When had he lost his ability to dream, to believe? The answer came readily enough: Rachel. Since the day she'd torn his young life apart, he'd believed death was darkness, oblivion; but he knew Manara still believed in more. She believed in so much he'd lost all those years ago. She believed in ghosts and demons, and in the power of dreams. She'd believed in love even when he had run from the truth.

Matt swallowed hard, aware that he'd changed a lot in the months since he'd first met Manara's dark eyes across Sidon's busy dock. He loved her, and in loving her, the rules that had once kept him alive no longer applied. Staring down into Manara's pale, still features, Matt knew that he would, that he *could*, believe in anything, if it would bring her back to him.

Eyes closed tightly, he fought for the faith to restore her, and felt himself waver as a long-suppressed memory washed over him.

*He stared out the helo's window, at the ocean frothing so far below, enthralled by its movement.*

*"Look, Matt," his father lifted one hand from the cyclic, grinning as he pointed toward the swelling waves and thick mists off to port side. "There's Atlantis."*

*"I can't see it. Where is it? Huh, Dad?" He strained his five-year-old neck as far as it would go, trying to see the city his mother talked about so often. "Can we land and say hi?"*

*"Fraid not, sport," John Raleigh said cheerfully, reaching out to ruffle Matt's hair. "Atlantis sank a long time ago."*

*Matt sank back, disheartened. "Why?"*

*"No one knows, but," his father grinned widely, winking, "your Mom sure intends to find out."*

Matt gasped, feeling pain stab his heart as the loss he'd never allowed himself to feel before hit him square in the chest. Reaching out to steady himself as his world tilted, his hand caught the edge of the sarcophagus, and vision blotted out memory.

*He awakened to hazy memories of a great battle, and a sense of time slipping away from him. Glancing at the young woman sprawled, unbreathing, on the floor, he frowned. His power was broken, as long as she remained in the demon's grasp. Her sacrifice had restored his ancient memories of Atlantis, but only the purity of her heart could restore his power, and his memory. These millennia of sleep had fogged his mind, and drained his power. He had beaten Chaos, here in this labyrinth, locked it away beneath the ground. But some fool had released it. Now, he must conquer Death as well, or he could never conquer Ereshkigal's demon again. This innocent's soul was immortal, but not her body, and the thin tether of spirit energy already slipped away. He had to act quickly, restore her soul to her body, or she would be lost forever, and the world with her.*

Matt blinked, to find himself standing before the long sarcophagus, with Manara's limp form sagging in his arms. Gently, brushing a soft kiss over her cool lips, he laid her on top of the sarcophagus, praying with everything in him that she wasn't already lost to him.

As he released Manara's body, she slumped against the smooth, cool stone and lay still, and Matt sucked in an involuntary breath, his eyes glued to her face. If only she would move, or breathe, or...

He jerked backwards on reflex as light, brighter than the sun, suddenly engulfed the sarcophagus. It grew steadily brighter, pushing him back a step at a time with an almost physical force. Raising his arms to shield his eyes from the glare, Matt watched in horror as the light consumed Manara, until he could no longer see her.

*No!* Gritting his teeth, Matt surged forward, feeling as if he was battling a raging river for each step he took. His heart pounding like a trip hammer, he fought blindly to gain Manara's side. "Manara!"

*"Halt where you stand."* The suddenness of that authoritative command froze Matt in place for a moment as its ethereal power closed over him. *"I am the Guardian of the Sun, and Servant of She Who Bestows Life. Step no further."*

Matt glared into the light. "I don't give a damn *who* you are. I want Manara back, *now*."

*"You know this woman who comes in Her name?"*

"Know her? I love her, dammit!" Matt bit out the words in frustration, his limbs feeling leaden and no longer under his control. He felt helpless, and he despised the feeling. "Let me help her!"

As if pulled together by a magnet, the light suddenly condensed into the glowing, spectral form of a man in the splint mail and conical helm of ancient Sumeria.

*“If you truly wish to aid this innocent, then you must do as I say. Power is not enough to win her freedom; only belief will grant you victory. Within the third pillar of the Sun, there is a weapon against Chaos and Death. You bear the blood of Atlantis; wield the Blade in Her name, and all you seek shall be restored to you.”*

The figure stepped forward and, before Matt could react, placed his hand to Matt’s chest. A massive, painful jolt, as if he’d been struck in the chest by lightning, punched through Matt, and he staggered backward a step as the electric heat ran through him. After a moment of crippling pain, the sensation passed, leaving him feeling stronger, but different in ways that made him uncomfortable.

*The third pillar of the Sun. Time is almost gone.* A voice, deep inside his mind, urged him to move as the room slowly melded back into semi-darkness. Blinking rapidly, Matt refocused his eyes. The third pillar of the Sun? What the hell was *that* supposed to mean?

Turning to scan the room, Matt felt his spirit sink. Nothing. No sun, anywhere...*wait!* Heart pounding hard in hope, Matt stepped closer to one of the pillars that lined the room, his eyes fixed on the spot just behind the torch’s flame. There was a symbol carved there, directly into the sandstone pillar. A crescent shape... a moon!

Striding rapidly across the room, he studied the opposite line of pillars. Each was decorated with a hieroglyphic sun. His pulse pounding, Matt found the pillar in the middle of the row—third from both ends, and walked slowly around it, studying it. There was a slightly lighter patch about the length of a man’s arm, just below the torch, and an indentation in the distinct shape of a man’s left hand, right in its center.

Drawing a deep breath, Matt glanced toward Manara, then laid his hand over the indentation, and pushed down. He nearly jumped away from the pillar completely as the ground beneath him suddenly shifted, and a grinding noise filled the air. His jaw went slack as he watched the lighter shaded section begin to slowly move. There was machinery of a sophistication beyond this temple’s time at work here. Swallowing, he watched in awe as blue-white light spilled from the compartment, gleaming off the length of a jewel-hilted sword, embossed with a glittering golden star. The craftsmanship alone would have made it a priceless object, and he briefly wished his mother, an authority on antiquities, could have



seen this weapon. The metal gleamed as if lit from within and was unlike any he'd ever seen before. Along the walls of the compartment, carved letters and figures, like a cross between Greek and the cuneiform Manara had shown him, ran in long lines. He wondered what they said.

Cautiously, Matt reached for the weapon's hilt and, as he grasped it, two worlds collided within him, causing him to stagger backward, gasping for air. Suddenly, he knew what he had to do. He could remember everything! The destruction of Atlantis, and the flight from the Temple of the Stars, bearing the Star Blade away to safety from the Brotherhood of Spiders. And the woman who'd saved his life, century after century.

Sword in hand, he returned to Manara's side, finally unafraid of her power, or her death. Lifting the blade, he touched it lightly to Manara's chest, watching the blue-white light play over her pallid features, uncertain of what he would see, but believing with every breath in him that the sword could heal her. For the first time in his life, he dared to believe that he could redeem his failure.

A red glow, centered around Manara's heart, began to throb. It was dull, like the hot coals of a fire, and pulsed slowly, growing brighter as it spread through her chest. Suddenly, her chest heaved, and she drew in a deep breath, even as the glow turned bright blue. Like a flash of lightning, it burst around her, a radiant star born in the darkness. The powerful flash lifted her upright from the sarcophagus, and a voice not completely Manara's echoed from the sandstone walls, as the familiar sounds and smells of the labyrinth returned, and the normal world returned.

*"I am the Servant of She Who is the Bestower of Life and Death, Guardian of the Sacred Unification, and Heart of the World. I am she who is the Speaker of the Goddess of Babylonia and Assyria, the Watcher of Empires and the Mother of Conquerors. I am the captor, not the captive. I command you to come forth, Urasat of Ereshkigal. Now."*

Matt started, his gaze turning from the glowing spectacle before him as he heard a low, guttural growl. The demon, its eyes glowing darkly, lumbered reluctantly toward them, looking for the world as if someone had thrown chains on it. Matt tensed as it drew near, the sword lifted, prepared to move swiftly to save Manara if the thing should attack.

It stopped before Manara, its head bowed as it fell to its knees with a reverberating thud, and understanding flashed through Matt. This was a world of opposites, and only the antithesis of evil could control a creature born of the bowels of Hell. Manara's innocence, when combined with her ancient

bloodline and faith, gave her a power over Urasat no other person on Earth could hope to achieve. Her sacrifice, for his sake, gave her the power to bind the demon's evil, and command its obedience.

*"You have defied My will."* The voice issuing from Manara's lips dripped with disapproval. *"As you lived in slumber, by My grace, so will you pay for your defiance in oblivion."*

Her eyes turned to Matt, and the heat he saw there staggered him. "Matthew."

The blue-white light of the weapon grew to blinding proportions, even as Matt heard the demon howl with a rage no mortal fury could match, as soon as Manara's attention shifted. God. Suddenly, he realized why Manara had been kept apart from men all her life. To command Urasat's complete obedience, she had to be pure. Only... He swallowed hard as he remembered the times they'd made love, and his gaze fixed on Urasat. If that demon came anywhere near her...

The demon flew forward suddenly, talons raised to deliver the blow that would free it, and Matt's instinct to protect kicked in. Without a thought to his own safety, he stepped forward and swung the blade in a wide arc. The impact of metal biting into flesh sent Matt stumbling backward in surprise, even as Urasat screamed in pain, the sword still buried in his side. Like a wildfire, the light of the sword consumed the demon, leaving nothing but a scream in its wake. Then, the light dimmed as Manara's feet settled back to the floor, and the lifeless body of Ra'id Al-Mawsil crumpled to the ground.

Manara blinked, feeling a power unlike any she had ever possessed swirling within her heart and soul. She felt changed, and knew that the power within her now, as much as the death-sleep she had endured, was responsible for the difference in her. She felt strong, and whole, but, more importantly, she felt free. With her sacrifice, her destiny had been fulfilled, and now her future was unwritten, her own to choose. A new sense of purpose—to live—rose within her, and she felt powerful from that life.

Manara shuddered as she recalled the odd dreams of the sleep she'd undergone. She'd dreamed of a man in the raiment of ancient Sumerian royalty, with strong features and very familiar eyes. Eyes as deep and muddy as the mighty Tigris... Manara's brow furrowed. She'd watched the man's flight from a doomed island, with the Star Blade—a sword of awesome power—girded to his waist. That blade had drawn Ishtar's attention, and a destiny of greatness to the man who bore it. A man named Sargon.

After he was mortally wounded, he brought the sword home to the catacombs that hid Ishtar's treasures, and there buried it within the very stone of the labyrinth. Only when his spirit was reborn

would he be capable of recalling the sword's location. And, even trapped in her own death, Manara had grieved Sargon's passing with a fierceness she had not thought herself capable of.

"Manara?" The tentative sound of Matthew's voice drew her from her thoughts, and sadness engulfed her as her eyes fell first on Ra'id's motionless body. Her anger at his actions had faded in her death-sleep, leaving only pity and regret in its wake. She was saddened by the awareness that Ra'id had been as cheated as she. They could have been the closest of siblings, had Fate not conspired to make them the deadliest of enemies. Had Ra'id's father not poisoned his mind—had Hassan Al-Mawsil not been consumed by his need for vengeance against the woman he'd once loved—her brother would not have come to this end. If only Ra'id had taken the time to listen and learn, he might have ended up very differently. At very least, he would not have ended up with the Star Blade sticking from him... *the sword!*

As her eyes focused on the uniquely forged blade, glowing with bright, blue-white light, a cry of joy bubbled up and overflowed, and she flung herself into Matthew's arms. He really *was* Sargon reborn! Just as the prophecies had proclaimed, she was reborn as well and free to love him!

Matt crushed her tightly against him, tears of joy tracing his cheeks to dampen her hair, and she felt whole and strong to know how deep his love was. He had believed her lost to him, and yet, for her sake, he had stepped beyond his past and freed her.

"I love you," he whispered, before his lips found hers in a drugging kiss, and Manara felt her heart and head spin simultaneously with joy. Pressing against him, she offered her lips, and her heart, with a trust she had thought never to know. With Matthew's love, her destiny was finally complete.

## Epilogue

### *Burn Cleary, Ireland*

“Don’t be givin’ me that look, Matt. You look like a man on his way to a funeral!” Peter Talladay’s sharp admonition was laced with self-mocking humor, causing a smile to twitch at Matt’s lips.

“Sorry, Pete. I just keep—”

“Blamin’ yourself for somethin’ that wasn’t your fault,” Talladay finished quietly. He tapped the frame of his wheelchair, and then swung it toward the bedroom’s window. “Isn’t that a wonderful view? Never thought I’d see grass that green again,” he said as he stared out at the rolling Irish fields. “It’s been near a year, Matt. When do you get to stop floggin’ yourself over it?”

Matt sighed wearily, slumping down in one of the room’s high-backed Victorian chairs. Sinead Talladay had always had a penchant for the unusual. Her son shared that trait, Matt decided with a touch of humor.

“I don’t know.” A wry smile twisted on his face. “Manara says I have issues with guilt.”

Talladay chuckled, his gaze still on the grass beyond his window. “That’s a smart lass you’ve got.”

“Are you sure you’re all right, here?”

Talladay frowned over at him. “Are you askin’ me if I’m happy bein’ home in Ireland, or if I miss bein’ a walkin’ man?”

Matt glanced away, unable to bring himself to look into Peter’s face. The trauma to the other man’s spine, from the demon’s attack in Iraq, had left Pete paralyzed from the waist down. Though he’d regained some movement over the past seven months, it had been painful enough to watch. Matt couldn’t begin to imagine what Peter had felt. The doctors had given up hope of more, even if Manara hadn’t yet.

“Ach, leave it go, lad,” Talladay whispered, wheeling away from the window. “It pains me some, still, when the weather’s bad, but I bless my lucky stars I’m alive today. I’m content with my lot, Matt, so don’t go feelin’ sorry for me.” He glanced back toward the window, where storm clouds brewed on the horizon. “Any word on Trevor, yet?”

Matt’s head shook. “No change since I was at Bethesda, last month. The doctors are keeping us updated daily, through Julia, at Prometheus’ headquarters. They’re going to pull the plug, next month, if he doesn’t come around. His sister’s already signed the paperwork.” He flinched away from the memory of Trevor’s hollow-looking face. “She said she doesn’t want him to suffer anymore. She told them to pull the plug soon.”

“Which is what I have said all along,” a soft, feminine voice said from the doorway, drawing the attention of both men. Manara moved gracefully to Matt’s side, placing one slim hand on his shoulder. “Trevor will not be well with machines.” She gave Talladay a warm smile. “How are you today, Peter?”

He beamed at her with his patent Irish charm. “Ah, lass, your lasses do wonders for the soul, as well as this poor broken body.”

Manara laughed, then shot Matt a look ripe with love as he rose and faced her. “Beloved, there is a man downstairs to see you.”

Matt nodded. He’d been expecting a diplomatic envoy who’d accompany them back to Iraq. “That would be Jeremy Banks. He can wait. How are you feeling?”

Manara laughed softly, and shot Talladay a mischievous look. “Your commander is enjoying ladling himself with guilt over both of our conditions, Peter!”

The Irishman laughed heartily, eyeing Manara’s burgeoning middle speculatively. “I’d say he’s had a great deal more to do with yours than mine, lass.”

Matt slipped an arm around his bride of seven months and muttered against her ear, “Are you hell-bent on embarrassing me, woman?”

She only laughed, giving him a gentle nudge toward the door. “Go on. Do not keep Mr. Banks waiting. He is a busy man.”

As he turned away, Matt caught her gaze, silently mouthing the words that formed the center of his universe.

I adore you.

Manara's eyes filled with tears, and her hands moved to rest against her swollen body, where their child grew a heartbeat away from hers. She didn't say a word, but her tremulous smile was all the answer Matt needed. An act of treachery had thrown them together, but it had taken a bond of love to unite their two souls across the breadth of time, and, to him, that was the greatest miracle of all.