



A WARRIOR'S DEBT

By

Trudy Thompson

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CHAPTER 1

Menila

Halfway to the village, a strange sound filled the darkness. Shana Kerr paused and turned about, searching for whatever made such an anguished noise. The strangled groan of an injured animal called out to her. She glanced around again, hoping to find a break in the dense trees that would offer a minimum amount of light to guide her but found none.

Shana ignored the rapid pounding of her heart and listened carefully. To her left, undergrowth rustled as something thrashed about. She stepped from the path, ignored the heavy dew that clung to her cloak and soaked through to wet her gown. She pushed aside a vine of wisteria, shoved away a dew-brightened web of an industrious spider that stuck to her hair and continued through the dense forest.

The trees grew thicker. Darkness closed in around her. She shoved her hands into her cloak pockets and continued, ducking low branches, twisting to avoid thickets and decaying leaves.

She paused in a clearing where the moonlight was sufficient to gather her bearings and listened. She heard only the normal sounds of the forest.

Yet something out there needed her. The healing gifts long nurtured within her awoke. Her fingers tingled. Warmth flowed through her body and centered in the palms of her hands.

Shana drew deep for the inner sense that had guided her through many seasons. She concentrated on the forest and searched for something that might be out of place. She pulled her hands from the pockets of her forest-green cloak and, trusting her instincts to guide her steps, walked forward.

Another deep groan split the silence.

A creature lay enveloped in a white aura of moonlight filtering down through the trees.

Shana raised her hand to shield her eyes from the brilliant light. She walked forward slowly to pause less than four steps away from a man lying on the forest floor.

Another step. Two. Shana dropped to her knees.

She reached out to him, hesitated, and then rested her spread fingers on her bent knees as she searched for an injury.

Never had she seen such a man. Even lying on the forest floor, his height surpassed hers by several feet. Shana glanced down his long legs to his booted feet, and then up to study the strange leather leggings that covered his muscular limbs. She paused when she saw the enormous sword encased in a leather scabbard, etched with foreign symbols, belted at his hip.

A rush of apprehension caused by the mysterious weapon shook her. She pushed caution aside and continued her examination of his wide shoulders and strong arms bared by a dark leather vest etched with similar markings open across his abdomen, exposing ripples of muscle beneath his taut flesh.

A deep groan spilled from his lips.

Shana reached out to grasp his hand. The instant her fingers touched his, arcs of white light erupted from his fingertips. Burning her flesh. Repelling her touch.

She jerked her hand away. "What just happened?" she mumbled as she put her fingers into her mouth to soothe the burns blistering her fingertips. "Did I cause that?" Knowing the man must be seriously injured and she might have made matters worse, she struggled to her feet. She turned and ran for help, unmindful of branches that slapped her face, tore her clothing, and prodded up through her slippers.

On the outskirts of her village, she paused to search the darkened cottages for any sign of life. Seeing no light reflected from the draped windows facing the dirt roadway, she pulled her woolen cloak tighter around her body and hurried down the rutted cart path toward home.

She stepped upon the stone stoop and pushed aside the latch on the heavy wooden door. The door opened with a squeal, exposing her adopted mother, Hilda, in the chair before the glowing hearth.

"There's an injured man in the forest."

"Where?" Hilda rose unsteadily from her chair and shuffled to the door to grab her wrap from a nearby peg.

"He's like no one I've ever seen. He could be one of Zandicol's men. We can't--"

"Nonsense. Have your studies taught you nothing? Our duty is to assist those who need our help. Wake several of the village men. Have them accompany us into the forest."

Shana watched Hilda hobble around the cottage, securing the tools of her healing. She wanted to explain what happened when she touched the man, about the strange aura glowing so brightly it lit the forest, but couldn't find the proper words.

"Come, Shana. We are wasting precious time."

Shana fled the cottage. She knocked on several nearby doors, rousing the families within and requesting assistance. When she'd gathered ten men, she joined Hilda and led her back to the spot where she found the downed man.

The aura of moonlight, previously surrounding the stranger, had disappeared as the moon moved behind a passing cloud, leaving nothing more mysterious than a tall man in need of assistance. Voices around her dulled to a murmur as Shana concentrated on his form, wondering again who he was and how he happened to be in the forest of Verdun.

Her fingertips began to tingle in a way she'd never experienced. She studied her hands and found the blisters had miraculously disappeared, but pulses of energy crawled up her arms, reminiscent of the arcs of fire that erupted over her hands. She rubbed her palms over her cloak and stepped back to place a greater distance between herself and the man who, had somehow, created her strange distress.

Several of the village men hurried off, and then returned moments later with a cart. She noted the caution the men used when removing the huge scabbard from the man's side. She heard their grunts and groans of exertion as they lifted his large body into the bed of the cart.

She wondered why the villagers were not affected when they touched him. Could it be her gifts warning of danger? What about Hilda?

She reached forward to warn Hilda not to touch him when her mentor climbed into the back of the cart, but she was too late. Hilda placed her palm against the stranger's forehead.

Nothing happened.

Confused but cautious, Shana followed behind as the villagers pulled the cart out of the forest and down the dirt roadway between the rows of little cottages. Her footsteps faltered when she realized that Hilda intended to take the man into their home.

Premonition tugged at her mind. This man should be taken far away from Verdun.

"Hilda?"

Hilda scooted down from the cart. "Be careful when you move him," she instructed. "Place him on the fur mat in front of the fire so I can tend his back and whatever else ails him."

Hilda turned from the men struggling under the stranger's weight. "Yes, Shana?"

"Do you think it wise to bring him here?"

"What is wrong, my dear? Where else would we take him?"

"Nothing important. We'll discuss it later."

Hilda touched her arm. "Are you sure?"

Shana watched as the village men carried the injured man into the cottage and placed him before the hearth. She then followed Hilda into the cottage. She removed her damp cloak, draped it on a peg next to Hilda's, and walked across the plank floor. She watched Hilda bend beside the man before the hearth.

"I need to turn him so I can look at a wound I discovered when he was lifted into the cart."

Several of the men hurried to do Hilda's bidding. Shana watched as they positioned the man on his stomach, slipped the heavy leather vest from his arms, and bared his wounded back. She listened when they asked if they could do anything else.

Hilda told them to go back to their homes.

Shana heard their whispered comments about the man's size and identity as they left the cottage.

She watched Hilda work, using her magic touch and healing herbs to make a poultice for his wounded shoulder, and then as her wrinkled fingers disappeared into his long, dark hair.

"I have done all I can for him this eve. Please find something large enough to cover him."

Shana hurried across the floor and gathered a coverlet from a trunk beside the far wall. She averted her gaze from his exposed flesh as she approached the hearth and bent to spread the coverlet along his body.

"Help me up."

She grasped Hilda's hand and steadied her as she straightened. After Hilda took her favorite chair before the fire, Shana made them both a cup of herbal tea.

She glanced at the stranger sprawled on the floor. "What about him? What if he wakes up during the night?"

Hilda chuckled. "He will sleep for the remainder of this eve."

Shana sat on the stool next to Hilda's chair. "I've been thinking about all you told me of my heritage." Hours before Hilda had explained to Shana that she was not the

orphaned daughter of the healer of Napul to the south, taken in by Hilda so she might learn her deceased mother's skills and return one day to treat her village. She was, in truth, the daughter of a queen murdered on the eve of her birthing and stolen away to live in seclusion because, like her mother, Shana carried the power of the Chosen of the Temple of Havenshire.

"What is it you do not understand, my dear?"

"You said you were a guardian for my mother, Dedra of the Chosen, when she traveled from Havenshire to wed my father, Mordith."

Hilda nodded.

"What happened to my father?"

"A few months after your mother's death, Mordith died of a mysterious sickness that rendered him incapable of carrying out his duties as leader of Soras. His younger brother, Larus, took his place on the throne. Throughout the years that have followed your birth and your parents' deaths, Larus has continued to rule Soras, but Zandicol rules Larus."

"I still don't understand. Who is Zandicol? Where did he come from and how did he gain such control?"

Hilda sighed. "No one knows where Zandicol came from, Shana. Some say he is descended from the invaders who threatened our world decades ago. Others whisper he is a castoff of the Chosen, excommunicated from Havenshire."

"The only thing I know for certain is Zandicol thrives off others' weaknesses and possesses a dark magic stronger than any force we know to destroy it."

"Why didn't the Chosen destroy Zandicol before he became so powerful?"

"The Chosen have dwindled in numbers over the passing of time, my dear. Once a great race sharing an immense power, those powers have now weakened until they do little more than preserve the Old Rights and protect the Temple. None remain strong enough to overthrow the evil that eats away at our lands."

Shana glanced around their tiny cottage, at each piece of hand-carved furniture. She remembered the good times she shared with Hilda. She studied her small alcove, the tiny cot where she slept, and the table where she practiced her many lessons. If she heeded Hilda's latest teachings, her life would be in jeopardy, and everything she ever believed in, destroyed.

She turned to study the tall man sleeping before the hearth.

"The Chosen aren't strong enough to stop Zandicol, yet you say it's my destiny to travel to Havenshire, accept the teachings of my ancestors, and then journey to Soras to challenge Zandicol."

"No one can force you to make this journey, Shana. Each of us must choose the crossroads we take carefully, for there is no turning back. No escape to a safer life."

"Why wasn't I told of my heritage sooner? Surely an innocent child could have done nothing to prevent Zandicol's rise to power."

"I can only assume Zandicol suspected Dedra might know of his plans for Soras and would use her magical gifts to prohibit his evil goals. He must have wanted you destroyed because he believed you would carry the same power."

Hilda touched Shana's cheek. "It is very late, my dear. You need rest."

She rose from her stool, bent and kissed Hilda's cheek, and then walked to her alcove to prepare for sleep. Moments later, she watched Hilda take to her own cot for the

night.

Shana listened to the popping and hissing of the logs in the hearth and watched the red glow of the flames dance over the stranger's body, still motionless before the fire.

She exhaled in a gush and flopped over to her back to stare at the ceiling of her tiny alcove. After a few moments, she forcibly freed her mind of the tumultuous thoughts that created such uncertainty, but she couldn't keep her gaze from straying to the mysterious man before the hearth.

Frustrated, Shana eased her legs to the side of the cot and dropped her feet to the floor. She stood and walked slowly across the room.

She bent to study the stranger's face in the firelight.

Dark shadows emphasized the strength of his jaw and cheekbones, his square chin. His nose straight and perfectly sized to compliment his angular features. Long lashes dusted darker circles beneath his closed eyes and softened the hard lines of his face. A tiny scar separated the dark hair of his right brow, changing the arch and giving it a sinister appearance.

Shana shivered, knowing she should place as much distance as possible between her and this male, but curiosity formed a stronger bond. She studied the dark hair that fell straight from a part at the center of his bronzed forehead to sweep his wide shoulders.

The strange tingle she felt before in her fingertips, when she was this close to him, reappeared but Shana pushed aside her reaction. She wondered again who he was, and how he happened to be in the forest of Verdun.

Shana jumped back when the man suddenly moved his head and opened his eyes as he attempted to gain a seated position. "Who are you?"

His voice was gravelly, deep, and his words slurred, but she had no trouble understanding his question.

"Who are *you*?" she responded.

"Are you real?"

"Why would you ask such a ridiculous question? Of course, I'm real."

He reached up to touch her arm, but Shana pulled away.

"Don't touch me."

The mysterious gifts within her awoke, causing every hair on her body to stand on end. "Go back to sleep."

A premonition she couldn't quite grasp slipped through her mind and deepened her apprehension of this man. They knew nothing about him but Hilda had willingly taken him into their home. First thing in the morning she planned to let her feelings be known and beg Hilda to have this stranger taken to another cottage until he recuperated.

She scooted behind Hilda's chair. She used the tall wooden back as a shield as she watched him drop his arm across his chest, turn his head slowly from side to side, then close his eyes.

Shana gripped the chair back hard. His many unanswered questions caused her unease to grow. She raised her hands to rub her forearms.

Memories of the strange aura of moonlight in the forest, the sparks of energy that now tingled over her flesh, reinforced her determination to maintain a safe distance from this stranger.

Closing her eyes, Shana prayed he'd recuperate with all possible haste and make his exit from Verdun before the dangerous force she sensed within him awakened to

manifest itself into something evil that would rival Zandicol's threat.

CHAPTER 2

Ryder fought the weakness threatening to drag him back into oblivion. Pushing up slowly into a seated position, he blinked several times to judge his surroundings. He wondered how he came to be here in this tiny cottage instead of along the shore of the Great River as he remembered from his last bout of consciousness. He studied the room, the hand-hewed furniture placed upon the polished floor, and then gazed at the rafters. Multitudes of different dried herbs hung over his head.

"I'm surprised you are awake this soon. Your constitution must be stronger than I thought."

A tiny old woman stepped into the firelight. Ryder noted her bent frame, the wrinkled features of her face, and the long gray hair that swept the ties of her faded blue robe. He wondered who she was, and again, where he was.

"Who are you?"

Her soft chuckle filled the room. She took another step and paused a few feet from him. She held a steaming cup in each hand.

"I must ask you the same question."

Ryder cast another glance about the tiny structure. Unsure of his circumstances, he decided to evade the old woman's question. "You need not fear me. I present you no danger."

The old woman took a step closer. She handed Ryder a cup of hot broth. "You are from the East."

He thought it odd she didn't wait for his response, but turned and took a seat in a comfortably worn chair on the other side of the hearth. Her pale gray eyes were inquisitive as she watched him over the rim of her cup.

He raised his arm and turned his head until he could see the wounded portion of his back. A thick swatch of white cloth covered his left shoulder. He shrugged, lifted his arm, and bent it several times. Surprisingly, he felt little pain. He turned to meet the old woman's gaze.

"Did you treat my wound?"

She nodded and took another sip from her cup. "You must have lost a great amount of blood to make you so weak that you would lose consciousness."

Ryder thought about the length and diameter of the chunk of wood that had punctured his shoulder, of the pain encountered when he tried to remove it, and of his blood loss. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the amount of time that might have passed since he plummeted into the raging waters of the Great River.

Warm fingers touched his cheek and scattered his thoughts.

"I have seen your arrival many times in my dreams, warrior."

Ryder opened his eyes and met the old woman's gaze, curious how she knew he was a warrior, and even more anxious to hear of her dreams. "Where am I?"

She leaned forward enough to place her wrinkled hand on his bare shoulder. The warmth of her touch sent a pleasant, relaxed feeling to encompass his flesh beneath her

spread fingers.

"My ward found you in the forest of Verdun. The men of our village brought you to our home."

Ryder searched the cottage for his possessions and his father's sword.

The old woman touched his hair. "Your packs and weapon are secure." She spread her palm over his forehead. "I am pleased you caught no fever from your wound. With proper care and nourishment, you should be renewed to your former self in a matter of risings."

He raised his hand, wrapped his fingers around the slender bones of her wrist. "Old woman--"

"I am called Hilda. I am the healer of this village. Now, I believe it is time for you to answer some of my questions. Truthfully."

Ryder released her arm but kept his gaze locked with hers. He remembered only portions of his journey. The many nights he traveled alone through the Tundra, the midseason storm before reaching the small fishing village on the shore of the Great River. He had made camp on the white sands and waited until he thought the weather calmed before loading the horse he'd purchased and his provisions on the old boat provided by the fisher folks, and then trying to cross the turbulent waters.

"I am Ryder L'Syr of the Freelands." He watched her face for a reaction and, receiving none, continued, "For many months I have traveled to reach your lands."

"You crossed the Great River? How?"

Not why, but how. Years of strategic training placed his senses on alert. He glanced once more around the cottage. Two shuttered windows flanked the heavy panel door. Sheltered sleeping alcoves took up each side of the cottage. The central opening served as a sitting and eating area. A cupboard covered the wall on the left side of the hearth. The right side held a tall chest filled with multitudes of tiny drawers. Another study of the rafters and the medicinal plants suspended there confirmed the woman's claim as village healer.

"By boat."

The old woman shook her head. "Many decades have passed since anyone from the East journeyed to our lands. Why would you undertake such a perilous voyage to Menila now?"

Ryder sipped from his cup as he weighed any answer he might give. His circumstances demanded study, but he sensed no harm in telling this woman enough of his plight to appease her curiosity.

"I am but a wayward traveler. My boat disintegrated beneath me in the aftermath of a storm, leaving the animal I had with me dead and a chunk of wood thick as my wrist protruding from my shoulder. I made it to the opposite shore, but most of my provisions were lost. I took the wood out of my shoulder the best I could, and then I must have lost consciousness. I have no idea how much time has passed or how I happened to travel from the shores of the river into the forest where you claim I was found."

The old woman nodded.

"I owe you a great debt, Hilda of Verdun. I also owe your ward."

She leaned forward to touch his forehead. Ryder again felt the hypnotic pull of her pale eyes before she dropped her hand to her side. "We will talk more later. You should rest now." She struggled to her feet, took the cup from his hand, and walked

across the floor.

Ryder wanted to call her back, to ask her to tell him of the dreams she spoke of, but his eyelids were suddenly too heavy, the effort it took to remain seated too great. He shifted into a comfortable position before the warmth of the fire and closed his eyes.

* * * *

Hilda watched the tall warrior in the firelight. She studied his even breathing and knew he heeded the words she placed into his mind and fallen back to sleep. She leaned against the table edge and closed her eyes, summoning again the dreams that reoccurred several times over the past few months. Dreams she took as a sign that the time had come to tell Shana of her identity, and to prepare her ward for the task that would restore her rightful place in Menila.

Hilda knew not to discount her dreams. In the past, her dreams or premonitions always seemed to ring true. And, this particular dream had haunted her for far too long to be ignored because it was always the same dream.

Out of the mists from the East, a dark warrior rode into her sleep, brandishing a magnificent sword that would help vanquish all evil from their lands. She never saw the warrior's face, nor could she determine his age. A great white aura cloaked him, hiding everything but his black silhouette.

Hilda rubbed her arthritic hands together. Destiny sometimes needed a guiding force--a little shove to nudge it in the proper direction. She felt no remorse at the manipulation she contemplated, secure in her belief nothing but good would come from her actions.

The warrior was beholden to her because she treated his wound and probably saved his life. It would take little to turn his gratitude into acquiescence when she told him of Shana's quest.

The difficult part would be convincing Shana to accept his aid.

Hilda cast one more glance toward the warrior's sleeping form, and then left the cottage.

Outside, she paused on the well-worn path and watched Shana pull weeds from the neat rows of herbs in the garden.

"Our houseguest has awakened."

* * * *

Shana swallowed hard in an attempt to push aside the apprehension those few simple words sent careening through her body. She'd spent a sleepless night watching the man before the fire and thinking about the mysterious control he appeared to have over her sanity.

Hilda obviously sensed no danger from the stranger or she would not have allowed the village men to place him into their cottage. However, she was distraught; her emotions were on edge. She'd left the cottage before the sun broke through the thick forest, determined to find something to occupy her time. Anything that would place her far away from the strange man and the peculiar unrest his presence created.

"He is weak and it will take a few more sunrises for him to regain his strength, but I am pleased with his recovery so far."

Shana jumped when Hilda placed a hand upon her shoulder. Hilda then cupped her chin and lifted her face until Shana met her mentor's gaze. "What is the matter with you? You have been acting strangely since we brought the man into our home last eve."

Shana shook her head. "I can't understand the unsettled feelings I've had since I found the man in the forest. Something just does not feel right, Hilda. I can't fully explain why I feel this way, but something deep inside keeps telling me we should not trust him and we should move him to another cottage away from our own."

Hilda shook her head. "I've felt nothing strange from him, Shana. To me he is a wounded man badly in need of assistance to recuperate from his accident. Moving him out of the cottage when he desperately needs our help would be a disservice to our profession and to the Chosen."

"Come with me," Hilda said.

Shana glanced over her shoulder toward the cottage door and, based on Hilda's offering that the man had awakened, expected to see him at any moment. The need for distance, at least until she could figure out why he caused so much upheaval, became urgent. She stood and followed Hilda's bent form down the path through the gardens and out into the rutted roadway.

She kept several paces back and hesitated when Hilda paused then turned into the forest. Anticipating Hilda's destination, Shana drew a deep breath and followed Hilda to the spot where she'd found the man the eve before.

She watched Hilda walk around the clearing and pause at several intervals to kick aside the wet, fallen leaves.

"What are you looking for?"

Hilda met her gaze. "The warrior said he lost consciousness on the shoreline of the Great River. He claims to have no memory of how he came to the forest, so many leagues from the water."

"Warrior?"

"Our guest also claims to be a traveler from the East. He said he journeyed far to reach our lands."

Every instinct demanded she ask Hilda how she knew the male was a warrior, but she fought down the urge. "You said the people of the East are our enemies, yet you allow one into our home."

"What I have said before has no bearing on now, Shana. Many things will change over the next few risings. The time for your journey is close and we must prepare. Come." Hilda retraced her path away from the clearing.

Her mentor's words were full of riddles. Everything that molded her life from the time she was old enough to hold coherent thought was now falling apart. All she once believed to be fantasy, was now real.

In a few short hours, she'd gone from being the daughter of a healer apprenticed to Hilda to learn her healing skills, to an orphaned princess stolen away at her birth because she was a descendent of the Chosen of Havenshire.

"Is there anything else you're not telling me, Hilda? Anything more I should know before I place my life into the hands of Fate and journey to Soras?"

Hilda shook her head and continued walking toward the village. "The whys and wherefores of what I do or say are no longer important, child. Much haste is needed. Too many signs are present to delay. Please, do not dawdle."

Confused by her teacher's actions and words, Shana hurried after Hilda, surprised the old woman had lost some of her hobbling gait and moved with a grace missing for many years. She followed Hilda down the rutted cart path that separated the tiny cottages

of Verdun, through the garden to their cottage door, dreading what awaited her within the walls of her home.

"You should be sleeping."

At Hilda's words, Shana cast a glance over her shoulder to confirm her path of retreat. She then turned back to the door only to meet the stranger's blue eyes.

"Shana Kerr, this is Ryder L'Syr. He will be our guest until he regains sufficient strength to return to his travels. Please set an extra place at our table for him. Since he has stubbornly refused to take the sleep he so desperately needs, he might as well fill his stomach."

Wanting to offer protest, but deciding now was not the time, Shana made a silent promise to share her opinion of their guest with Hilda at the first opportunity. She hurried across the room to the cupboard for their dishes. She imagined the heat of the man's glance burning into her back with each step. She shoved the thought quickly aside and concentrated on filling their bowls with grain mash, their cups with herbal tea.

"Our fare is simple but filling, Ryder. Come. Join us," Hilda said.

The plank floor groaned beneath the man's weight as he neared the table. Shana noted her mentor took the seat across from hers, leaving the end of the table open for their guest to occupy.

Appetite suddenly lacking, Shana concentrated on the curious tingling she related to the stranger as it spread slowly over her body to center in the palms of her hands, instead of listening to the conversation taking place between Hilda and their houseguest.

The need to escape overwhelmed her. She shoved her bowl aside and was about to ask to be excused when Hilda's words, rather than the deep tone of the stranger's voice, finally penetrated her discomfort.

"Verdun has, thus far, gone unscathed by the strife that plagues the rest of the lands of Menila. The location of our tiny village makes it inconvenient for an invading force to overtake. Hidden in a deep valley between the highest peaks of Hyden Shelf to the North, a fierce desert to the West, and a vast river, then the Tundra to the East, Verdun's vulnerability lies only in its Southern exposure. Thick forests and forbidden swamps stretch out for league after league southward, preventing unwanted intrusion by anyone other than those familiar with the passageways that offer safe travel."

Alarmed to hear Hilda trusting this Easterner when they knew so little about him, especially when her instincts continually warned of danger, Shana finally found her voice. "I don't think you should be--"

"Nonsense, my dear. Ryder wishes to travel through Menila. If that is his desire, he should be well aware of the obstacles he will face."

In Shana's opinion, he asked too many questions.

She wondered about his interest in the strategic locations of nearby villages, the distance from Verdun to Soras, and any other problems he might face during his travels.

Perhaps their warrior was more than he claimed to be.

Hilda's responses were even more confusing. She answered each of his questions candidly, giving graphic details of the bloody carnage that swept over their lands. Creating mental images many times more vivid than the tales she'd told to her last eve when she had explained her heritage.

How had Hilda acquired such detailed information? To the best of her knowledge, Hilda had spoken to no one who'd traveled beyond the borders of Verdun.

Nor had she left the tiny hamlet to see these horrors firsthand. Could her old teacher have retained more of her mystical powers than she professed?

Needing time alone to explore these developments, Shana pushed her chair back and stood. "I have much to do before the sun rises directly overhead and the air becomes too hot. Please, excuse me." She scooted around the table then through the door without a backward glance.

"You must forgive Shana's rudeness," Hilda explained. "Though the men of Verdun grow larger than average in height, and many are big and strong because of the hardships of their lives, Shana has never seen someone your size. I suspect your presence is confusing her greatly."

* * * *

Ryder paid little heed to the old woman's words. The enchanting creature that slipped out of his line of vision occupied his thoughts. He remembered the slender legs he glimpsed when she entered the cottage. Long legs the skirt she had outgrown winters before could not disguise. Nor could he ignore the shock he experienced when she turned away to fill their bowls and he discovered a wealth of golden hair that fell down her back to reach mid-thigh.

"Shana has a perilous journey to undertake, Ryder. One that will place her life in great danger."

Thoughts of the young woman in jeopardy set his heart pounding. The old woman had obviously been speaking the entire time he allowed his attention to lapse and, judging from her last words, he missed something important.

Ryder shoved his bowl aside. "Why?"

For the next hour, Ryder listened in awe as Hilda told him of Shana's birthright. She explained the quest Shana must undertake and the danger she would face in order to bring lasting peace to their lands.

The blight the Prophet Jordan had foreseen sweeping across the continent of Menila and endangering the Freelands now had a name.

Zandicol.

Ryder remembered the hours spent in his father's tent before the storm abated enough for him to travel the hundreds of leagues from Darden's Field to the Great River.

Jordan had come to share his vision, telling Ryder and his father, Travol, of a great stone keep and, beyond its high walls, a ramshackle village sprawled out for several leagues. Hundreds of different pairs of eyes filled the Prophet's vision. Young eyes, and old eyes, all sad, all lacking. Thick forests, swamp lands, blazing deserts, and mountain peaks of unfamiliar stone jutted high into an overcast sky, creating a panorama vastly different from anything Ryder or his father had ever seen.

Jordan also told of darkly clad men brandishing swords backed by evil until the earth ran red with blood and a thousand voices cried in terror.

The old woman reached to place her palm on his forearm, bringing Ryder's attention back to the present. She closed her eyes. A strange lethargy flowed over him. He fought the feeling and studied her wrinkled face. Her lips moved silently as if speaking a prayer. She then raised her lashes and studied his face.

Ryder's listlessness vanished.

"It had been my plan to employ several of the village hunters to accompany Shana to Havenshire, and then on to Soras, but the men of Verdun are not warriors. Though

they will surrender their lives to see Shana to safety, I fear they will be useless when confronted with the danger Shana is destined to face.”

She tightened her grasp on his arm. “I feel in my heart you are a good man, Ryder L’Syr, though you have not been truthful about your presence in Verdun.”

Ryder placed his hand over the wrinkled one on his arm. “I represent no danger to you or Shana.”

“I believe you. Did I not, I could never request of you what I feel in my heart is necessary.” She looked down at the table. “I beg you to use your skills to see Shana safely to Havenshire, so that she might complete her training before beginning her quest.”

Ryder wouldn't dream of denying her request. He was a stranger in a strange land with a mission of vital importance to the survival of his people. Hilda had been very helpful acquainting him with the lay of the land and the dangers he might face as he traveled through Menila.

It wasn't enough.

If Hilda's words were truthful, Shana Kerr held the key to destroying Zandicol before his father's armies were in danger.

Avoiding war had been the directive of Travol L’Syr for the past five decades. Before that, his ancestor's had kept peace in the Freelands since their defeat almost two centuries ago when his great, great, grandfather Fallimar led an army to conquer the continent.

Images of Hilda's beautiful ward floated into his mind.

Accepting protection of the young woman meant he would give his life to protect her against all aggressors--even himself.

Hilda had saved his life. A Warrior's Debt was owed. One he could repay by using his skills, his father's sword, to see to the safety of Shana Kerr as the young woman traveled the path that would lead to her destiny.

And, ultimately to his.

Ryder gritted his teeth, knowingly condemning himself to continuous agony as he spent time with Shana. Close enough to touch, but forever out of reach.

“It would be my honor, Hilda of Verdun.”

CHAPTER 3

The late afternoon heat combined with the cooling of dusk to create eerie mists that rose from the shimmering pool and filled the air with moisture that clung to each leaf, every branch and flower like the fine sheen of morning dew.

Shana sat upon a flat rock and watched nature's miracle envelop her special place. Wiggling her bare foot in the cool water, she studied the ripples that spread into wider and wider circles. She inhaled deeply to capture the many fragrances in the humid air.

The beauty of the haven escaped her, as did the calm she'd sought since leaving her cottage many hours before. For the first time in her life, she was afraid. She didn't like the sensation. She hated not being in control of her life, her emotions, and blamed the strange warrior's presence more than her own impending journey for her discomfort.

Shana closed her eyes and reached deep for the special gifts within her. She whispered words Hilda taught her years before, soothing phrases that would help her escape and free her mind from the tumultuous thoughts that had plagued her since learning of her heritage.

Breathing deeply, she concentrated on the quiet, allowed the peacefulness of the forest to seep into her mind until she became one with the mists, still as the rock she sat upon.

Her heartbeat slowed. Blood whispered through her veins. Every muscle relaxed, creating a sense of calm weightlessness. Her mind registered only the soft flutter of the leaves, the pleasing gurgle of the pool and songs of the night creatures, allowing each melody to take her deeper and deeper into a trance.

* * * *

Ryder dropped the cloth Hilda provided. The pool and all thoughts of bathing were forgotten as he stared at the mist-enshrouded vision seated before him on the rocks in the moonlight.

He looked at her. Golden hair shimmered like a gossamer curtain around her shoulders and fell into a curling mass about her folded legs, her bare feet.

He tensed every muscle in his body and allowed the torment of physical restraint taught to every warrior of the Freelands to encompass his being. After several seconds, and twice as many words of denial, Ryder relaxed.

He lost touch with time as he watched Shana, curious how she could remain still for so long, until reality claimed him. Concern over her statue-like pose surfaced.

He took three strides forward, paused, and deliberately crunched a thick twig beneath his boot.

Shana never flinched.

Ryder pushed caution aside and knelt before her seated form. He studied her shallow breathing, the rise and fall of her breasts beneath her tight bodice. He watched her face. Her closed eyes. Long lashes brushed her cheeks. Her lips were slightly open and so inviting Ryder wished he could set aside his oath and sample her sweetness.

He brushed away a long strand of golden hair that fell across her brow, and then

fought the urge to wrap the silky length around his hand and bring it to his nose to test its sweetness.

Instead, he grasped her shoulder. "Shana?"

Her lashes fluttered several times, but her eyes remained closed.

Ryder tried again, this time adding a gentle shake in hope of gaining a reaction. "Shana?"

Troubled by her lack of response, he raised his left hand, grasped her other shoulder, and rose to his feet, bringing Shana's pliant body up with his. He cursed again the oath sworn to Hilda, cradled her spine with one hand, and lifted his other hand to place it under her chin.

"Shana, answer me."

Her lashes opened, exposing brilliant eyes to the moonlight filtering down through the branches overhead. She blinked several times then gasped, sending chills down his spine when her body became rigid against his. Ryder eased his grip, but he did not release her.

"Unhand me!"

"I mean you no harm," he reassured.

Her scream of outrage echoed through the forest.

Ryder refused to give up his hold until he was certain Shana was capable of standing on her own. He did the only thing he could think of at the moment to quiet her.

He bent his head and kissed her lips.

* * * *

Shana tried desperately to pull away, but his hold on her back, the pressure he applied to her chin, was too strong. However, neither caused her pain. She panicked, remembering the currents passed between them in the forest, the fire that burned her fingertips. She tried to wiggle free of the persistent force of his lips, away from his touch, but found movement only increased the tingling that began at her fingertips and slowly flowed throughout her entire body.

She tried to kick him.

He was too strong for her to break away.

She raised her hands, dug her nails into the exposed flesh of his waist above the leather leggings, prepared for the arcs of fire that would char her flesh. She felt nothing more dangerous than the heat of his flesh beneath her palms.

Something deep inside insisted she yield. Drew her into a maelstrom of emotions she'd never felt. Warmth flowed through her body. Her stubborn hands ignored the command she tried to send with her mind and slipped up the contours of his muscular chest, higher to glide through his midnight hair. Her lips softened in rebellion at her command to draw away.

* * * *

Ryder's conscience bellowed his error when Shana stopped struggling and molded her lush body against his. No matter how hard he fought, he couldn't pull away, couldn't relinquish the sweetness of her lips, the warmth of her mouth. He tasted her fully, leaving no crevice unexplored, returning repeatedly to partake of all she would give.

He released her chin and pulled her closer. Dug his fingers deep into her glorious hair, and then downward until he could draw her lower body closer to the part of him that

hardened and grew, despite his best efforts to control his lust.

Her hand slapped his cheek with a loud crack.

He raised his head to look into her eyes.

"Release me immediately."

Her swollen lips trembled. Glorious strands of golden hair entangled his arms, clung to the perspiration beaded on his chest, and tickled his abdomen.

He dropped his hands and stepped away.

"Don't say a word. I don't care to hear your excuses. I only want you gone so I never have to see you again." She staggered back, placing a safe distance between her body and his.

"Shana."

"Go." She turned and started along a path that led deep into the forest.

"I cannot."

She glanced over her shoulder. "Your wound's healed sufficiently for you to be up and about. I suggest you find your way out of Verdun the same way you found your way in."

"I can't leave until you are ready to accompany me."

She turned so quickly her hair flew wildly about her body. Fisted hands found her hips as she advanced to pause only a few feet away. "Until I what?"

Ryder choked away the need to smile at the way she shifted from terrified to enraged in the span of a heartbeat. "I owe Hilda a Warrior's Debt to see you safely on your journey to Havenshire."

Her eyes widened to almost twice their normal size as her face lost all trace of color. "I release you from your debt."

Ryder shook his head. "My debt is not yours to release."

"We shall see."

* * * *

"I don't want the warrior's company on my journey."

Hilda turned from packing foodstuffs into the satchel on the table. The red glow of the fire in the hearth outlined the wrinkles on her face and cast a warm glow to her gray eyes. "He will protect you."

"No." Shana backed away from her mentor until her buttocks bumped the table edge. She stared into Hilda's eyes, wondering if the old woman had finally lost control of all of her faculties.

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears, but she resisted the urge to raise her hands and cover the sides of her head to still the pounding. She curled her fingers into the palms of her hands until her nails dug tiny crescents into her flesh. She hoped pain would abolish the sudden need to run her fingertips over her lips, to relive the memory of the warrior's kiss.

Perhaps, it was she who'd lost control.

She unfolded her fingers and shoved her hands behind her to grip the table edge tightly.

"Why not?" Hilda asked.

Did Hilda truly believe she'd travel across league after league of strange land with a man who happened into their lives less than two nights ago? One they knew nothing about other than what he chose to tell.

She studied the interior of their cottage, praying for time to explain her objections about the stranger, objections she'd delayed relaying to her friend and teacher for too long.

Until a few moments ago, she hoped he would have recovered sufficiently to take his leave--in the opposite direction from the one she'd be traveling--before she began her journey. Now, it seemed Hilda had been conspiring with the warrior behind her back.

"I don't want his help. My journey will be dangerous enough without a companion I can't trust."

"Ryder L'Syr is an honorable man, Shana. I sense much goodness in him. Not evil. Besides, he is trained in making journeys such as the one you will take. His resourcefulness may astound you. His sword skills and intelligence will be of great value to you as you travel through unknown territory."

Shana shook her head adamantly. "I already have my journey planned. I've studied the maps you provided and believe I can succeed quite adequately on my own. I won't have need of him, nor do I wish his presence."

"I do not think you have given your journey as much consideration as you claim, my dear. Many dangers await you beyond the forest."

Shana didn't need Hilda's reminder of the dangers she'd face. She'd lost many hours of sleep thinking about everything from injury to being taken captive. No matter how terrified she was of the upcoming months, she'd done her best to put on a brave face for Hilda's benefit.

"I would have faced these same dangers had the warrior not happened into our village."

Hilda lifted her hand to brush a stray tendril of hair from Shana's forehead. Tears glistened in her gray eyes. "I have loved you as if you were my own child, Shana. Throughout the years of your life, it has given me great pleasure to guide and nurture your growth. Now, when you will be tested beyond anything you have faced in your short lifetime, it pains me deeply that I am not strong enough to accompany you on your journey."

Hilda wiped away a tear. "I should be at your side, using whatever remaining gifts I have to assist you in your quest. However, I fear with my advanced age, I would only hamper your progress."

"Ryder is young, strong, and healthy. He trained long and hard to achieve his status. Despite your misgivings, I sense a conviction within him capable of much good. Accompanying you to Havenshire will relieve him of a Warrior's Debt, and he will do his utmost to see you arrive safely."

Shana turned away from Hilda's sad eyes and tucked several small, empty flasks into the corner of her pack. "I have a strange feeling you're hiding something from me. The way you evaded my questions in the forest, the riddles you've spoken since the warrior appeared in Verdun, and now, your insistence I accept him without knowing anything about him or his origin, confuses me."

Hilda touched her shoulder. "If I tell you everything I suspect, will you then accept Ryder's company?"

"You spoke of omens."

"Omens are not always signs of evil, my dear. Much good can be foretold if one knows how to interpret the evidence." Hilda grasped Shana's hand. "Join me by the

hearth."

Shana allowed Hilda to lead her across the room. She sat as instructed on the stool beside Hilda's chair. She studied the paleness of her teacher's kind face, the deep circles beneath her eyes. The events of the past few months had taken a heavy toll on her mentor.

She reached up to touch Hilda's cheek. She recalled the many wonderful seasons she'd spent at her side, learning to heal, to pray, and to love.

A deep ache grew in her heart. Shana felt the need to forsake the quest set before her, fearing if she left Verdun, she'd never see her beloved friend again.

She forced a smile. "You must know how much I love you, Hilda."

"And I you, child."

"I can't leave you. You said I could choose my own path, and I think I should--"

"I believe the Chosen had a part in bringing Ryder to Verdun."

Shana stared into Hilda's eyes, trying to comprehend the meaning of her words.

"I knew he would come. Many months ago, and several times since, I dreamed of a magnificent warrior brandishing a mighty sword. He appeared through the mists of the forest and offered assistance in attaining Menila's salvation."

"I would hardly call our warrior magnificent. Nor do I recall seeing anything but an ordinary sword in the decorated scabbard the village men took away from him."

A strange smile creased Hilda's lips as she placed her wrinkled hand upon Shana's forearm. "You see only what you wish to see, my dear. An ordinary rock can be magnificent if it is sufficient to disable a foe."

The cottage door swung open.

Shana turned to find the warrior's tall form filling the opening, his flesh bathed in firelight, and rivulets of water dripping from his long hair. She made the mistake of meeting his intense gaze. However many seconds passed as they stared at one another, Shana could not guess.

Hilda's words finally broke the spell. "Come, Ryder. Warm yourself by the fire. Shana and I were just discussing her journey and you should be involved in the planning."

"A moment, please," he said.

He shook his head as if shaking off the same disturbing trance that had captured her, and then walked across the room.

Shana studied the hard muscles at the back of his thighs as he knelt to draw something from his possessions. Muscles rippled across his back, shifting the white bandage Hilda placed over his shoulder as he stood and slipped a soft gray tunic over his head.

Magnificent whispered through her mind before Shana chased the thought away and forced her attention abruptly to the other side of the cottage.

The floor creaked as he walked across the room and took a seat next to hers at the hearth.

Shana slid closer to Hilda's chair.

"I studied the maps you gave me and, with the changing of the seasons you described so close, I believe we cannot postpone our departure any longer than a few moonrises."

His deep voice sent shivers up her spine and raised the tiny hairs on the nape of

her neck. Wanting to offer more words of protest, but unable to coerce her vocal cords into action, Shana listened as Hilda and the warrior discussed the best route to travel through Hyden Shelf.

"Shana will need suitable clothing and sturdy boots," he said. "I was able to save the tent I carried with me from my homeland, so shelter from the elements will not pose a problem."

The tent? Surely, he didn't expect her to share his tent.

"Clothing will pose no problem. I have prepared sufficient foodstuffs and I agree your journey must begin immediately. As we speak, Zandicol's wrath spreads," Hilda warned.

Shana's shattered dreams fast turned into nightmares. Determined to make her position abundantly clear and let the warrior know she wanted no part of his participation on her journey, she glanced up, only to lose her train of thought when she met his blue eyes.

"Shana?"

She tore her gaze from his and noticed his extended hand--a hand that could easily enclose hers twice over. The strange tingling sensation she felt when he was near rekindled, along with the memories of the warmth of his hard body, the tenderness in that same hand as he held her chin, and the taste of his lips.

Renouncing the queer emotions that ran amuck in his presence, Shana refused his offer of assistance and rose slowly. She turned her back to him as she addressed Hilda.

"Please release Ryder from his debt. His wound has healed sufficiently to allow him to continue his journey, separate and apart from my travels. My life will be in danger because it's my destiny, but I won't place his life into jeopardy to protect mine."

Hilda glanced at Ryder then met Shana's gaze. "I cannot." She placed her hands upon the worn wooden arms of her chair and rose slowly to her feet. "Now, if you both will excuse me, I will gather the clothing that the villagers promised me."

Hilda left the cottage.

Shana hugged her arms over her chest and refused to acknowledge Ryder's presence. She didn't count on the pressure of his fingertips upon her shoulder. She shrugged away from his touch and walked to the other side of the cottage to pause against the table. She offered a prayer for strength before she turned to meet his questioning gaze.

"I don't want your company. I don't trust you."

He nodded as he walked to stand before the fire.

"I'm not a fool, Ryder L'Syr. I don't perceive the world by blind faith, as Hilda is prone to do. Nor do I hold any hope of accomplishing this task that the Chosen are not strong enough to undertake."

When he refused to comment, Shana continued, "though Hilda claims the mystical powers in the blood inherited from my ancestors are still vastly untested, I believe my journey will be futile and, in the end, my life will probably be forfeited. I've no wish to spend what could be the last few moments of my existence guarding myself not only against forces I cannot foresee, but also against you."

Other than tightening his fists at his sides, he did not move.

She wondered what thoughts must be running through his mind, and then dismissed him as she considered a plan that would not only appease Hilda but would give

her the opportunity to evade the warrior at her first opportunity.

"Against my better judgment, I'll allow you to accompany me to relieve Hilda's worries, but only as far as Hyden Shelf, where we'll go our separate ways." She watched as he opened and closed his fists. The muscles in his biceps bulged, as did the veins that covered the tops of his hands. He stared at her, a dangerous gleam shining in his pale eyes. His lips thinned to a grim line. A tiny twitch appeared in his right cheek.

He stepped closer.

Shana backed up until she pressed into the hard wooden edge of the table. She could do little more than look up into his eyes and pray he meant her no harm.

"I would suggest you get a good night's rest, Shana Kerr. We will leave at first light." He turned and walked out of the cottage.

* * * *

Shana tugged on the strap of her pack to position it more comfortably against her back, winced, then yanked her braid free and dropped it over her shoulder to dangle down her chest. She glanced up. The warrior had disappeared into the thick fog that hugged the forest floor like a blanket in the gray light of dawn, obscuring even the trees until she stepped within an arm span of the moss-covered trunks.

Shaking her head, Shana took two steps forward, paused, and then looked left and right. The fog was too dense. She couldn't see beyond her outstretched fingertips.

She listened carefully to the sounds of the forest, concentrated on the moisture dripping from the leaves overhead. She heard a gentle wind rustle the treetops, but nothing of the warrior.

Again, against her better judgment, yet determined her journey wouldn't end less than three leagues from her home, Shana drew a deep breath.

"Ryder?"

She heard him approach seconds before he materialized through the fog less than an arm's length away. She took a step back from the hand he offered and focused her attention on his broad shoulders rather than look up into his eyes.

"Sunrise will come shortly. This fog will burn away and our path will clear. Until that time, you must stay close so we will not become separated."

His reasoning was logical, but Shana couldn't get past the memory of the last time she'd placed her hand into his and arcs of white fire had burned her fingertips. She shook her head and stepped around him.

He halted her with a firm grasp on her shoulder. "You will take my hand."

"No." She pulled away from his touch and placed a safe distance between her body and his.

He took a step closer and stood with his feet apart, his arms crossed over his powerful chest. The soft gray tunic he'd pulled over his broad shoulders last eve hugged the contours of his muscular physique. The deep neckline exposed a curly mass of short, dark hair spread liberally across his wide chest. When he bent his head, Shana could feel the heat of his nearness radiate throughout her body.

"You are my responsibility, Shana of Verdun. You will allow me to see to your welfare as I see fit."

"You will not touch me again." She made the mistake of looking up into his face and witnessed the steely glint of determination in his blue eyes.

"Your Warrior's Debt holds only until we are free of the forest, and then we go

our separate ways.”

His deep chuckle filled the heavy air. “Those were your words. I made no such agreement. Now, do you take my hand or must I bind you to me?”

CHAPTER 4

A number of different sensations rushed over her at once, yet the most powerful one began deep in her belly and burned its way through her bloodstream until it centered in her chest. Instead of showing her reaction, she dug her fingers into the well-worn leather leggings Hilda had borrowed from one of the village lads for her use. She drew a deep breath, held it, and then released the captured air slowly as she attempted to control her anger.

Less than three hours ago she'd wiped the tears from her eyes and embraced Hilda for what might have been the last time. With a heavy heart, she reluctantly left her home, everything she'd known, and headed off behind the foreign warrior for what she hoped would be a two-day journey to the foothills of Hyden Shelf where they would part company. Now, he stood before her, tall, muscular, and dangerous, denying he'd accepted her terms, and threatening to bind her to him.

Shana clamped her jaw tight, closed her eyes, and willed her thundering heart to slow. She raised her lashes and met his penetrating gaze, praying as she did so the turbulent emotions she fought weren't evident.

"You'll not touch me nor will you bind me." She turned abruptly and stomped away.

Again, his deep chuckle echoed through the forest.

Shana bristled at the sound of his laughter, but kept walking in the direction he'd materialized from moments before. She chewed her bottom lip when she heard his heavy footsteps grow nearer and fought the instinct to run.

"You're too stubborn for your own good, Shana."

She missed a step and almost stumbled. A firm hand on her shoulder kept her upright. She glanced over her shoulder, looked down to his hand, and then up to meet his piercing blue eyes. He stood close behind her, watching her with the menacing stillness of a predatory beast.

"Take your hand off of me." Shana turned her head away.

He dropped his hand to his side. "Remain close. If you must pause, tell me so." He stepped around her and almost disappeared into the fog before Shana shook her disquiet and followed.

* * * *

Less than two arm spans now separated them as the gray slowly receded to be replaced by the golden light of the sun. Shana studied the warrior's tall form. His steps were unerring as he walked through the leaf-covered, root-infested forest floor. His posture straight, giving no evidence of the burden of carrying their packs and the enormous sword protected by the carved leather scabbard he now wore strapped over his back close to his injured shoulder.

His dark hair swept wide shoulders as he turned his head left and right to study their surroundings, but he never looked back to make sure she hadn't strayed, and he never spoke.

Unbidden, images formed in her mind, vivid and bittersweet, and filled her with the confusion she'd felt in Ryder's arms, sharing his warmth, his kiss, beside the hidden pool. His kiss had awakened passions within her body she had no idea existed. She remembered the warmth of his body, the strength in his arms as he held her close, the taste of his tongue as he invaded the inside of her mouth.

She hadn't been a docile participant. She had learned to return his kiss as she melted against his muscled chest. To run her fingers through his magnificent dark hair, and to use her fingertips to test the contours of his chest, the soft hair that tickled her fingers.

Biting down hard on her bottom lip, Shana forced her thoughts away, considering instead her journey and how she might accomplish a task even the Chosen were unable to handle.

She thought about all of Hilda's teachings and how she'd explained the weird occurrences that happened during her early childhood. Hilda had told her that the premonitions she'd had of future events were merely a portion of her healing skills inherited from her fictional mother. Her ability to lay her hands upon the sick and injured, to ease their pain and speed their own body's natural recovery, were just a few of the hidden gifts Hilda now confessed were acquired from her real mother, Dedra of the Chosen.

She remembered the strange words Hilda taught her to use when she summoned her healing skills, the mysterious tingling that began in her chest and radiated down her arms to her palms when someone or something needed her.

Her thoughts returned to finding the warrior wounded in the forest, sensing his anguish.

Reluctantly, she cast another glance his way, forging past the sensations created within her when his long hair brushed his shoulders or the muscles in his powerful thighs bunched and relaxed as he took another step.

She'd never seen such a man. Never dreamed such a handsome creature could exist. Throughout her life, she'd taken the males of Verdun in stride, never considering them in any way other than friends. None created the unusual stirring within her Ryder did with only a glance. Not one had ever ventured to place his hand upon her, or dared taking the liberty of pulling her into his arms. Never once, had she been tempted to touch her lips to man's lips, her hands to man's hair.

With a groan, Shana shook her head and thrashed away further thoughts of Ryder L'Syr, what his presence in Verdun meant, how his nearness affected her, and tried to speculate on the journey ahead.

Fueled by the desire to leave her unwanted companion at the first possible opportunity, Shana raised her chin and followed close behind. She took two steps to his one, determined to enjoy what might be her last glimpse of the beautiful forest of Verdun.

* * * *

By mid-afternoon, the air turned hot, the early autumn heat cooled by only a light breeze that ruffled the leaves overhead and lifted stray locks of Ryder's dark hair.

Over the passing hours, Shana kept her own counsel. At first, she welcomed the silence of the forest and the absence of his voice, to review the many lessons Hilda taught her. Yet, as the day stretched and she became weary of walking, her leg muscles numb from their trek, Shana's irritation grew.

Hilda had told Ryder everything of Shana's life, of her quest, and of the trials and dangers she'd face. However, other than the few words he offered in explanation of his presence in Verdun, she knew nothing about him. This man who mysteriously appeared in an aura of moonlight, was temporarily responsible for her life. She knew only that she couldn't trust him.

She forced away a sly smile. He might not intend to honor her demand to leave her to her own resources as soon as they passed beyond the forest, but she'd have it no other way. She considered waiting until they made camp for the eve and slipping away while he slept, taking with her the maps Hilda provided for their journey.

Warrior's Debt or not, she *would* be free of him and the wild thoughts that clamored in her mind when he was near so she could spend her time concentrating on the task ahead.

"Warrior?"

He paused but did not turn to look at her. "I have a name."

Shana stared defiantly at his broad back. "I'm tired and hungry. I need to rest."

He glanced overhead to the thick leaves all but blocking the sunlight, and then studied their surroundings.

"Not yet."

He renewed his pace, again not looking back to see if she followed.

Furious, Shana stomped after him. "Will you please slow down? I have to take two or three steps to every one of yours."

* * * *

Ryder smothered a smile with a curse and avoided shaking his head. For too many hours, he'd fought for control, to distance his chaotic thoughts from the beautiful woman who was now in his charge. He'd spend a fitful night remembering her words hurled at him in anger and her hostile expression when she stated she didn't trust him.

He realized she only allowed him to accompany her past the boundaries of Verdun to appease the old woman. He knew at the first opportunity, Shana Kerr would try to elude him and carry on alone.

Ryder remembered the heat that claimed his body when Shana stepped out of her alcove and he studied her garments in the weak firelight. It had been by his demand that she be provided suitable clothing for their journey. At the time, he had no idea what she'd look like swathed in tight-fitting men's clothing.

The snug, supple leather of the leggings she wore did little to hide the shape of her calves, her thighs, and the rounded softness of her buttocks. Even the hard leather half boots did not detract from her captivating appearance. The buttery soft fabric of the golden tunic she clenched in at her slim waist with a strip of cording only served to outline the fullness of her breasts.

What he found most alluring was her hair. She had pulled the golden fullness straight back and twisted the strands into a long braid that hung past her bottom. The absence of the soft curls around her face emphasized the bewitching beauty of her emerald eyes, the lushness of her dark lashes, her high cheekbones, and the softness of her lips.

The total effect, instead of hiding her charms as he'd hoped, accentuated every inch of her from head to toe, and heated his blood to a temperature hot enough to melt iron.

Cursing his foreign lack of control, Ryder increased his pace. He ignored the grumble in his belly that persisted loud and angry, the frustrated woman who followed less than an arm span behind him.

He concentrated on the path ahead, remembering the maps Hilda had given him packed away in their provisions. He kept a cautious eye on his surroundings, uncomfortable in this alien place, not knowing, but pledging silently to be prepared for whatever forces there might be among the trees.

The afternoon grew hotter. Ryder swiped his hand over his forehead to wipe away the moisture beading his brow. He vowed to shed his woolen tunic in favor of his vest as soon as they paused, and looked about for a suitable place to build a small fire and share a meal.

"Curse you, I'll not go another step."

Ryder pivoted so quickly that Shana almost bumped into him. She staggered back, balled her hands and dropped her fists to her hips.

"You will continue until I feel it's safe to stop."

"I need to rest. Now. I'm hungry, tired, and blisters have formed on my feet. You might be accustomed to grueling activity, but I'm not."

Ryder studied her. Anger darkened her cheeks, lit a determined gleam in her eyes, and caused her breasts to rise and fall beneath her tunic.

He tensed, denying the inner demand to reach out, take her into his arms, and smother her with his need.

Instead, he nodded, stepped back, and deposited their packs alongside the path. His sword remained sheathed across his shoulders in case the need to defend her arose.

A quick glance over the clearing revealed a brook several spans beyond the trees to his left. Thickets shielded the forest floor to his right. Heavy foliage above broke to afford a view of brilliant blue sky unmarred by clouds.

Without turning, he knew Shana stood behind him, determination etched across her face, fists placed against her hips. Ryder shook his head at her stubbornness then kicked aside the decaying leaves to expose the damp earth.

"We will rest for one hour."

"Thank you."

* * * *

Shana gave into exhaustion and stumbled to a fallen tree. Her pack hit the ground with a loud thud. Her leg muscles threatened to give out when she lowered her bottom to the decaying tree trunk.

She spread her fingers across the small of her back and pushed hard to relieve the ache that had started hours before. In an effort to ignore her pain, she thought about how wonderful it would feel to remove her boots and wiggle her toes in the coolness of the brook she could hear gurgling beyond their camp.

Weariness washed over her as she realized she had never considered the physical aspects of her quest. Nor had the numerous walks she'd taken through the forest surrounding Verdun prepared her for such a grueling march. Shana wished for a moment there had been beasts they could have ridden. However, with the exception of the few mules, the lumbering oxen used to cultivate fields and pull carts were too slow and wouldn't have covered as much distance as she and Ryder had traveled on foot.

Shana studied the afternoon sky above the clearing and judged the time to be just

past the noon hour. Meaning they'd traveled less than seven hours. By Ryder's estimate, after his strategic session with Hilda last evening regarding the time it would take to fulfill their journey to Havenshire, they'd traveled less than six leagues.

Autumn in Verdun meant the sun would set early and darkness would claim the skies before they could travel much farther. At six to eight leagues per day on flat land, and even less through Hyden Shelf, she still had several days travel ahead on the first leg of her journey.

Too exhausted to think of food, but determined not to allow Ryder to witness her physical state, she pushed away from the fallen tree to dig through her packs. She withdrew an oiled cloth and opened it slowly to savor the aroma of fresh cheese Hilda bartered from one of the Villagers. She remembered Hilda's caution to eat the cheese first because it wouldn't remain fresh.

Digging into her pack again, she pulled out a loaf of hard bread and several quiva apples plucked from vines that grew along the garden fence surrounding Hilda's cottage. She closed her pack then looked up to find Ryder had gathered an armful of dry brush and built a small fire in the clearing he'd prepared.

Shana studied him carefully as he turned, dug into his own pack, and withdrew something she couldn't identify.

She watched as he unfastened the heavy leather strap about his waist, raised his arms, and slipped the enormous sword from his back. He placed the weapon carefully at his feet before peeling off his gray woolen tunic.

The same errant pulses of energy she'd felt too many times in his presence engulfed her as he slowly revealed his tall, broad-shouldered frame. Once again, she had the desire to touch him, to run her fingers through that marvelous fall of dark hair.

In response to her errant thoughts, her fingertips began to tingle.

Shana closed her eyes and resisted the urge to bring her hands to her cheeks to hide the warm patches that burned her face. She focused hard on removing her disturbing thoughts and opened her eyes to find he'd donned the etched leather vest. He stuffed his tunic into the pack with his other belongings, and then replaced the sword across his back and shoulder.

He met her gaze as he adjusted the leather strap about his waist.

"We'll eat then be on our way," she said.

He nodded. "We must travel as far as we can while the light is sufficient to navigate the forest."

His long strides made short work of the ground that separated them. She noted that he was careful not to touch her hand as he took the meal she offered.

Relieved because, for the moment, she'd forgotten what happened if she touched him, Shana forced a bite of soft cheese and bread and drank her fill of the cool brook water Ryder provided.

The silence of the forest closed in around them.

Shana glanced toward the opening created by the leather vest that hung from his shoulders and left his massive arms bare. She studied his muscular chest, the maze of dark hair covering his upper torso before tapering into a thin line that disappeared beneath the wide strap secured about his waist.

She admitted that he was a magnificent, darkly handsome man. Unfortunately, that admission created a whole new set of problems for her over-tested senses, like the

uneasiness she felt when he looked at her with those strange blue eyes. She could still sense that there was something dangerous about him, and his sexuality made her extra aware of him and served as a reminder that things were suddenly becoming far too complicated.

The sooner she was away from him, the better.

* * * *

Twilight in the forest was a haunting sight. The air grew deathly still, the forest quiet. Enveloping mists and errant swatches of light twinkled like ghostly fingers along the rough-barked trees beside their path.

Long shadows cast down from the thick branches above their heads created patches of darkness, obscuring roots protruding up beneath the fallen leaves and making travel treacherous.

Shana kept close to Ryder as she surveyed a part of the forest she'd never traveled. The trees were spaced farther apart and the thickets less dense. Tangled patches of unfamiliar long-leafed yellow grass protruded up through the fallen leaves that blanketed the forest floor. Yet, the strangest thing she encountered was the absence of the numerous species of wildflowers that grew in such abandon near Verdun.

Ryder paused and Shana evaded bumping into his back by stepping to his side. She looked at his face, saw his eyes narrow, and watched as he turned his head side to side to study their surroundings. Sensing danger, yet not understanding the source, Shana closed her eyes and listened.

Nothing but the rustle of leaves and the chirping of forest insects filled her senses.

She opened her eyes and stared up in to Ryder's stern face. "What is it?"

He held his left hand up to demand silence. He then raised his right hand and grasped the hilt of his sword. The blade slipped effortlessly from the leather scabbard to glitter in the waning light.

Tension built as seconds passed. Prickles of premonition peppered Shana's flesh, creating a sensation unlike anything she'd ever experienced. She projected her concentration deeper into the surrounding forest, searched for a disturbance in the natural order of nature.

Violent tremors built in the moist air, growing in intensity like thunder before an approaching storm. Shana glanced at Ryder to see if he heard or sensed the changes in the atmosphere around them, but he continued to stand rigid by her side.

He looked down and met her gaze. "When I command it, I want you to run forward as fast as you can. I will stay behind you for as long as possible, but should I be detained, do not stop running and do nothing to try to help me."

"What ... ?"

"Run. Now!"

Shana hesitated less than a heartbeat before his shove propelled her forward. She swallowed hard to dislodge the lump that clogged her throat and gasped for breath as she ran through soggy leaves, and twisted side to side to avoid exposed roots and holes.

An unearthly howl sent chills down her spine. An answering call from the opposite direction almost caused her to falter.

Ryder steadied her with a firm hand on her shoulder and guided her footfalls as she leapt over a shallow crevice, and continued.

"Run. Do not look back."

Heart pounding and exhausted to the point breathing hurt, Shana struggled forward. The intensity and fierceness of the howls grew louder.

Surrounding them.

The sound of howling creatures running toward them, as they snapped leaves and twigs, alarmed Shana.

Shana stumbled and fell with a bone-rattling thud that almost knocked the breath from her lungs. She attempted to regain her footing, but one of Ryder's huge boots held her in place. She looked up, saw him shake his head. He lifted his boot and straddled her prone form, sword raised for battle.

Another growl penetrated her being and crawled over every inch of her flesh. Shana cast a hesitant glance around to discover a horde of wolf-like creatures, each tall enough to reach Ryder's waist.

Eyes possessed with Hell's fire penetrated the encroaching darkness. Shadows partially hid their shaggy, mud-colored coats, but she had a hard time focusing on anything other than immense mouths full of yellowed, razor-sharp teeth displaying the dried, bloody remains of their last meal, and angry jowls salivating heavily.

One of the beasts growled a deep vibrating sound that rose from its powerful chest.

Another answered.

Soon the other beasts joined the frightening symphony.

Inching closer.

Tightening the circle.

CHAPTER 5

Two powerful slashes of Ryder's enormous sword halted the advance of the first beast. A snarling mass of sharp claws and teeth appeared in the opposite direction.

Shana could do little more than gape in horror as another downward swing of his sword separated the creature's neck from its grotesque body to drop only inches from her knee. The severed veins in its massive neck spewed blood across her boots.

She fought the instinct to scream, knowing she'd distract Ryder from his task. Knowing also she had her own task to fulfill.

Another beast edged closer. The faint moonlight glowed in the animal's beady eyes. Groaning, Shana realized ignoring Ryder's warning to remain within the protection of his spread legs was her first mistake. Thinking she could offer some measure of assistance against the beasts determined to have them for a meal, her second.

Now, she stood pressed back to back with Ryder, fighting the wild palpitations of her heart, the terror threatening to steal her will. Convulsive tremors shook her hands so hard she could barely hold the long, sharp knife Ryder had thrust into her palm.

Their objective was simple.

Defeat or be defeated.

Ryder turned slowly to her right. Shana matched his movement, kicking aside the bundle she dropped earlier. She felt the muscles in his back bunch and stretch beneath his vest as he lifted his sword for another swing.

She heard the anguished howl and heavy thud as the creature fell to the leafy ground.

One beast sprang at her.

Shana held her breath to withstand the foul stench of its shaggy body and sliced wildly in front of her chest with the knife. Her efforts tore open the beast's throat. Blood spurted from the open wound as the beast fell to the ground at her feet.

Another charged.

Ryder dispatched it.

Shana had but one second to gasp for breath before another beast leapt over the body of the one she'd killed. Stumbling, she sank to one knee. Locking her elbows and bracing her arms against her legs, she tightened her fists, held the knife out, and prayed.

The blade sliced through the creature's under belly, creating a long, jagged gash, but not before enormous teeth gouged the flesh of her forearm, scraped bone, and sent pain up her arm to encompass her entire body.

Lightheadedness threatened her ability to think straight. Cold chills flashed over her body, raising the hair on her arms and at her nape. Familiar tingling sensations built in her chest, radiated through her shoulders, down her arms, then tickled her fingertips.

An angry snarl brought her quickly back to her senses. Another followed as the horror around her continued. She fought the need to close her eyes and allow her mystical gifts to work the warm magic on her own flesh she'd performed so many times for others, and fought on.

Another beast.

Another kill.

Her entire body trembled. She could hear Ryder's strained breathing over her own desperate gasps for air.

His movements were slowing. Her own stamina was almost at its end and she had no idea where she acquired the strength to continue wielding the knife when every instinct demanded she cease.

Behind her, Ryder destroyed three beasts to every one she killed. He continued to fight for their lives, slashing his sword through the air with a swishing noise that sent chills racing up and down her spine.

"Shana, run."

She glanced quickly around. Run? Where?

Darkness shadowed the surrounding trees, hiding any possible path of escape. The full moon cast a spectral glow through the sparse branches directly overhead, illuminating only portions of the forest floor. The ground was littered with dead and dying creatures. Blood covered the fallen leaves, dripped from the wound on her arm, and soaked her hand.

The stench of death filled her nostrils. Clung to her skin.

A strong hand gripped her shoulder and pulled her to her feet. "Now. Before the ones that ran off come back."

She allowed the unnatural quiet to seep into her dazed mind. She worried that the beasts would be back soon as she looked over her shoulder to find Ryder at her side. The absence of the angry growls sent another tingle of apprehension up her spine. Their provisions were slung over one shoulder, his sword over the other.

"What happened?"

He bent to retrieve her pack and held it out to her. "The werebeasts of my homeland are pride animals. I assume one of these," he pointed to the numerous creatures lying around the clearing, "is the pack leader. They must have fled to regroup."

Shana had no idea what he meant, but she didn't want to stay long enough to find out. She lifted her hand and gave the knife back to Ryder. He bent and wiped the blood from the blade on his leather leggings before he slipped the long knife into the scabbard at his waist. He started to give her the small pack she insisted upon carrying, but stopped and grasped her arm.

"You are injured."

Unprepared for the jolt of energy that streaked up her arm at his touch, Shana stared down at his large hand, wrapped gently around her wrist.

She pulled free of his grasp.

Forcing her gaze from his fingers to the vast amount of exposed flesh left vulnerable by his vest, she noticed several gashes oozing blood. She then turned her attention to his arms and found a profusion of gaping wounds from his wrists to his elbows.

Heat flowed immediately to her hands, warming her palms, tingling over her fingertips. "We both have wounds in need of healing."

"Not here. Those beasts could return at any moment. I want to be out of this accursed forest and into the open grasslands as soon as possible." He added her pack to those already on his shoulder and stepped around her.

Shana curled her fingers into her palms to subdue her natural instincts. She picked her way through the bloody carnage and followed.

* * * *

Exhausted, Shana could do little more than stagger behind Ryder's tall form, and try her best to ignore the painful blisters upon her feet. The wound on her forearm throbbed. Her shoulder muscles ached to the point that she couldn't stand the weight of her braid lying heavy on it, so she tossed her hair to hang down her back.

Hours ago, she'd pushed aside the horror of their ordeal with the beasts and followed Ryder through the darkness.

Now, as the early gray light of dawn slipped through the lingering trees, exposing a vast field of the strange yellow grass she'd seen the day before, memories flooded back.

She'd never taken the life of another creature, but she understood if she hadn't helped Ryder kill those beasts, they might not have survived.

Her entire life had been spent learning to use the gifts inherited with her Chosen blood to protect life. To heal the injuries and illnesses that befell the people of Verdun, and those of the surrounding southern villages. Though she realized she'd been given no other choice than to defend against the horrible beasts, she considered how easily she had cast aside all Hilda had taught her. How quickly she accepted Ryder's knife and struck down another life force.

By Hilda's words, her father's ancestors were great warriors. Their deeds in battle had awarded the Sorian ruling houses throughout the generations with a mate from Havenshire.

Shana considered the sheltered life she'd led in Verdun and the fact she never reflected upon how other races beyond the forest might live. She'd heard stories passed from the village elders, and from Hilda, but she never contemplated the physical aspects of a lifetime of war. Or the amount of training that might have to be endured to dedicate one's life to such actions.

She cast a glance toward Ryder and wondered about his seemingly endless stamina. Somehow, he kept their pace steady, and his footsteps never faltered over the tangled forest floor. Or now, through the thick grasses that swept her knees. She thought about the tale he'd told Hilda of traveling to Verdun, and of the hardships he must have faced to cross the raging Great River.

A chill spread rapidly over her body when she recalled how opposed she'd been to his company, and after devising a scheme to ease Hilda's worries, how eager she'd been to be rid of him.

What might have happened to her alone in the forest if he hadn't been by her side?

"We will rest here for a few hours."

Shana staggered to a halt. She looked up into Ryder's face, noted the same exhaustion she experienced evident in his taut jaw, the dark circles beneath his eyes.

She belatedly remembered he'd not had time to recover from the ordeal that left him injured in the forest before he fought those beasts and sustained more wounds.

The weight of her own selfishness felt heavy upon her already aching shoulders.

Shana looked around. They stood in a spot about four spans in diameter that was devoid of vegetation.

Surrounding the barren patch, league after league of yellow grasslands spread out

in all directions. A light wind blew through the tall stands, bending the grasses, causing the shafts to sway.

Looking up, she noted the sun at its zenith.

She'd been so caught up in her own misery that she'd paid no attention to how far they traveled since last eve.

She took a step closer to Ryder. "Tell me what to do so I might help set up camp."

He stared down at her for several seconds before he drew a pack from his back. Shana took the bundle from his hand, placed it upon the ground, and then relieved him of his other burdens and watched as he surveyed the area.

Ryder bent and dug into the larger of the two packs. "The tent will offer protection from the sun while you gain a few hours sleep." He turned and began to unfold a fur-bound leather creation.

To Shana's surprise, moments later a tent large enough for two to sleep in comfort appeared. She remembered earlier thoughts of sharing a tent with him. Having him so close, and the heat of his body ...

She swallowed. Hard.

"What about you?"

He met her gaze. "I will sleep once we have found sufficient shelter."

"We have leagues to go before we reach Havenshire," she protested.

"With a few hours' rest, we should reach the foothills of Hyden Shelf by nightfall." He turned away to remove the remnants of the loaf of bread shared at yesterday's noon, along with several more quiva apples and a chunk of cheese.

He broke the cheese in half, cut the bread with his knife, and handed a portion of the simple fare to her.

Starved, Shana devoured the cheese, swallowed several bites of hard bread, and drank brook water from the flask Ryder offered. She returned the small apples to the pouch for later.

Yawning, despite her determination to stay awake, she swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand and turned again to study their surroundings. She squinted through the waning sunlight to discover a faint purple haze jutting up from the horizon to the north.

"It's not as far to the Shelf as I anticipated."

Ryder glanced over his shoulder. "We traveled many leagues farther than I expected to cover over the last rising. Hilda told me the grasslands were fifteen leagues beyond Verdun. Hyden Shelf another ten leagues across the grasslands." He gazed into the sky. "I judge three or four more hours of light. With no more diversions, we should find shelter in the foothills before the moon rises overhead."

His mention of the diversion they'd faced brought memories to the surface. She tightened her fingers into fists and attempted to push away the images that flashed through her mind of sharp teeth, long claws, and an abundance of blood.

"Ryder." When he met her gaze, Shana almost forgot what she wanted to say. She had to look away. "About those beasts--"

"We did what we had to do to survive."

Shana chewed the flesh on the inside of her bottom lip. With Ryder this close, his masculine scent filled her nostrils and teased her senses, chasing away the smell of death and destruction that clung to her body, her clothing.

She studied his face, the full dark hair that grazed his shoulders, his broad chest, and paused on his wounds that she'd pushed out of her mind so she could forget their encounter with the beasts.

"Your wounds."

He glanced at his chest, and then met her gaze.

Shana's heart turned over as the glint of pain flashed through his eyes for a second before he pushed it away.

She reached forward to push the edge of his vest aside.

"Let me treat these cuts." Numerous claw marks, crusted over with dried blood and dirt, covered his flesh. Her fingers shook as she raised her hand and placed it on his chest. She closed her eyes and fought memories of the other time she'd touched him.

Those thoughts were instantly washed away when other, more disturbing images of the time he'd taken her into his arms by the pool, held her tightly against his body, and kissed her lips. The heat of his body had traveled through her hands, up her arms, over her shoulders, to warm her entire body.

Shana slid her hand higher, entwining her fingers in the silky dark hair on his chest. The soft strands wrapped around her fingers. The rapid pounding of his heart pulsed beneath his flesh. Her heart answered each beat. Drawing deep, Shana forced her eyes open. She stood for several seconds mesmerized by the sight of her fingers splayed across his flesh until her hand began to tremble.

"Shana." His voice carried a warning.

She tried to pull away, but the pressure of his larger hand instantly appeared about her wrist and halted her retreat.

Shana watched his face, saw him bend closer until less than inches separated his lips from hers. Whorls of desire captured her senses, filling her with a deep need that began low in her belly and spread outward to encompass her entire body.

She swayed closer.

He matched her movement.

She fought the temptation to close her eyes and lose herself in the magical trance he wove. She opened her lips, wanting, needing him to join their mouths as he had at the pool. She swiped the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip, remembering the taste of him, the warm moisture that enthralled her.

He bent closer still.

"Shana."

Her name, carried by the warmth of his breath, whispered over her face. Her knees lost the ability to hold her upright.

Shana leaned against Ryder, their bodies separated only by her hand against his chest and his hand stilled wrapped firmly about her wrist. His other hand settled over her shoulder, burning through the fabric of her tunic, stealing her willpower, her every thought except the one that sent her blood careening through her body.

His lips touched hers, gently, like the brush of a feather. She moaned softly and answered his tender caress, moving her lips beneath the heat of his, meeting the warm tip of his tongue tentatively with her own, wanting to learn now to return his kiss. Needing to capture the heat that melted her at the pool, the magic that sent her senses soaring past anything she'd ever endured.

The pressure of his firm mouth increased, as did the grasp of his fingers on her

shoulder. He pulled her closer, held her captured hand tighter. Her body trembled in answer to the self-restraint she could feel building within him as his chest muscles tensed and knotted beneath her spread fingers.

His tongue glided slowly over her lips, invading her mouth, her sanity. She tightened her fingers, grasped the hard planes of his chest, entwined the hair more firmly about her fingertips, and held him to task.

He released his grasp on her wrist and slid his hand up and over her aching breast, past her collarbone, through the tangled length of her hair that had escaped her braid, to settle his fingers on her other shoulder.

Shana inched her hand higher up the muscled planes of his chest to the pulse thundering fiercely in his neck. She dug her fingers into his midnight hair.

A deep groan escaped his throat and echoed the sound that slipped from Shana's own mouth.

He pulled her closer still, erasing the distance between their bodies. He molded her tighter against him until Shana could feel her heartbeat meld with his, the strength of his thighs against her thighs, and the bulge of his manhood against her abdomen.

She stretched against him as he deepened his kiss. Each breath became a shared breath. She lost all awareness of her surroundings. All that mattered was Ryder's nearness and the urgent pressure of his mouth upon her own.

The heat of his tongue filled her. Tingling sensations tightened her breasts, caused her nipples to pebble, spread like lightning through her body to settle at the apex of her thighs in an ache so strong every internal nerve ending throbbed.

* * * *

Ryder increased the pressure of his hold on Shana's shoulders. He pulled her closer until the mysterious warmth of her body sent another coil of tension through his groin.

He felt Shana's hand slide slowly around his body and slip beneath his vest. Her fingertips teased his hot flesh. Her innocent attempts to return his ardor fueled the fire in his blood higher, higher still until the blood boiled in his veins. His groin responded by sending another jolt of agony through his already hardened flesh.

He groaned and held her tighter, fused his mouth to hers. Fighting desperately for the control that slipped rapidly, he thought he wouldn't allow himself to experience the wonder he held in his arms.

Only sample her sweetness.

His conscience demanded he stop. He couldn't. He wanted her too much, needed her as he needed water to drink, air to breathe.

She swayed.

The contours of her lush body burned his flesh through his clothing, leaving an imprint Ryder was sure no amount of time would erase.

Silently cursing himself a fool and damning the need pushing him almost beyond his ability to control his lust, Ryder tightened his grasp on Shana's shoulders and reluctantly pushed her away.

She staggered back several paces, blinked rapidly as if escaping a trance, and then looked up to meet his gaze.

Ryder felt his heartbeat increase to triple time when she narrowed her lashes and stared at him with a look that seared marrow deep.

She took another step back.

Ryder had less than a second to clear his lustful thoughts as she fell over the pack he'd left upon the ground.

He reached out to prevent her fall.

The instant his fingers entwined with hers, arcs of white-hot fire engulfed his flesh, burned his fingertips, and repelled his touch.

It took a moment for the pain that flashed through his body to subside. Ryder turned his hand over to stare at the blisters forming on his fingertips. He looked down as Shana struggled to her feet.

She watched him for an instant before she turned and fled for the protection of the tent he'd erected and closed the flap behind her.

Ryder remembered the words Hilda had spoken of Shana's mysterious gifts inherited from the ones the people of Menila called Chosen.

He vividly recalled the events of the past few moments and wondered why Shana had used her magic against him. He hadn't forced her participation in their embrace, their kiss.

She'd been as willing as he.

Again, cursing his lapse of control, Ryder walked to the packs he'd left upon the ground near the center of the clearing. He fumbled in the larger pack, found the herbs and swatches of cloth Hilda included for their use in case of an accident, and then grabbed his water pouch.

He stared down at his open hand to find the blisters had disappeared, leaving instead a grim reminder of what his moment of weakness created. He closed his eyes and tensed every muscle in his body in an effort to erase the lasting effects of Shana's soft body pressed against his own.

Moments later, as he sat upon the ground cleaning his wounds of dried dirt and blood, his body and thoughts once again within his control, Ryder silently renewed the Warrior's Debt he'd given Hilda. He would see Shana safely to Havenshire, and no matter what physical or emotional hardships he faced, he would endure.

He remembered his own task set about by the Prophet Jordan's vision, the images Jordan presented in his father's tent, and the threat of the same thing happening to his homeland.

He reached down, touched the hilt of his father's sword propped against his knee. He repeated his pledge to fulfill his assignment as an advance scout for his father's army and return to his homeland to take his rightful place by his father's side.

Ryder grimaced at the Warrior's Debt he'd sworn. He remembered the old woman's words warning of the hardships he'd face as he accompanied Shana to fulfill her destiny.

He'd come too far. Experienced too much. His word given and responsibility accepted.

To his father, his people, and to Hilda.

His mission would be met. He would return to the Freelands and spend the remainder of his days attempting to forget Shana Kerr.

CHAPTER 6

The stone stairway was narrow and steep, but Zandicol navigated the ancient passage with agility belying his eighty-eight years. At the top, he paused before a wooden door and pushed aside the carved iron latch.

He squinted until his eyes grew accustomed to the bright sunlight flooding the stairwell. Stepping out onto the walkway that circled the tower of Soras Keep, Zandicol trod to the chest-high stone wall and looked out over the vast countryside, the view unobstructed from his position a hundred and fifty spans above the ground.

Parched lands stretched out in all directions to reach the horizon. Blackened patches of earth still smoldered from the fires that had burned throughout last night and well into the morning hours. Fires that had destroyed more of the run-down dwellings of the Sorian peasants who still resisted his Rule.

Fools, the lot of them. They could not win their battle to remain free of his power, yet there were those who stubbornly refused to bend to his will. Those peasants chose to surrender their lives to escape his control rather than forfeit their essence of will to assist in Zandicol's war against the Chosen.

Zandicol banged his fist on the stone wall, then turned his attention toward the horizon and the distant boundaries of Hyden Shelf. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the Temple of Havenshire and those who resided within.

Final descendants of the magical sect of Prophets, the Chosen, centuries past, had fled what was now the Freelands long before the last war of the Black Forces saw the remaining members of Zandicol's kind murdered.

Fearing they would meet their demise like their ancestors, the remaining Chosen forbid the use of the word "Prophet." Instead, they began life anew as Chosen when they settled on the continent, built the vast fortress of Havenshire, and then bred to increase their race.

The new Chosen vowed to remain separate from the general populace of the continent until they foolishly rewarded the rulers of Soras with a bride from Havenshire for each generation, in exchange for the preservation and protection of their culture.

Anger chased away Zandicol's thoughts of the past. He narrowed his gaze, siphoning strength from his fury to search for a weakening in the magical shield about the Temple's high walls, a tiny crack that would allow him to penetrate the final barrier that denied him his dreams.

The shield remained intact, but Zandicol could feel it weakening. Only a matter of time.

"Why do you spend so much time up here looking out over the countryside? Surely, you saw enough of those peasants last eve?"

Zandicol opened his eyes and turned toward the man who had invaded the privacy of his thoughts. He studied the frail form of Larus Kerr, ruler of Soras. He noted how the fine blue fleece of his robes clung to the man's slender frame and hung from his bent shoulders. Though he tried, he could find little resemblance to his robust older brother,

Mordith, who Zandicol had poisoned many years ago so that this weak-willed idiot could take his place on the throne of Soras.

Larus' shoulder length dark hair had turned white over the past twenty years. His deep green eyes had lost all sparkle and were now dull and lifeless. His penchant for asking the same questions over and over, quickly wore on Zandicol's nerves, but he needed Larus for a while longer.

Though it tried his patience to curb the instinct to destroy the younger man and be done with it, there was still much to do before all of Menila was under his control. However inept Larus might be, in the minds of the people on the continent, Larus ruled Menila.

"The shield is weakening."

"How do you know?"

Zandicol clenched his hands at his sides. "I can feel it, you idiot."

Larus accepted his answer without additional comment, nodded, and then stepped to the stone wall to look over the countryside. "I remember a time when Soras was green. When crops flourished in the fields and trees grew in masses in the great forests. It is a pity our land dies. What will my people eat when there is no food to sustain them?"

"Your people bring this destruction upon themselves, Larus. By resisting your will as ruler of Soras, they subject themselves to needless death." Zandicol turned and placed his hand upon the younger man's shoulder. He stared deeply into Larus' green eyes, willing the weaker man to obey his words without question.

"You will walk among your people again on this moon rising and demand they lay down their meager weapons and cooperate with your fight against the Chosen. Your warriors must use their resources to combat the evil threatening to overtake Soras and not waste their time putting down uprisings among the peasants. You will declare it an act punishable by death to deny your warriors whatever they need to proceed with their battle to destroy this evil."

Larus nodded.

"Go now. There are things I must do." Zandicol dropped his hand and watched as Larus disappeared through the open doorway.

Zandicol drew a deep breath then reached up to stroke the graying beard on his chin. He thought about his ancestors and all he had accomplished over his life in Menila. He recalled how being declared by the Chosen as unworthy to live among the survivors, and his subsequent banishment from Havenshire, had turned failure into what would soon be triumph.

The Chosen had no consideration for a youth of twelve. Because of one disruptive act, he had been transported far away from the Temple to a desolate area on the continent where the Chosen believed he would immediately die.

Yet, he had found his way to Soras Keep, taken shelter provided as a reward for hours of hard labor, and survived by giving up sleep to plan his revenge long into the night.

He changed his name to Zandicol, wanting no evidence of his prior life to interfere with the plans that were germinating within his young mind.

It had taken many years, but as he matured, he taught himself to call forth the darkness the Chosen claimed hidden within him. He used his mental strengths to

insinuate himself firmly into the ruling house of Soras, and eventually, made his service as an advisor invaluable.

Mordith, the last worthy ruler of Soras, and his Chosen bride had been destroyed, along with the infant they spawned. All obstacles in his way carefully eradicated. Now, his minions were spreading his reign at a rapid pace deeper and deeper into the southernmost portions of Menila.

His power grew stronger, his life span longer, with each essence of will he possessed from the many hundreds of thousands of peasants across Menila, but it still wasn't enough. Until the Chosen weakened to the point that they could no longer maintain the magical shield that protected Havenshire, his ultimate victory would be incomplete.

Yet, there had to be a way he could acquire enough strength. A way he could use the Chosen's magic to his advantage, or learn of their weaknesses.

* * * *

The hot, stuffy air inside the tent closed Shana away from reality beyond its walls as she huddled on the fur-covered floor, hugging her knees close to her chest.

The events of the last few risings washed over her, bringing chills to her clammy flesh and reminding her not only of the dangers she might still face as she made her way to Soras, but of the horrors, and wonders, she'd experienced by the warrior's side.

Shana squeezed her hands together in the darkness. She hadn't imagined the arcs of white fire from Ryder's hands in the forest, not conjured visions of blisters on her fingertips. Still, she didn't understand the source of the strange occurrence.

Did some unknown evil lurk beneath Ryder's façade that would forbid her touch? Were her gifts somehow repelling any contact between them?

She considered Hilda's words on the eve before she began her journey. Hilda said she felt a strong sense of honor within the foreign warrior and trusted in his abilities. She also confessed having seen the warrior's arrival in her dreams. Hilda was convinced he was the champion that Shana needed to see her quest met.

Shana released her grasp on her knees, straightened her legs, and then turned over to her back to stare up into the darkened interior of the tent. Memories of Ryder's touch upon her body, the feel and taste of his mouth on her lips, the vibrant emotions that engulfed her when she pressed against his length, chased away the chills and set her flesh afire.

She forced away errant thoughts of Ryder, and her sweet memories were replaced by frightening musings of what might still lie ahead as she traveled to Soras.

She had no idea what proof of her identity lay within Soras Keep. No clue how she would gain entrance into the stronghold. Even less notion how she might use her gifts of healing, of being able to mentally transport away from her environment into a place of peace and solitude, or even her ability to sense changes in the atmosphere around her, would accomplish when dealing with Zandicol's crimes.

Hilda had been unable to offer suggestions, saying she would know her strengths when the time arose.

Her only hope lie with the Chosen and their ability to awaken the dormant gifts Hilda sensed were awaiting training within her.

She'd never seen Zandicol. She had no idea what form his magic might take, no knowledge of a power so malevolent.

Sheltered in Verdun, she never witnessed the death and destruction Hilda often spoke of during her lessons. Until she faced those beasts in the forest, she'd never truly felt fear trace her spine, or had her life been threatened by something beyond her control.

Shana closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. She willed her mind to empty of such tumultuous thoughts. She thought instead of the hidden pool in the forest, the gentle breezes that rustled the leaves and stirred the moist earth scents to mingle with the different aromas of abundant wildflowers surrounding the pool. She exhaled slowly to relax each muscle, every nerve, until her body felt heavy, her blood sluggish.

She whispered the enchantments Hilda taught her, repeating the phrases until peaceful weightlessness washed over her, whisking her away into a deep slumber that would restore her strength, heal her wounds, and renew her courage.

* * * *

"Ryder?"

He paused in his preparation of the rabbit he'd killed while she slept. Glancing up, he arched a dark brow, and lifted his hand to brush away a lock of hair that dangled in his eyes before he returned his attention to the creature before him.

"Ryder?" Shana stepped closer until her shadow fell over his seated form. "I'd like to apologize for the awful things I said at the cottage."

She watched the sharp edge of his knife slip beneath the shaggy brown fur of the tiny creature in his hand. She stood mesmerized as the fur peeled away from the animal's body, leaving wet, slick flesh beneath. She swallowed hard as she remembered using that same knife, and the efficiency with which the blade had sliced through the tendons and muscles in the beast's necks.

Shivering, Shana forced away the images she knew would live forever etched in her mind.

For over an hour, she'd sat in the darkness of the tent, rehearsing an apology for the way she'd treated Ryder over the past four risings. The words were hard enough to speak, but by ignoring her presence, he made her task that much more difficult.

"Please."

He wiped the rabbit blood on the fur he discarded then slid the knife back into the sheath at his waist. After skewing the prepared meat and placing it over the fire, he rubbed his hands against his leather leggings before he rose slowly to his full height, turned, and looked down at her.

Words she planned to speak disappeared from her mind, taking with them the ability to think straight, and replacing every logical thought carefully drawn with the same strange tingling sensations that afflicted her every time she looked into his intense blue eyes.

He turned away.

Shana stared at his broad back, the length of dark hair that swept his wide shoulders. A curious knot formed in her throat. She swallowed to alleviate the discomfort. "I've been selfish. You must have had a purpose for coming to our lands, but I gave your journey no consideration, nor did Hilda."

"Are you still trying to get rid of me, Shana?"

The best way to ease her discomfort was to say what had to be said and be done with it, she thought. "I admit your company has been a great asset. Those beasts would have--"

He turned on her abruptly. Irritation showed in his eyes. A mocking smile curled the corners of his sensuous mouth. He took a step closer, but Shana held her ground, fists planted against her hips. "Your debt has been paid. Hilda saved your life. Now, you've saved mine."

"Shana."

She failed to recognize the warning in his voice until it was too late. He grasped her shoulders and pulled her closer, so close she felt his breath whisper across her face, the warmth of his body penetrate her clothing.

"Face the facts once and for all, Shana. I've given my word to see you safely to Havenshire. Nothing you do or say will change that."

"I won't accept your assistance unless your company is given willingly, without the burden of an oath because Hilda treated your wound."

She turned her head side to side to stare at his large hands spread across her shoulders. She met his furious stare with a defiant one of her own. "Mine is a hopeless quest. What we've met so far is only a sample of the danger that awaits us. I'll not have you bound to me by an oath of responsibility. Nor will I allow you to be subjected to the same Fate I face without understanding if you accompany me from this point forward, you do so by your own will and not a sense of duty."

"Duty?" Fury darkened his face and blazed in his eyes.

The need to be beyond his reach became urgent. Shana twisted in his grasp, but he held fast. "Let me go."

* * * *

Ryder tightened his grip when Shana tried to pull away. His stomach churned, his heart pounded beneath his ribs. A warning echo rang out inside his head.

While Shana slept, he faced those same doubts and fears. He tried to channel his energy into other pursuits as he hunted meat for their meal, but he lost interest in his quest and returned to camp with only one capture.

Now, hours later, his thoughts still in turmoil, Shana's insistence he relinquish his honor, his duty, only added fuel to the fire burning deep in his gut.

He released his grasp on her shoulders and watched her stagger away. The terror in her eyes, the trembling of her lips, the way she studied him like a frightened animal ready to flee at the slightest provocation, sent chills over his flesh.

Ryder fought to regain his lost composure and wondered at Shana's ability to break his iron will when no one, not even his formidable father, could tempt a response from him he had no desire to give. Self-control was an intricate part of the training each warrior of the Freelands received. The ability to cloak his emotions, to maintain command over his body and circumstances had been tested numerous times and never failed him.

Until Shana looked into his eyes and tore his hardened shell away bit by bit.

Ryder turned from her intense stare and ran his fingers through his hair. After spending hours pacing the clearing and agonizing over the events of the past few days, he was still haunted by memories of her soft flesh pressed firmly against his as they faced the beasts in the forest.

Repeatedly, he considered what might have happened had one of the beasts succeeded in injuring him more seriously than the few minor wounds he'd sustained, or worse, killed him.

Moments ago, staring into her eyes, tightness had grown in his chest stronger than anything he ever experienced. He still had the inexplicable urge to wrap his arms around her and use any power of persuasion he could muster to convince her to forget this absurd quest and flee with him to the safety of his homeland.

Shaking his errant thoughts, Ryder stepped closer to the fire and turned the spit. Juices from the cooking rabbit dripped into the flames, sizzling and sputtering in the silence that engulfed the clearing. Unbidden, as he watched the smoke rise--the flesh of the animal brown in the heat--the Prophet Jordan's words filled his mind.

Memories of the multitudes begging for help ricocheted around inside his head.

Was this the destiny Jordan foretold? Did Fate place him in Verdun and give him responsibility for Shana?

Ryder dropped to his haunches before the fire and cradled his aching head in his hands.

"Ryder?"

The sound of his name whispered from her lips rippled over him like a lover's caress. He raised his head and realized she'd dropped to her knees at his side.

"I'm sorry."

She reached out and touched his shoulder. Heat from her fingers penetrated his body like a smoldering brand, followed by a tightening in his groin.

Ryder grasped her tunic sleeve and thrust her hand away. He rose and walked to the other side of the clearing.

* * * *

Ryder's abrupt movements sent Shana sprawling to her backside on the ground. She winced in pain and shook her head.

What had come over her? One moment she was frightened by the fury she witnessed in his eyes. The next, she was filled with the unexplainable urge to soothe the pain reflected in his handsome features. To answer the urgent tingling that began in her chest and radiated through her arms to her fingertips, and to ease his plight so he might take a few hours rest before they resumed their trek.

She had no control over the force that guided her footsteps as she crossed the few feet separating them. Nor did she have any inkling how she'd acquired the nerve to raise her hand to touch his shoulder. She glanced at the tense way he held his muscular body and, once again, felt the deep, compelling need to reach out to him.

"Ryder?"

"See to your needs, Shana. We will eat, break camp, and be on our way within an hour."

Infuriated by his abrupt dismissal, Shana said, "no."

He glanced over his shoulder.

"I'll not leave here until this thing is settled between us. I've apologized to you for the way our journey started. I've offered an honorable way to continue whatever quest brought you across the Great River."

"Do you want me to accompany you?"

His words were soft and full of an emotion she couldn't identify.

Shana tore her gaze from his broad back and studied the ground. "I'm trying hard to understand you. I admit I judged you too harshly in Verdun." She closed her eyes. "I never imagined what a journey such as the one I've begun would entail. Those beasts.

The grasslands. What lies ahead in Hyden Shelf, and beyond.”

“Do you want me to accompany you, Shana?”

Shana opened her eyes and looked up, expecting to see his brilliant blue eyes blazing down at her from his imposing height.

Instead, she met his back.

She hesitated, unsure whether or not she should tell him the truth, then refused the coward's way out. “I would never have made it out of the forest of Verdun without you.” She took a step closer, raised her hand, and placed it upon his shoulder. “I'm trying hard to understand many things. My emotions are in turmoil. The gifts Hilda has long nurtured within me are creating havoc with my mind and body. I want to trust you, but I find it difficult. When you hold me--”

He turned to face her, causing her hand to fall from his shoulder. His eyes impaled her, demanding she finish her statement.

“I'm afraid of the things happening between us, of the arcs of fire that repel our touch. I sense some hidden force trying to forbid our partnership, Ryder L'Syr of the Freelands.

“Because of this mysterious force, I can't ask you to place your life into danger in order to protect me. Nor do I expect you to delay whatever brought you to Menila until my plans are met.” She stepped closer until less than a hand's span separated them. “I won't place your life into needless danger.

“You asked if I'm still trying to be rid of you. The answer is yes.” But, I need you, she whispered softly enough that she hoped he wouldn't hear.

Shana had no time to anticipate his actions as he reached forward, drew her into his embrace, and crushed her against his chest.

He then pushed her away to arm's length. “Don't trust me, Shana. You must be strong enough not to test what little control I have left.”

He released her abruptly and walked away.

CHAPTER 7

Darkness filled the countryside. A full moon unobstructed by clouds turned the tall grasses that fluttered in the slight breeze muted shades of brown and gray. Along the horizon to the North, jutting ridges of mammoth rock reached skyward, reminding Shana of the teeth of the beasts in the forest and sending chills of apprehension over her flesh. She looked beyond the foothills to the great jagged mountains that reached high into the star-studded sky.

To combat the exhaustion threatening her ability to remain upright, Shana focused on Ryder's broad back. Hours ago, she'd given up trying to decide what he'd meant by warning her to be strong for both of them. He certainly offered no explanation. In fact, other than caution her to stay close after they broke camp and began another long journey across the grasslands, he hadn't uttered another word.

The hours since daylight slipped into dusk and then into darkness, crept slowly by. A chasm grew between them and widened until anger now fueled Shana's energy and gave her a renewed sense of purpose. She silently vowed she might need his strength and abilities to see her journey to Havenshire met, but she didn't need his companionship. The physical and emotional distance he'd placed between them would allow her senses to right themselves so she could concentrate on her task.

Buried deep in thought, Shana paid little attention to where she stepped until she stumbled. After she regained her balance, she looked down to find the terrain filled with fist-sized brown rocks flecked with tiny golden specks, the same rock used to build her home in Verdun. She glanced up to discover they'd reached the outcropping that bordered the higher mountains of Hyden Shelf.

A hasty glance left then right revealed numerous sharp boulders jutting up twenty to thirty spans above her head, each casting a shadow of darkness beneath the light of the moon.

"Warrior?"

"Back to that, are we?"

She refused to respond to the challenge in his voice, fighting instead the warmth that rose to her face and the strange tingling that captured her body. "How much longer before we rest?"

"Hilda said it would not be safe to delay our journey through the foothills. She also stated numerous abandoned caves line the first shelf and will offer us shelter from the elements as we climb higher." He glanced skyward then shook his head. "We'll try to make it to the safety of the mountains before we search for a place to rest."

Exhausted, Shana had great difficulty placing one foot before the other. The blisters that had formed on her feet during yesterday's trek now produced sores ready to fester. The rejuvenating touches she'd applied to the wound on her forearm left by the beast's teeth had only partially healed and the renewing flesh throbbed with an ache so intense it almost left her arm useless.

Shana looked up at the forbidding mountains. Dread washed over her, followed

by a deep tightening in her chest. Hilda's kind face materialized, reminding Shana of the many wonderful times shared during her youth, the lessons her mentor taught, and the secrets finally told that shattered her happy life and sent her on this futile mission into the unknown.

Ryder paused and looked around. Shana watched him shift the packs on his shoulder and gaze slowly left to right. Filled with the need to ask if he sensed danger, she stepped closer and said, "is something wrong?"

"It's too dark to be sure of our footing through the loose rocks. We should seek adequate cover now, and then climb to the first shelf at dawn."

A renewed spark of energy burst through her body at the prospect of closing her eyes and taking a few hours of rest. She studied her surroundings only to find an abundance of sharp, towering rocks. "Have you a suggestion where we might find a suitable place to rest?"

"If we're careful, I believe we might climb high enough to locate a plateau, but you'll have to allow me to assist you."

The prospect of placing her hand into his was daunting. Exhaustion was one thing. The phenomena that occurred between them when their fingers touched, quite another.

She met his intense gaze. "I won't touch you again. I've no way of knowing what damage the force between us might do if we continue to test it. There has to be another way."

He bent, dropped one of the packs he'd strapped to his back on the ground, and then fumbled around inside. Seconds later, he produced a short length of rope. "I'll tie this about my waist. You do the same with the other end."

Her alternatives were a possible plunge down a rock-strewn trail or blisters from the warrior's touch. She chose the rope.

After tying the end around her midsection and testing the knot with a strong tug, Shana nodded, ready to resume their travels. She followed Ryder through the darkness for several hundred more spans until they reached a large cavern in the rock. She waited impatiently while he dug into his pack again and produced a glowing stone. He bade her to stay put while he eased into the opening then returned moments later to assure her it would be safe to rest in what appeared to be an abandoned animal den.

Moments later, seated inside the small cave approximately four spans wide and six spans tall, Shana huddled into the warmth of the fur tent Ryder extracted from his pack to use as a blanket. She glanced about the interior of their cramped hiding place, at the remainder of a fire some other traveler had used. Shana studied Ryder as he used the remains of the previous fire to build their own that offered minimum light and warmth. She then watched the smoke from their fire dance in the twinkling light of the flames.

Wind howled beyond the opening of their cozy den, stirring dust settled on the rocks along the stone path. The eerie howl brought the beast of the forest to mind, and Shana unconsciously slid closer to Ryder.

In order to distract her thoughts from straying to his large body, his close proximity, she concentrated on the unusual stone he'd produced. Reaching forward, she touched the palm-size rock, expecting the surface to be hot, yet found it cool to her touch.

"It's called a glowstone. In my land we use such rocks as a source of light."

Shana picked up the rock and balanced it in her palm. She ran her fingertips over

the surface. "It's beautiful, but it must be worth a fortune."

"Glowstones are abundant in the mountains of the Freelands."

Simple answers. Direct. To the point. Offering no additional knowledge of his home, his life before he was found in the forest of Verdun. Nothing of himself. Shana wondered what it would take for him to open up to her, to answer the many questions that needed explanations.

She placed the glowing rock on the cave floor where he'd positioned it and dismissed it as an unknown from another world she had no wish to learn about at this time. Since Ryder L'Syr of the Freelands chose not to elaborate, and she refused to inquire, she did her best to dam her curiosity. Such thoughts would only add to her growing burdens and might distract her concentration from the task ahead. They could also close the gap she tried so hard to maintain between her emotions and the foreign warrior.

Yawning, despite her determination to stay awake until he took his rest for the eve, Shana snuggled deeper into the mounds of fur to ward off the rapidly increasing chill. She watched the vapor created by her escaping breath mingle with the smoke from their small fire, the sparks and tiny fragments of wood floating on the wind currents that entered through the cave opening before drifting to the cave floor like feathers.

Somewhere beyond the cave, an animal howled. Another answered from a greater distance, sending Shana closer to Ryder's hard body. She realized her position too late when the weight of his arm settled over her shoulder. She tried to resist the marvelous warmth that flowed over her as he pulled her nearer, wrapped the fur tighter, and enclosed her in a cocoon that kept out the chill and surrounded her in comfort.

"Lie down, Shana."

His words, whispered close to her ear, were reminiscent of a warm summer breeze, kissing her flesh like bright sunlight, sending a languid feeling through her arms, her legs, her ...

She tried to pull away.

"Relax. The air will grow colder as the night lengthens. We must share the heat of our bodies to survive the frigid temperatures that will come before the sun rises."

His logic was reasonable, but it didn't slow the pounding of her heart or the tingles of apprehension crawling along her flesh.

He gave her no opportunity to refuse. He leaned back, dragging her along with him, until her length pressed firmly into the cradle of his body, her spine against his muscular chest, and her buttocks snug to the warm, leather-covered expanse of his groin.

"I can't rest this way," she protested.

"Sleep, Shana."

His soft command was followed by his arms tightening about her shoulders as his forearms and fists grasped the thick fur to cross it over her breasts. His head shifted so the side of her face pressed into the heated flesh of his neck and the pounding of his pulse echoed in her ear.

Shana bit her lip. She couldn't spend the evening hours this way. Not wrapped in his arms, feeling his heat, inhaling his scent. She desperately needed sleep, but by all that was sacred, she'd never close her eyes in this position.

Drawing a deep breath to steady her resolve, she forced her eyes closed and her concentration toward anything that didn't include Ryder. She mentally reached out,

visualizing the placid pool in the forest of Verdun. The abundant flowers filling the air with fragrances were vastly different from those now encompassing her. There was the gentle stirring of the breeze instead of the thunderous pounding of her heart.

She recited the words of the Chosen, calling forth her inner strength to comfort her and whisk her away to another place, another time, where her mind and body could be at ease.

Vast green pastures sprinkled liberally with wildflowers appeared in her mind. Blue skies filled with puffy white clouds stretched across a tranquil panorama. Gentle winds bent the grasses and caused ripples in the flowing brook that split the pastureland, creating pleasant thoughts that whispered through her mind, calmed her heart rate, and slowed the blood through her veins. Tranquility lulled her into a state of semi-consciousness that block reality, deeper still until sleep claimed her body and dreams filled her mind.

* * * *

Ryder cursed again his impulsive act of trying to give Shana comfort from the rising cold without considering what her nearness would do to his control. His body throbbed with an ache centered in his groin and grew in intensity each time she rubbed her soft bottom against his already explosive erection.

He closed his eyes against the agony and buried his nose into the spice-scented tangles of her hair, inhaling deeply to capture the fragrance he'd learned to crave over the past few days. Berating himself a fool, yet unable to give up the pressure he exerted to hold her position exactly as she was, Ryder resigned trying to resist her abundant charms. While they were wrapped warmly in the folds of the fur tent, he intended to enjoy her nearness.

Only for this one night.

He listened to the soft, even sounds of her breathing and knew she'd fallen into a deep slumber. He concentrated on the sensations her supple body created in his much harder one. The way her curves melded against him, her long legs fit perfectly between his. A strange heat seeped through his every pore to relax tense muscles too long denied the pleasure of resting at ease. And he slept.

* * * *

Blackness filled his mind, chasing away all calm and causing his pulse to race. Ungodly howls penetrated his being, echoing louder and louder, sending chills along his arms, raising the hair, tightening the tendons until his muscles strained.

He stood in an open pasture. Wildflowers grew at his feet. Blue skies and velvety white clouds floated overhead. But the beauty surrounding him was quickly overshadowed by an ominous darkness that crawled slowly over the land from the North. Destroying everything in its path. Leaving behind a vast, empty void.

The unworldly howls crew louder, whining along with the wind that gained velocity, blew through his hair, and sent the tall grasses at his feet flat against the ground.

Darkness approached. Closer. Closer still. Faster.

Wind now blew at gale force. Great spears of lightning flashed down through the darkness, striking the earth, creating fires that rushed ahead of the devastation fast approaching.

Still the howling persisted. Growing louder. Gaining strength. Whining.

Wailing and haunting as the sounds were carried by the wind. Startled cries reached out to him, begging his assistance, pleading for him to stop the insane destruction eating up the land.

Shana was suddenly at his side, brandishing the knife he'd given her in the forest to fight the beasts. Tears fell down her cheeks, leaving wet trails in the dust that settled on her face. Her glorious hair was unbound and whipped around her body. She stared straight into the storm, never blinking, never raising her hand to wipe away the moisture.

He reached up, retrieved his father's sword from its sheath and assumed his fighting stance, legs spread for balance, muscles tense and ready for combat, wondering how a lone warrior and an untested female would withstand something as ferocious as the turbulent darkness less than five hundred spans away and gaining rapidly.

Lightning struck the ground before him. The force of the strike and the energy it created caused the earth to tremble and great plumes of smoke to hinder his vision. He glanced at Shana and discovered she stood steadfast by his side, staring not at what threatened them, but at his sword. He followed her startled gaze toward his father's sword raised for battle. He held not a weapon honed of the finest steel the Freelands had to offer, but a shaft of pulsating light emitting a strange whistling sound that, upon realizing what he held, seeped slowly through his hands, down his arms, past his shoulders, and vibrated within his chest.

As he stared at what had once been a weapon, mesmerized by the brilliant glow, the sword disappeared in a flash of white light, leaving him empty-handed in the face of battle.

He grabbed Shana and shouted for her to run.

But there was no place to go. Darkness now surrounded them, inching closer, closer still, threatening to engulf them. He pulled Shana against his body, forced the top of her head beneath his chin, and buried his cheek against her hair. He wrapped his arms around her for what little protection he could offer. Watched the darkness grow closer. Held Shana tighter and prayed whatever Fate lay before them would be merciful as he grasped her securely in his arms.

The encroachment ceased, leaving them standing in the middle of a grassy area no larger than fifty spans in diameter. The wind calmed until nothing stirred. He looked down to the woman in his arms. She pulled from his embrace only far enough to meet his gaze. A strange luminescence filled her beautiful eyes. A white aura began to shimmer around her, growing in intensity until he could see nothing but the light.

Shana?

She did not respond.

In the blink of an eye, the brightness disappeared, leaving only darkness that swallowed him up and drained away his sense of time and place. Beneath his feet, he could feel no solid surface anywhere that he could grasp to right his world. He could see nothing, hear nothing except the thumping of his heart. Feel nothing but the force of fear that flooded him, choked him, drained his strength and ability, and rendered him impotent in the darkness.

As suddenly as the darkness appeared, it vanished to leave him standing with empty arms in the middle of a grassy field.

Shana?

* * * *

"I'm here."

Cool fingers touched his cheek, traced his brow, his jaw. Ryder couldn't break the clutches of the horror he'd felt at losing Shana, of not being able to protect her from the evil that had stolen her away.

"Ryder. Wake up. You're having a nightmare."

Sweat drenched his body, soaked his clothing and sent chills racing over his flesh beneath the heavy fur covering. Anger, fueled by frustration, followed. He reached out, grasping for a solid surface to regain his equilibrium as he struggled for control.

"Stop, Ryder. You're hurting me."

Shana's painful cry penetrated his delirium. Ryder gasped, forcing air into his lungs. He willed his taut muscles to relax as he struggled to separate delusion from reality. He opened his eyes but he saw nothing other than the faint shine of the glowstone against the cave wall. He heard nothing but the howl of the wind beyond the entrance.

"Ryder?"

Shana's soft voice and the touch of her fingertips across his brow sent warmth flowing through his veins. He met her gaze and realized he held her tightly within his grasp, her body half sprawled over his.

"You were having a nightmare," she said.

* * * *

He tightened one hand across the small of her back while he dug his other hand into the fullness of her hair, effectively stilling Shana's effort to scramble away from the tension she could feel building within his body. She struggled against his hold as he increased pressure on her back, urging her closer. Closer still.

A seductive smile creased his lips.

Memories of the taste of him--the warmth from his lips to heat her flesh and leave her body a quivering mass in his arms--washed over her.

His breath whispered across her cheeks. Those thick lashes dipped and closed, sheltering the strange lights that burned in his beautiful eyes. His smile vanished when less than a finger's width separated her mouth from his.

A distance Shana desperately wanted to cross.

His fingers slipped from her neck to trace a light path between her shoulders. The arm he'd secured over her lower back slid away, giving Shana ample freedom to flee, but when he opened his eyes, the soft reflection of the glowstone revealed the battle he fought for control.

"Shana."

Even if she'd not understood the warning in his voice, she couldn't miss the tensing of his body, the way he dropped his arms to his sides and turned his head so he wouldn't have to look at her. However, he couldn't hide the evidence of his lust that pulsed against her belly, nor the rapid rise and fall of his expansive chest beneath her breasts.

The choice was now hers to make. Whether she crossed the chasm that separated them or retreated to the other side of the cave, it would be her decision, for his withdrawal indicated he would do nothing to influence her.

Unfamiliar warring emotions flooded her body. She knew nothing about him. Not even if he'd given her his true name.

Somehow, at the moment, it didn't matter.

Shana placed her palms over his cheeks and turned his head so she could look into his eyes. He didn't blink as she studied the shadows that combined with the darkness of stubbled cheeks and even darker hair to define each angle and plane of his handsome face. She avoided looking at his lips, watching instead the pulse that thundered in his neck. She felt the rapid cadence of his heartbeat through the fabric of her tunic.

A peculiar tightness grew in the region beneath her belly and spread outward to encompass her entire body. She swallowed, knowing if she surrendered, if she gave in to the demands of her body, the urging of her heart, this time a simple kiss would not douse the flames threatening to consume her.

"Ryder," she whispered as she entangled her fingers into his long, dark hair.

CHAPTER 8

Ryder opened his eyes to find Shana's face only inches above his own. He stared into her eyes and noticed her iris had darkened from brilliant green to deep emerald. The flush across her cheeks, the way she moistened her full lips with the tip of her tongue, tightened his painful erection against the leather laces that secured his leggings.

The gentle tug as her long fingers threaded through his hair, kneaded his scalp and outlined his ears, set his heart pounding.

He reached up, grasped her shoulders, and pulled her close enough to feel her breath whisper across his face, the softness of her breasts beneath her golden tunic press against his chest. He shifted under the cumbersome tent until he could lay flat, then wedged his knee between her legs and maneuvered her pliant body until the apex of her thighs fit tight over his engorged length.

"Feel what you're asking for, Shana. Know that if you continue to tempt me beyond my almost shattered control, there will be no going back. No retreating. Know also that filling you once won't be enough. I'll continue to come back time and time again until I have nothing left to give." He added a determined thrust against her woman's mound to make sure she understood every word he said.

She'd been a fever burning through his bloodstream since he first laid eyes on her in the tiny cottage, her body in full bloom and ready to escape the seams of the gown she'd obviously outgrown. The need to run his fingers through her abundant fall of golden hair, to pull the lushness of her body close so he could feel every enticing curve, hadn't been lessened by the simple kisses they shared.

He needed more.

His body demanded more.

Ryder reached up to grab her braid and tore away the thong that held the thickness of her golden hair. He raked his fingers through the silken length until wave after wave of unbound curls fell free about her shoulders, his shoulders, and a portion of the fur beneath his back. He wrapped a length of her hair about each hand and then touched her cheek.

"Stop me now, Shana. Before it's too late."

* * * *

Shana watched his eyes in the faint light of the glowstone. Felt the heavy thud of his heart beneath her breasts, and knew her heart beat just as fast. Each breath she drew scraped her breasts against his hard flesh, bared by the leather vest that had been pushed aside to expose the glorious dark hair fanned across his muscular chest. Her fingers ached to be buried again into the silky mass, to touch the pulse she saw thundering in his neck.

Her mouth went suddenly dry as each deep breath stretched the fabric of her tunic over her taut nipples and sent spirals of pleasure to her core. She squeezed her eyes shut to savor the warmth of his touch upon her cheek, the rise and fall of his chest beneath her breasts, and the persistent tightening of his erection against her heat.

She explored the sensations that rushed through her lower body when he dropped his hands to her shoulders and lifted her as he rose into a seated position. He stretched her thighs over his and left her wide open to the thickness pressed against her as she straddled his lap.

Leather against leather. His heat fanning her own.

Shana opened her eyes as he slipped the leather vest from his shoulders, exposing the broad expanse of his chest to her perusal. Lured like metal to a magnet, she reached forward to lay her palms against his chest, to entwine her fingers into the silky dark hair that covered the area beneath his collarbone and swept downward to arrow into his leather leggings.

Her hands wandered across the wide expanse of his shoulders to the broad base of his neck, and higher until she could bury her hands in his midnight hair.

Her lips trembled from the want of his kiss. She inched closer. So close she could feel his breath across her face. He reached forward slowly and wrapped his large hands around her waist to draw her against his chest.

Answering her silent plea, his lips met hers. Softly at first, then forcefully. She opened her lips with a sigh when his tongue prodded, accepting him fully. She met each thrust and probe timidly with her own.

Shana felt his hands at the waist of her leggings, gently tugging at the hemline of her tunic. The warning signals her brain tried to emit immediately stilled when his lips left hers to trail soft kisses over her cheek, her chin, and finally her ear.

"Stop me now, Shana, for in a few moments it will be too late," he warned in a whisper as he tugged her tunic higher until she could feel the cold air touch her back. Higher still until her shoulders and arms were bared and her breasts crushed against the heat of his chest.

"Ryder," she sighed his name, begging for something she'd never experienced, needing whatever he would give. "Please."

"Are you asking me to stop?" he asked as his lips grazed her cheek, left a trail over her chin, down her neck, and lower still to the fullness of her breast.

Shana gasped as moist, searing heat enclosed her taut nipple, drawing hard until she thought she'd expire from the sheer pleasure of his mouth.

Coherent thought disappeared as he laved one breast then the other, his large hand molding, shaping, and caressing in a rhythm that matched the suction of his lips, the scrape of his tongue. She sensed a tugging action between her legs and realized he was working to unlace the bindings that closed his leggings.

"Ryder, I've never--"

He lifted his hips, bringing Shana up with him. His amorous attention never left her breast as he worked his leather leggings beyond his hips.

"Ryder ... please."

"Please what, Shana? I won't take you against your will, sweet innocent. But, understand this. If I do claim you, as is my desire, you'll never be free of me. My Warrior's Debt will never be paid." He raised his hands to grasp her hair and spread the heavy locks carefully over her back and across her breasts.

"It's wrong to want you," she whispered.

"Tell me to stop, Shana. While I still have a shred of willpower left."

She buried her face into the side of his neck. "I've never been touched by any

male but you, Ryder. Until you kissed me, I'd never experienced--"

"Shana." He lifted her face from his neck and placed tender kisses on each closed eyelid, her cheeks, and the tip of her nose.

"Teach me, Ryder."

His hands melted away from her face to cup her breasts then inched around her ribs to cradle her back. He enclosed her in his embrace, melding breast to chest as he shifted until she lay on the fur tent stretched across the cave floor. He watched her with eyes that matched the soft blue light of the glowstone. He spread her hair over the fur, cupped her cheek before his hand slid down the length of her neck and across her collarbone to encase her breast again.

"You're beautiful, Shana."

Shana felt a flush creep across her cheeks as his gaze slipped downward, followed closely by his hand. She closed her eyes as he worked the laces loose on her leather leggings and positioned one hand under her buttocks to lift her enough to slide the tight leather from her hips.

Chills from the cold cave air flashed over her bare body only to be replaced by a burning heat when his warm hand traced her ribs then inched lower to circle her navel. Lower still to tangle in the light curls that hid her woman's mound.

She reached up, grabbed a fistful of his hair and pulled his mouth down to hers as she felt his first tentative touch at her core.

He plundered her mouth, leaving no crevice untouched. He used his tongue to mimic the action of his fingers as he delved deep inside her.

She squirmed beneath his touch, needing something, but not knowing exactly what.

He raised his mouth from hers and stared into her eyes.

"Your membrane is intact, Shana. You'll experience some pain when I break it. Do you still want my touch?"

Shana was past the point of worrying about pain. Her needs were fast overcoming her commonsense. She met his concerned gaze. "Please, Ryder, I need--"

He didn't wait for her to finish. He captured her mouth with a searing kiss, thrust his tongue deep and ruptured her thin barrier with his finger. He continued to kiss her through her sharp intake of breath, but he stilled his probing finger until she raised her hips to indicate she wanted more.

Pain fled instantly when Shana realized two of Ryder's fingers were deep inside her body, delving, retreating, deeper, and deeper. She tried to match the cadence of his thrusts, needing some sort of release from the friction building within her entire body.

He dropped his lips to her breasts and offered soft kisses then strong tugs against her nipples. He increased the pressure with his mouth and hands until spasm after spasm of pure ecstasy shook her entire body.

Bereft when his lips left her breast and he shifted away from her side, Shana reached to pull him back until he eased between her open thighs. She watched him in the soft light from the glowstone, saw taut lines etch his face when he grasped his enormous erection and rubbed it against her tender tissues until she arched against his length.

"Are you sure?" he whispered, going perfectly still while he awaited her response.

She stared hard at his engorged length, wondering at the sheer size of the organ. "I don't think this is going to work," she sighed.

"I'll not hurt you, Shana."

He continued to rub the tip of his erection against her quivering flesh until Shana thrust against his length, searching for relief from the storm building within her.

He reached forward, wrapped one arm beneath her spine and lifted her as he dropped back until his knees were spread and he sat upon his folded legs. He positioned Shana's legs across his thighs, giving him greater access to her entrance. He captured her mouth and kissed away her distress as he guided his thickness inch by slow inch into her soft folds, rocking her gently as he pushed deeper until he was fully imbedded within her hot sheath.

Shana was afraid to move, afraid he'd tear her apart. She wasn't prepared for the first stroke of his powerful hips propelling his erection tightly into her body. Nor did she expect to feel her own internal muscles easing and contracting as her body eagerly took all he had to offer and demand more.

His large hands cupped her breasts, kneading, tugging, and molding her. He bit the side of neck, her shoulder, and her ear. Nuzzled his face into the thickness of her hair.

He thrust. Deep. Deeper still. Offering all he had.

She took everything he offered. Touched him. Stroked the hard contours of his back, his broad shoulders. Clung to his hair, caressed his cheeks, his neck. She felt each massive muscle in his thighs bunch and stretch as he continued to drive her higher and higher in her quest for the wonderful feeling she'd experienced when his fingers breached her body.

She felt his body jerk beneath her thighs. She panted, searching for the pinnacle just beyond her reach.

He thrust harder, harder still, until she screamed out his name as wave after wave of sheer pleasure started with a ripple then built until she convulsed as he reached his own climax.

They fell to the fur as one.

* * * *

Ryder eased over to his back, bringing her to lie upon his stomach. He listened to her shallow, exhausted breathing then leaned closer to kiss the side of her face.

She lifted her lashes slowly to meet his gaze. "Why is it we can make love, but not touch hand to hand without striking fire between us?"

"Oh, we strike fire, sweet Shana," Ryder responded then kissed her eyelids when he realized she'd fallen asleep in his arms.

He closed his eyes, wondering about her question as he drifted into his own slumber.

* * * *

Dawn brought frigid air and crisp, bright sunlight filtering into the cave. Shana snuggled deeper into the warmth that cradled her back, wiggling until she found the perfect position. She opened her eyes just far enough to see the sun twinkle against the specks of gold embedded in the darker rock on the cave walls. She exhaled a frosty breath and watched the vapor clouds obscure her vision, and then twisted again to settle more comfortably against--

Ryder!

What had she done? She froze every muscle in her body as she attempted to

assess her current position. Her head cradled against the powerful arm that lay beneath her. Her legs entwined with long, muscular thighs. A hand, twice the size of her own, held her left breast.

Her bare left breast.

Shana tried to wiggle free, only to feel the warmth of his hand spread downward to cross her abdomen and pull her closer to the engorged length that had given her so much pleasure not once, but twice last night.

Heat flashed through her belly as she remembered every glorious detail of their lovemaking. Ryder had been patient with her, teaching her every little detail that would enhance her pleasure, and ultimately his. She'd blossomed in his arms, demanding things she never dreamed possible, responding to his kisses, his caresses, in a way that should have left her shamed.

Yet, as she lingered in his arms, she longed to postpone the quest that lay before her, if only for one day, so she could experience again the ecstasy Ryder provided.

"Shana?"

She glanced toward her shoulder and studied the dark length of his hair entangled among her lighter strands. He eased his grasp on her abdomen and straightened his legs, giving her enough room to turn until she could press her body close against his muscular length and stare into his vivid blue eyes.

"Are you all right?"

She considered his question. Among the many other things in her life she'd simply taken for granted, she never considered what it would feel like to make love with a man. She couldn't believe how naïve she'd been, or how remiss Hilda had been in her teaching. By the age of twenty, most of the young women in her village were already wed and had babies of their own.

She was well versed in how conception occurred, had even assisted in the births of several babes, but she never stopped to think upon the pleasure the simple act of making love could evoke.

She considered Ryder's question. Yes, she was definitely all right. Though her body felt sore in several places, it was nothing she would actually call pain.

Shana snuggled closer as Ryder pulled the fur up to cover their shoulders. "I'm fine."

"Shana, I--"

She pressed her finger against his lips. "Don't say it. Don't apologize. I've just experienced the most enlightening eve of my life and I won't have you ruin it by saying you're sorry."

His eyes twinkled in the sunlight. "Enlightening? Do you consider what we shared last eve nothing more than another lesson that needed to be learned?"

"I didn't mean it the way it sounded. Yes, I meant it was enlightening. Also, wonderful. I'm amazed at my own naiveté sometimes. I guess you could say I'm lacking in worldly experience, and I've made up for it by ignoring anything that didn't fit into the orderly little haven Hilda created of my life."

"From what I understand, Hilda had no other choice. If your existence had been known, your life would have been in grave danger."

She reached up to run her fingers through his hair. "Speaking of danger, what happened to your Warrior's Debt to keep me safe?"

He laughed. "I vowed to keep you safe, Shana. Not chaste."

"I see. This Debt you've sworn is something you can change as you see fit."

He lowered his lashes until he stared at her through narrow slits. "Never doubt I will keep you safe. One vow has nothing to do with the other. I've sworn to give my life to protect yours, and I'll follow through no matter the outcome." He raised his hand to cup the back of her neck and pulled her closer until he could join his lips with hers.

He broke his kiss too soon, but Shana forgave him when he said, "As much as I'd like to spend today as we did last eve, we have to continue our trek. This weather," he nodded toward the opening of the cave, "and the sudden temperature change makes our travel to Havenshire more urgent. Should the weather turn worse, we're not equipped to withstand the frigid cold and it would be dangerous to be caught in these mountains if snow falls."

* * * *

The wind whipped through the crevices as they climbed higher, each gust stronger than the last until it almost reached gale proportions. The sun, just past its zenith, offered little warmth to heat their shivering bodies as they forged upward in search of a cave or crevice large enough to offer a break from the cold wind.

Shana raised her hand to shelter her eyes from the force of the wind. Eyes red and raw, she blinked several times in an attempt to remove the specks of dust. An avalanche of tiny rocks dislodged by Ryder's boots almost caused her to lose her balance, but she grasped the length of rope tethering her to his waist and continued, paying particular attention to where she placed her hands.

Hyden Shelf was an unforgiving mountain range. Jagged, granite rocks larger than Hilda's cottage in Verdun, were stacked at angles one atop the other, almost as if some giant's hands had mashed two separate mountain ranges together until both ranges overlapped. The results created an enormous tangle of boulders that had to be maneuvered around or through with the precision of a mountain goat.

No vegetation of any kind grew upon the Shelf. Only sheer rock with sharp edges that sliced through flesh and tore clothing.

Shana had a number of stinging slices on her hands and twice as many gashes in her leather leggings to prove the tenacity of the stones. She didn't take time to allow her gifts to heal the abrasions because it would have been useless. In a matter of moments, she would have only suffered more cuts when she used her hands to steady her body as she followed along behind Ryder at what seemed to be a snail's pace.

Instead, she'd wrapped her hands, and Ryder's, in torn strips taken from one of the tunics in her pack, thankful for any protection the thick cloth would give.

Ryder paused and Shana almost bumped into him.

"There's a break in the rocks ahead. It might be large enough to offer shelter for a few hours of rest."

He'd pulled his hair to the back of his neck and tied it in place with another strip of the tunic she'd dismantled, leaving his face and neck exposed to the debris blown by the wind. He had also replaced his vest with the gray tunic he wore from Verdun before they left the tiny haven in the foothills.

His sleeves were also covered with slashes gouged by the rocks. The whites of his eyes also abraded from the accumulated particles blown in by the wind.

Shana prayed for a few moments relief from the tempest, a few hours rest and a

light meal to restore their strength for the remainder of their trek up Hyden Shelf.

CHAPTER 9

The only shelter they were able to find was two huge boulders that had fallen together, leaving an opening about four spans high and six or seven spans deep. Their less than cozy haven opened at both ends, allowing the wind to streak through, bringing with it frigid air and more dust. The howling wind had now grown louder and colder, the sky darker, offering the threat of turbulent weather.

Shana huddled closer to Ryder's body beneath the heavy fur of the tent they used for additional shelter, seeking what little warmth he had to share. She closed her eyes against the stinging dust that threatened to tear away the delicate tissues of her eyes, her face, and any other area of skin left exposed to the elements.

Her urgent need for food was forgotten. The chills that wracked her body, and the chattering of her teeth, also pushed away all thoughts of sleep.

Any attempt to build a fire for warmth would be useless in such an exposed area, so she snuggled deeper into the thick fur, pressed her exhausted body closer to Ryder, and listened to the wind howl through their crevice.

Darkness fell quickly, stealing away even the meager light of dusk that had provided a limited sense of safety beyond their rudimentary shelter. And, as uncertain as the weather was in Verdun in late autumn, true to form, the dust storm gave way to snowflakes and drove them into their shelter of rocks.

Ryder shifted beneath the mound of fur to pull her closer. Thankfully, Shana eased into his arms as he grasped the edge of the fur tent and tugged it up to form a hood to protect their heads from the blowing snow.

"Hilda warned me about the weather," he whispered against her ear. "If I'd paid greater heed to her caution, I would have insisted upon more adequate clothing to sustain us through these colder temperatures."

"It's not your fault, Ryder. I've lived in Verdun my entire life and have seen firsthand how unpredictable the weather can be."

"Snowflakes in summer and blistering heat in the middle of winter. If anything, I should have taken responsibility for making sure we had warm clothing. But, at the time, I was more worried about having you for my traveling companion, rather than thinking of what might happen if we got caught in inclement weather."

"I suppose we both were too wrapped up with our own internal struggles to consider that far ahead," he agreed. "For now, I think we should do our best to gain a few hours rest. Tomorrow's trek down the other side of this mountain is liable to be treacherous."

* * * *

Daybreak brought bright sunlight and a decrease in the velocity of the wind. It also brought several inches of snow that filled the crevices and rocky trails down the hazardous mountainside.

Shana looked up to find the higher peaks of Hyden Shelf had disappeared into a bank of clouds that obscured her view of the faint blue sky. She glanced down at the

shadows that those same clouds cast over the snow beneath her feet.

Snow encrusted her leather half boots, slipped between the tops of her boots, and then past her leather leggings. It melted by what little warmth her soggy feet offered, and left freezing water that pooled in her boots and made squishing noises with every step.

Earlier, she'd pulled out the only other tunic left in her pack, after shredding the other one to use as bindings to protect their hands from the sharp rocks on their climb up the mountainside. She layered the tunic atop the dirty golden one she'd worn since leaving Verdun. The extra layer offered a little more protection from the cold.

But not enough to keep her teeth from chattering, or her limbs from trembling to the point she relied heavily on the rope that secured her to Ryder's waist. Doing her best to steady her balance, Shana slipped and slid from one sharp rock to the next.

She glanced at Ryder. He'd pulled his dark vest over the gray tunic he still wore, but she knew it offered him as little warmth as her own insubstantial clothing. She watched him struggle with their packs against his back, the enormous sword in the etched scabbard, and her added weight, as he braced his wrapped hands on one large boulder then the next as he carefully tread the slick path downward.

His struggles reinforced her precious thoughts of how futile it would've been to attempt this dangerous trek on her own. Even if she'd somehow managed to avoid the beasts in the forest, she would never have been able to climb Hyden Shelf, find shelter, and then navigate this horrible descent through the snow. Or the ice that now formed as the sunlight melted lesser layers of snow for the frigid wind to freeze into patches of slick, brown ice.

Shana glanced around, thankful that Hilda's maps directed their journey through the lower hills of Hyden Shelf instead of through the harrowing, higher peaks still hidden in the clouds.

She could only imagine the amount of snow that must have fallen last eve in the higher elevations, and gave thanks they'd not been forced to climb any higher to find shelter. With their limited clothing, they would have frozen to death before they managed to escape.

Shana followed carefully as Ryder maneuvered around another boulder then down through several more sharp turns and bends. The tall boulders surrounding their path obscured her view as she tried to determine how much farther they might have to travel before they exited this forbidding mountain range and finally felt solid ground beneath their feet.

Resigned to placing one foot in front of the other, she paid particular attention to where she stepped to avoid the icy patches and prevent a fall.

Down another incline. Around another bend.

She ignored the hostile grumble from her belly that demanded food, the slosh of freezing water inside her boots that aggravated the blisters on her feet. Blisters she'd taken time to heal each time they rested, but reformed as soon as they began another trek. She did her best to forge past the pain, and struggled on, closer and closer, she prayed, to the end of this nightmare.

* * * *

After three more days of freezing temperatures, dangerous terrain, and little sleep, they finally reached the northern side of Hyden Shelf. And, thankfully, warmer air and an absence of snow and ice.

Shana studied the few scrubby trees scattered throughout the smaller boulders that would provide sufficient wood to build a fire. Water from the melted snow in the higher peaks flowed down to form small pools that would afford abundant fresh water to drink and bathe.

While Ryder set out to snare several rabbits to fill their belly's gone too long without sufficient food, Shana took advantage of the warm air and abundant sunshine to wash away days of perspiration and dirt accumulated on her flesh and in her thick hair. She also washed their soiled tunics.

And, later, as she sat beside a shallow pool to allow the sunlight to dry her hair, while the rabbits Ryder provided roasted over a spit, she had the immense pleasure of watching him strip bare and perform his own bathing ritual.

She studied his muscular body from the top of his midnight hair to the taut lines of his buttocks as he raised his arms to wash his bronzed flesh. Shana imagined her fingertips covering the same path, gliding over each firm muscle, each indentation where his flesh smoothed or bunched as he turned to reach another part of his handsome anatomy.

Her fingers began to tingle, not with anticipation or dread, but with longing. A longing to feel his body beneath her hands, her lips. To taste his flesh and to run her fingers through his long, wet hair.

She rose slowly and stepped closer to the pool. She shed her tunic and leggings, and then stepped into the cool water. She made her way closer, closer still until she stood behind him.

"Ryder," she whispered.

He turned to stare down at her. The look in his beautiful eyes almost as wicked as the thoughts running through her mind.

She reached up to touch his cheek then dropped her hand to his neck and pulled his head down so she could run her tongue over his lips. She pulled back and said, "I need you."

His reaction was immediate. He reached down, grasped her thighs and lifted her so easily, she felt as light as a feather.

He kissed her lips, the side of her face, her neck and ran his tongue over the shell of her ear as he whispered, "Why did you wait so long?"

Shana could feel the length of his erection against her abdomen as she stretched her arms around his neck and tugged his face closer. "I was enjoying just looking at you," she sighed as she shifted until she could tug at his earlobe with her teeth.

Ryder lifted her higher, high enough the tip of his strong erection teased her moist opening. Shana wiggled against him, begging without words to feel him inside her, to ride the wonderful tide of rapture he created as she felt his first tentative probe.

She could feel his hands inching closer to her bottom, the slush of the water in the pool teasing her delicate flesh. When Ryder slipped his hand between her legs and began to manipulate her tiny bud, she almost collapsed because of the erotic sensations flashing through every nerve in her body.

"I'm going to move us closer to the edge of the pool," he said as he took a step, and then another, each step driving her need for him higher as the water continuously sloshed against her open thighs.

With each step, his fingers continued to caress her, making her squirm within his

embrace. "Now, Ryder," she insisted, but he resisted and bent his head to capture her lips.

"I've waited too long for this, Shana. I plan to take my time."

Shana grasped at his shoulders then dug her fingers into his hair to fight the urgent tremors flashing through her core. She couldn't wait. Her body demanded release. Her mind screamed for him to take her to the marvelous heights she knew she would reach as they rode the waves of passion together.

When Ryder reached down to rub his erection against her opening, Shana grabbed his hair and pulled his face down until she could whisper, "I need you inside of me. Now. Please, don't make me wait."

* * * *

Ryder continued to walk toward the edge of the pool. When he reached a spot where the water ebbed, he laid Shana down and watched her beautiful face in the sunlight.

Her cheeks were flushed and her beautiful hair hung in long curly strands around her body. Each move she made caused his heart to race faster within his chest.

He pushed her thighs open wider as he eased down her body until he could bury his face against her abdomen, and lower still as he kissed each inch of her beautiful flesh. He opened his hand against her soft folds, and then gently inserted his finger. He added a second finger as she moaned and twisted against his hand.

"Ryder, please."

He knew what she wanted, but she would have to wait. He gained too much pleasure watching her respond to his touch.

Ryder inserted a third finger to expand her opening. He slid his lips lower until he could lap at the dew that dampened the golden hair surrounding his probing fingers.

When she reached down to grasp a handful of his hair, he removed his fingers, and then used his forefinger and thumb to spread her delicate folds before he used his tongue to suckle her tiny bud.

She screamed when her first climax erupted, but Ryder continued to ply his tongue and his lips against her core. He raised his free hand and circled her beautiful breasts, teasing each extended nipple with a soft tug that caused Shana to groan with delight.

He abandoned her breasts to insert his finger inside of her mouth and, with each swipe of her tongue over his finger, his erection grew harder.

He continued to kiss her bud as he shifted so he could watch her face as he pleased her, and he resisted his urgent need to sink his erection deep into her body and give them both release.

Instead, he stood and pulled her against his chest. When she flattened her beautiful body against his, Ryder placed his hands under her bottom and lifted her until he could position her soft opening above his engorged length. He kissed her deeply as he eased his hand around her bottom until he could push his erection into her body. He walked out of the pool and laid her gently against the fur tent she'd spread across the rocks to dry.

The urgency of his own release was hard upon him, but he fought for control as he made slow love to Shana. He watched her face, saw her emotions as she took everything he offered and demanded more. And more until every nerve in his body

quivered at the impact of her flesh against his own.

She wrapped her legs around him. Drew him deeper and held him to task. Deeper still until Ryder could no longer control the need for release that spread rapidly through his body.

He watched Shana's eyes as he found his own climax seconds after Shana quaked around him in her own ecstasy, and then fell sleep in his arms.

For the next two days, they followed the same routine and allowed sore muscles to recuperate. Their nights were spent under the stars, wrapped in the thick tent to ward off the chill, and making love in the moonlight.

* * * *

Less than a league from the foothills of Hyden Shelf, the terrain changed. The tall, yellow grasses reappeared to grow in sparse patches separated by long spans of dry, barren earth. The scrubby trees were left behind in the foothills, and now, as Shana walked close to Ryder's side, she wondered why there were no trees growing in this flat, desolate land.

Yellow grass and barren patches of soil spread out for leagues ahead and to both sides. She thought it odd no birds flew through the skies, and they hadn't disturbed any wildlife during their trek.

The land appeared to be dying, as if all nutrients that might support any form of life had been stripped away.

"Something's very wrong here, Ryder. Hilda's maps don't indicate any type of wasteland between Hyden Shelf and Havenshire. In fact, from the markings I remember, this land is supposed to be lush and fertile."

Shana reached down and grasped a handful of the dry soil beneath their feet. She brought the soil to her nose and sniffed. "This is strange," she whispered.

Closing her eyes, she allowed her gifts to guide her as she shifted the dry soil through her fingers. She recited the words Hilda had taught her slowly, whispering each phrase until she slipped into a trance. Her subconscious mind slid beneath each grain of dirt, shifting each tiny particle, studying the composition until she became one with the soil. Her essence flowed through the substance in her hands, searching, seeking an explanation.

Shana shook her head and opened her eyes to meet Ryder's gaze.

"This soil is little more than ash, but it hasn't been burned. There's no organic residue at all. It's almost as if every primary element of the land has been siphoned away."

She looked around and located a patch of the strange yellow grass several hundred spans away. She didn't wait for Ryder to accompany her as she turned and walked toward the growth.

She grabbed a handful of the tall yellow grass near the base and pulled it from the soil by the roots. She then brought the root ball to her nose and inhaled deeply.

Tears stung her eyes as a caustic stench filled her nostrils and burned her throat. She pushed the root ball away to arm's length and used her other hand to sift through the roots, knocking the clinging soil away to expose the plant's life source.

"Oh, no," she whispered as Ryder stepped to her side.

"What's wrong?"

"This." Shana shook the clump of yellow grass. "This is what's causing the land

to die.”

“The grass?”

“Not grass, Ryder. It’s a living, breathing life force, but it’s not truly a plant. Nor is it anything I’ve ever heard of before.” She traced the spiny yellow leaves with the tips of her fingers, broke one blade in two, and then pressed hard to expel whatever thrived within.

A sticky, clear gel oozed from the tear and clung to her fingertips. It burned her flesh, almost like acid. She quickly wiped the gel on her leggings and braced for the caustic odor as she brought the leaf closer to examine it further.

“Whatever it is, it’s pure evil,” she said. She shook her head. “By all that’s sacred, this stuff was thriving in the forest on the other side of Hyden Shelf. I remember thinking how strange it was when I first noticed it, but my thoughts were distracted by the absence of the many species of wildflowers that flourish in Verdun.

“Could this,” she waved her hand to indicate the desolate land surrounding them, “be what happens when this substance has exhausted all of the nutrients it can from the land?”

“Is *this* what’s in store for my beautiful forest?”

“I don’t understand, Shana,” Ryder said as he stepped closer and took the root ball from her fingers.

“It must propagate by spores of some type, similar to a plant. Since I don’t remember seeing any of this grass growing in the foothills on either side of Hyden Shelf, I can only assume it needs nutrients found in certain types of soil to survive.”

She glanced around again. “That’s why there are no birds or wildlife living on this plane. No trees or any other type of vegetation could possibly survive on what’s left of this land.”

“The birds and animals probably left this area to forage in more fertile places,” Ryder offered.

“I pray so, for if not, it could mean this substance kills not only plant life, but it could be dangerous to other living creatures.”

Shana took the root ball from Ryder’s hand, dropped it to the ground, and stomped it flat. “We need to get to Havenshire as quickly as possible,” she said. “It’s the Chosen’s sacred duty to protect the grounds around the Temple of Havenshire. If this destruction has progressed as far as it has without their knowledge, something even viler than this abomination is behind its rapid spread. Possibly, even Zandicol.”

* * * *

Ryder walked several paces behind Shana as she trudged through the knee high yellow grass, and then patch after patch of dead earth that left small clouds of dust in her wake. He thought about the vision Prophet Jordan had explained before he began his journey to Menila. He wondered if this grass Shana named evil was somehow connected to the blight Jordan said would spread across Menila and threatened the Freelands.

Could there possibly be more than one threat involved in Jordan’s vision?

He accepted Hilda’s warnings about Zandicol’s evil, though he had no idea what form that evil might take. He also believed with all of his heart that Shana’s untaught gifts were important to both the survival of Menila and the Freelands.

He recognized the importance of her further training by the Chosen.

What he could not accept was the possibility of the woman he’d begun to cherish

placing herself into danger to protect able bodied men who could take up their weapons and fight for their own freedom. Competent males, who stood by and watched their families destroyed, their homeland stripped away, confused him to the point he wanted to draw his father's sword and force their participation.

He'd seen capable men in Verdun. Men fully able to pick up a sword, a club, or even a length of wood, to protect what they held dear. But would they actually fight if their homes were threatened?

Hilda told him many of the men in Soras had easily surrendered their will to Zandicol's evil, leaving loved ones behind to fend off whatever threat followed.

Many long years of hard, physical training and constant preparation filled his thoughts. The warriors of the Freelands spent their time honing skills in order to protect those within their charge. Each vowed to fight to the death to sustain the peace that had thrived in the Freelands for the last century.

Even now, his father's army, one hundred thousand strong, awaited his return home with the information he'd been dispatched to gather. At this point, he had nothing conclusive to offer, other than the sparse details Hilda had given him about the various regions of Menila before he and Shana began this trek.

League after league of dense forests, dangerous high mountains, vast seas of strange yellow grass, and dead patches of earth, were nothing an army could defeat.

He needed solid answers. Answers he was determined to receive as soon as they reached Havenshire.

* * * *

As darkness fell, Shana slowed her pace and looked around. They were still in the middle of the barren plane. Hours of brisk walking had covered many leagues, but they apparently had many more leagues to go before their arrival at Havenshire.

She looked up to meet Ryder's gaze as he stepped to her side. "How far do you think we've traveled since leaving the foothills?"

He glanced around. "Probably no more than five or six leagues. The map shows at this pace we should reach Havenshire by tomorrow eve."

Shana couldn't help the sag of her shoulders when she thought about another grueling march through the horrid yellow grass and devastated earth that filled her heart with such sadness.

Her entire life had been spent in a secluded haven filled with lush greenery, tranquil pools, and abundant wildflowers. When not training with Hilda, she'd used her time working in the herb garden, cultivating various species of flowers and vegetables to enhance the beauty of her world.

Now, this senseless destruction tore through her mind and filled her with heart-rending grief. She hurt for the land and the multitudes that, at one time, must have thrived here. She held back tears that threatened to fall each time she took another step.

Such useless devastation. For what purpose?

If this was Zandicol's doing, why would he want to destroy the land he worked so hard to obtain?

Nothing made sense.

"We should select a place and make camp before total darkness falls," Ryder said.

She looked around again. "I believe we should find a spot devoid of that yellow grass. At least we know we will be safe as long as we are on dead soil."

Ryder nodded then walked a few hundred steps toward the next area of vacant ground.

Shana followed.

* * * *

Morning started warm and grew hotter as the sun crept overhead. With no trees or vegetation to shadow the area, heat vapors escaped the patches of yellow grass they avoided and covered their bodies with perspiration.

Shana pulled off her second tunic and yanked the hemline of the golden one that remained from the waist of her leggings in hope of allowing whatever breeze might appear would cool her parched flesh. She watched Ryder shed his tunic completely, not bothering to replace it with his vest.

"Aren't you afraid you'll get your skin burned?"

He gave her a wicked smile. "Warrior's of the Freelands train constantly in the hot sun with less clothing than I now wear. My flesh is accustomed to sunlight."

She laughed. "Well, if you want to display all of that marvelous bronzed flesh, who am I to complain? Lead on, brave warrior."

Much to Shana's distress, each league they traveled produced more dead patches of earth and less yellow grass. After a few hours, no sign of the grasses remained, only endless stretches of emptiness.

"This is frightening," she said. "It's almost like some deep, dark void passed through this place and destroyed everything in its path."

* * * *

Shana's words sent a chill up Ryder's spine. He remembered the vivid nightmare he had while resting in the cave on the southern side of Hyden Shelf. The blackness that filled his mind. The angry howls that tormented him.

He recalled the darkness that approached, destroying everything in its path.

The thunder.

The lightning.

The haunting voices that had cried out, begging for his help, pleading for him to stop the destruction.

He closed his eyes as chills spread rapidly over his hot flesh. Tremors shook every muscle in his body.

Was his dream an omen? Did it warn of the horrors he might find ahead? Of losing Shana? His father's sword?

He opened his eyes and found Shana staring up at him with a strange expression on her beautiful face. He fought down the need to tell her of his dream, to alarm her unnecessarily.

Instead, he pasted a false smile on his face and reached to touch her hair.

"I think we should continue on throughout the night. We are close now to Havenshire. Only a few more leagues. I don't want to spend any more time here," he said as he waved his hand to indicate the emptiness.

"You need the comfort of a soft bed, adequate food, and time to rest. None of which we can get here."

She placed her hand upon his arm. "Are you all right? You seem disturbed."

Ryder placed his hand over hers. "I'm tired, Shana. Just as you are." He looked up. "The full moon will be sufficient to guide our steps. I suggest we take advantage of

it.”

* * * *

Shana's steps slowed as the moon slipped across the black sky. Stars by the millions winked overhead, bringing reminders of her tranquil haven in Verdun--if she didn't look down into the parched earth beneath her feet.

Tired to the point of exhaustion, she plodded along following Ryder's footsteps, praying that the Temple of Havenshire would magically appear before them.

Ryder stopped walking and she almost bumped into him.

“Look, Shana,” he said, pointing ahead.

An enormous structure twinkled in the moonlight less than a league ahead. Havenshire.

All thoughts of exhaustion vanished. She stepped to Ryder's side, looked up into his tired eyes, and smiled.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“For what?”

She reached up to touch his cheek then clasped the back of his neck and pulled his head down to place a soft kiss on his lips. “For insisting we continue on throughout the night instead of making camp. For being my strength when I was exhausted. For every ounce of hardship you've endured to keep me safe when you didn't have to. For teaching my body to sing. For--”

He placed his finger across her lips. “My pleasure, sweet Shana.” He replaced his finger with his lips.

CHAPTER 10

Shana stepped back into Ryder's embrace and glanced up at the enormous structure in awe. Walls erected from strange pinkish blocks reached well over fifty spans above her head. The walls smoothed until only a faint outline around each block delineated the method of construction. There were no windows of any kind visible from her vantage point, and no gates. Instead, an eerie luminescence shimmered over the entire structure and appeared to flow like ripples of water in a pool. Muted tones of pale blue and green coalesced with white to form a lustrous curtain that covered the entranceway.

Havenshire.

She'd finally reached the magical home of her ancestors, and she had no idea how to enter.

Errant tingles of static energy rippled over her flesh when she reached out to touch the glistening curtain that blocked her path. An unfamiliar stirring unfurled deep within her chest and came to life to touch each nerve ending, flow through every blood vessel, test every molecule of her being.

Shana jerked her hand away and turned her palm up to study her fingers. Tiny arcs of soft blue light danced from fingertip to fingertip. She closed her hand and the blue light disappeared.

(Welcome home, child of the Chosen.)

Startled, Shana staggered back until she leaned against Ryder's tall form. She raised her hands and placed her palms flush over her ears.

"What's wrong, Shana?"

Shana tried to shake off the uncanny thought that raced through her mind.

(Step through the curtain, my child. No harm will come to you.)

She shook her head and tried to take another step back, but Ryder's body blocked her retreat. "Someone's talking inside my head. I don't understand--"

(Shana Kerr, daughter of Dedra, come, take your place among your people.)

Shana shook her head. "This can't be happening." She grasped Ryder's hand hard. "It's not possible for someone to be speaking inside of my head."

(You must step through the curtain to complete your training, Shana.)

She cast a quick glance behind Ryder then looked side to side. She saw no one. "Who are you? Where are you? Why must you talk inside of my head instead of meeting me face to face?"

A light sound, almost like a chuckle, filled her mind.

(There is no physical form to show you, child. Only the shimmer before your eyes. You have felt my touch and passed my test. You are now welcome into Havenshire. Please, step through the curtain.)

The curtain? Impossible. It was energy, not a living, breathing life force. She grasped Ryder's hand harder until she knew her nails dug into his flesh. "I think the curtain is speaking to me through my mind. Hilda never warned me about any of this.

Surely, she would have told me if the Chosen were capable of speaking mind to mind.”

She grasped Ryder's hand as he attempted to touch the curtain. “No. Don't touch it. It accepted me because I'm of Chosen blood, but I have no idea what it might do to you.”

Shana released his hand and took a step closer to the glistening curtain. “If it's truly you speaking to me, you must know I have a companion with me. If my companion cannot enter, I will stay where I am. I will not enter Havenshire.”

(Your companion must also pass my test to enter Havenshire.)

She felt foolish speaking to a voice inside of her head, but Ryder's life could be at stake. “You promise nothing you do will harm him,” Shana warned.

Again, the impression of a laugh filled her mind.

(Companion, place your hand into the curtain.)

Shana held her breath as Ryder plunged his hand through the curtain. The soft blue light that played upon her fingertips suddenly engulfed his entire body. She watched as he straightened to his full height, and then froze as still as a statue.

(Chosa'den.)

The whispered voice echoed through Shana's mind. A golden light suddenly surrounded her. She looked up to the hilt of Ryder's sword that protruded past the etched leather scabbard. The sword glowed with a golden sheen against the blue light that still covered Ryder's body.

As suddenly as it appeared, the blue light covering his body and the golden hue emitted from the sword disappeared.

(Enter immediately, child of the Chosen. Your companion must accompany you. Circumstances have changed. It is now dangerous for you and your companion to be outside the walls of Havenshire.)

Shana glanced toward Ryder and noted his strange expression. “Are you all right?” She touched his arm and watched as he shook off whatever lingering affects remained from the curtain's test.

“I feel as if I've been physically and mentally violated, but I sense no lasting harm.”

“The curtain claims we both must cross immediately because it is now dangerous for us to remain outside of the walls,” she explained.

“What's so different now from all of the other days we've spent traveling to get here?”

“I don't know. I caught a whisper of caution and the word Chosa'den, but I have no idea what the word means.” She touched his arm again. “We have traveled far to get here, I can't back away now. Will you accompany me through the curtain?”

He nodded and took her arm. “We go together or not at all.”

Shana took a deep breath and stepped through the curtain with Ryder at her side.

Other than the feeling her body was being sprayed with a fine mist of cool water, she felt no ill affects from their crossing. She watched Ryder carefully to make sure he'd breached the curtain safely. Once he assured her he was fine, she took time to look around the area and found they were standing in a lush garden many times more beautiful than anything she'd ever dreamed possible.

Flowering bushes in every shape and size imaginable covered the interior walls of Havenshire. Vibrant shades from deep purple to the lightest pink, filled each crevice

large enough to support growth. Tall trees with huge leaves of deep green shadowed parts of the cobblestone pathway, which wound through the gardens and beds of lush ferns and lilies. Morning glories bloomed in the faint light that filled the gardens, though darkness claimed the sky above Havenshire. Bush after bush of roses in multitudes of different colors filled the air with the sweet scents of springtime.

Insects chirped in the foliage. Birds of every size and color sang in the branches overhead and flew from tree to tree.

"Am I dreaming this?" Shana whispered. "Certainly, nothing so beautiful could grow here when beyond the walls everything lies in waste."

"Havenshire is an oasis in a desert of evil, my dear," a soft voice said from behind her.

Shana sucked in a quick breath and turned to find a tall, thin man dressed in blue robes, standing behind her. She then looked toward Ryder and noticed he'd assumed a battle stance.

She placed her hand upon his tensed arm and shook her head.

"I am sorry if I startled you, Shana Kerr. The force shield alerted me of your arrival, but it took me a while to get here from my quarters.

"My name is Zachara. I am one of the Elders of the Chosen and it will be my pleasure to nurture your gifts."

Shana studied Zachara and wondered at the age lines liberally scattered across his thin face, the graying hair so much like Hilda's that covered his head. She then scanned the long blue robe he wore that stopped at the sandals covering his feet.

Zachara then turned to Ryder with an outstretched hand. "And you are?"

Ryder hesitated a moment then accepted Zachara's hand. "I am Ryder L'Syr of the Freelands."

Zachara nodded. "Please allow me to escort you to your chambers. I know you are both very tired and probably hungry after your journey."

Shana turned in all directions, still awed by the abundant beauty of the garden. "Zachara, how is it Havenshire has such a beautiful garden while everything beyond the walls is being destroyed?"

"Everything will be explained to you tomorrow, Shana. There will also be many questions asked and answered, but first, you must rest. Please, follow me. By the time we reach your suite, a warm bath will have been drawn and food aplenty will await your needs."

Shana felt the comfort of Ryder's arm settle over her shoulders as she followed Zachara through a maze of cobblestones, around an enormous fountain covered with more flowers, and then through a carved archway into the living quarters of Havenshire.

They followed Zachara up a winding staircase constructed of the same pink stone that made up the outside walls of Havenshire to an enormous carved door at the top of the stairs.

"This suite is for your use as long as you are here at Havenshire. Please allow the members of the Chosen to cater to your every need while you reside with us," Zachara said, and then turned to descend the stairs.

"Wait," Shana said. "How is it everything is so perfect within the walls of Havenshire while all outside is being destroyed?" she repeated. "And, what do you know of the strange yellow grasses that appear to be siphoning every available nutrient in the

soil so nothing survives?"

"As I stated before, all of your questions will be answered tomorrow, Shana. Please, take your rest now." Zachara continued down the stairs.

"Strange man," Shana whispered as she watched Zachara's blue robe as he descended. She then turned and pushed aside the enormous carved door panels and stepped into luxury. She stared in awe at the wonderful room.

Walls of pink stone surrounded her. Thick gray carpeting cushioned her feet as she walked around the room, touching the ebony wood tables, chairs covered with muted shades of pinks and grays that matched the carpeting and walls. She paused before an enormous table in the center of the room heavily laden with foodstuff and a large bowl filled with exotic fruits.

She reached to pluck a strange reddish-blue fruit from the bowl and brought it to her nose to inhale the fragrant scent. She tasted the fruit and sighed with delight as the succulent juices slipped over her tongue and slowly down her throat.

"You must taste this," she said, handing a piece of the fruit to Ryder.

Shana watched as he turned the fruit over in his hand before bringing it to his mouth. She smiled at the strange expression of delight that covered his face as he experienced the same wonderful taste she discovered and then grabbed another piece of the delicacy and continued her exploration.

She paused when she stepped into the bedchamber. As expected, walls of pink embraced her. The same thick gray carpeting continued into this room and the simple furnishings also covered in pinks and grays as in the first room.

The bed was enormous, constructed of more ebony wood, and covered in hangings of muted pink and gray.

How had the Chosen acquired the abundance of ebony wood? She was familiar with the exotic dark wood because she'd seen it growing many times in the swamps of the Southland. However, the Southland was several hundred leagues from Havenshire. How had the Chosen known about the wood? How had they transported the heavy ebony from the Southland's to Havenshire?

Shana shook her head and added more questions to those she planned to ask tomorrow as she stepped toward the bed and ran her fingers over the pink and gray patchwork covering that draped a waist high mattress.

She then walked to the opposite wall, opened another carved door, and stepped into paradise.

Baskets of thick green ferns and ivy circled a large pool built into the center of the floor. The pink walls were decorated with elaborate sconces adorned with fat, fragrant candles that filled the humid air with scents of wildflowers. She stepped closer to the pool and inhaled whiffs of steam that rose into the air.

She rolled her aching shoulders then reached and unfastened the laces that closed her leggings. She pushed the leather down her thighs then bent and removed her boots. Kicking the leggings aside, she stepped closer to the edge of the pool and wiggled her toes in the steaming water. She snatched the tunic over her head.

Shana stepped down into the pool, determined to forget the trials and troubles that still faced her on this quest, if only for a few moments in time.

She settled into the warm water and reached to tug the thong from her braid. She dropped the thin leather strip to the side of the pool. Running her fingers through the

thick length of her hair, she spread the tangled mass over her shoulders and across her bare breasts.

"Shana?"

"In here."

* * * *

Ryder stepped into the chamber and froze as he looked around the lavish area.

When he met her gaze, Shana raised her hand and said, "join me."

Ryder stared at the lushness of the room then the beautiful creature that beckoned him with open arms. His heart stalled when she moistened her lips with her tongue then raced at triple time when she raised her hand and placed the tip of her finger into her mouth.

Lust tore through his groin, sending pain to his engorged length that threatened to explode before he could shed his clothing. He unbuckled the strip of leather secured to his waist and lifted the strap that held the sword across his back. He dropped the leather scabbard to the floor.

Ryder tore at the laces that closed his leggings, rolled the tight leather down his hips and over his thighs. He bent to remove his boots. He kicked his leggings aside as he yanked the tunic over his head.

He stepped closer to the pool and watched Shana's green eyes darken with need. He studied the rise and fall of her breasts beneath her glorious wealth of golden hair, the swell of the warm water lap at her nipples exposed through the tendrils of hair that floated atop the water.

He accepted her extended hand and stepped into the warmth of the pool.

* * * *

Shana watched Ryder's body as each muscle stretched and relaxed when he leaned closer. So close she could feel the force of his heavy breathing against her face. She reached out and touched the sculptured planes of his chest, ran her fingers over his nipple, and watched in fascination as it beaded beneath her caress.

She met his eyes and watched his gaze slip quickly over every inch of her exposed flesh. She knew he could see her entire length beneath the clear water, and knowing only raised her desire higher.

She needed him.

Fast. Slow. Hard. Gentle.

She didn't care.

Every inch of her body demanded his touch, his possession.

She reached down to close her hand around his hardened length, and felt him almost come apart as he growled and pulled her against his chest.

"I've very little control left, Shana. Don't tempt the inevitable," he whispered.

"I need you now, Ryder. I've waited long enough to have you deep inside me. I can't wait another moment."

* * * *

Ryder grasped her around the waist and twisted until he lay against the side of the pool. He spread Shana's legs over his groin and positioned his erection against her moist opening. He pulled her face closer until he could capture her mouth with urgent strokes of his tongue as he embedded his flesh into the warmth of her sheath.

He used his hands to raise her body up his length, then down hard, until he was

fully encased in her heat.

There was nothing warm or gentle in their furious mating. He thrust against her body, as she demanded more, harder and harder, deeper and deeper.

She tore at his hair.

He molested her hot mouth with fevered kisses.

She ground her bottom against his groin until every muscle in his body demanded release.

He accommodated her every demand.

She met her release with a triumphant scream that echoed around the bathing chamber.

He pumped every ounce of his soul into her waiting body as he obtained his own relief.

Lust temporarily sated, Ryder grasped Shana around the waist and turned until he once again leaned against the side of the pool. He positioned her body over his and placed soft kisses along the side of her face.

"Shana?"

She leaned closer and ran her tongue over his bottom lip. "Don't apologize to me, Ryder. I needed you so badly if you had been slow and gentle, I probably would have come apart in your arms."

He kissed her again then whispered, "We might be exhausted, but I don't think we'll be getting much rest this eve, Shana."

She buried her fingers into his hair and leaned close enough to swipe her tongue against his ear as she said, "Is that a promise?"

Ryder reached down to touch her wet heat then rubbed his rapidly expanding length against her soft folds.

CHAPTER 11

A sharp knock against the chamber door awakened Shana. She sighed and stretched her arms over her head to ease the muscles that had gotten a strong sexual workout throughout most of the night. She snuggled back under the pink and gray covering and closed her eyes.

"Maybe you should see who's at the door," Ryder whispered against her ear.

"I'm really too tired to move. It would be wonderful if I could spend the rest of the day in this comfortable bed."

The knock sounded again.

"I guess not." Shana slipped out of the bed, reached for the silken pink robe she'd discovered in the bathing chamber in the wee hours of dawn, and slipped it over her body. She tied the sash as she walked across the suite to the door.

The woman who stood in the hallway awaiting entry reminded Shana of Hilda. The way her soft gray hair fell across her slender shoulders and the age worn wrinkles that creased her lovely face.

A deep ache centered in her chest and squeezed. She pushed those memories aside to consider at another time and smiled at the small woman.

"Zachara sends his well wishes, Shana Kerr. I am Vasha, and I have been sent to give you this robe. Zachara requests you wear it for your meeting with the Elders. I am also to inform you food will arrive shortly. After you have broken your fast, Zachara will come for you."

Shana accepted a soft blue robe from Vasha's hand and nodded thanks as the woman backed away from the door and disappeared down the stairway.

Another knock sounded as Shana replaced the pink robe she'd donned earlier with the soft, flowing light blue robe that Zachara requested she wear.

An elderly man who did not offer his name, brought an enormous tray filled with various foodstuffs and placed it upon the table before he bowed and left in silence.

"Something smells delicious," Ryder said as he walked up behind Shana and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"I think it's safe to say we won't starve while we're here at Havenshire," she said with a smile as she surveyed the abundance of delicacies the Chosen provided. One enormous bowl held another selection of the mysterious fruits they had sampled during the night. A platter contained an assortment of sweet meats and pastries to tempt their hunger.

"I must remember to ask Zachara how the Chosen grow such exotic fruits and grains," Shana said as she bit into a sugar-covered pastry filled with berries.

She coated her fingertip with the sweet berry juice that escaped the pastry and swiped the dark liquid against Ryder's lips.

He licked the juice away and leaned closer to whisper, "we'll save this fruit for later, after our meeting with the Elders. I can think of several interesting spots on your beautiful body that might tempt my tongue and mouth." He teased the side of her neck

with his tongue.

Shana turned into his embrace and lifted her hands to run her fingers through his dark hair. She then laced her fingers on his nape and tugged his mouth to hers as she whispered, "Taste me now. Savor the juice on my tongue and spend your day thinking about what I might do to you with my mouth." She kissed him lightly and pulled away.

Ryder's feral growl was interrupted by another knock on the door.

Shana hurried to braid her hair while Ryder answered the door. She returned to the sitting area as Ryder ushered Zachara into the chamber.

"The Council of Elders is ready to speak with you, Shana. I am here to accompany you to the meeting chamber," Zachara said with a slight bow. He looked around the chamber. "I hope you found everything satisfactory last eve and will be comfortable in this chamber while you receive answers to your many questions and training for your gifts."

"Everything has been wonderful, Zachara. Though, experiencing all of this luxury only adds more questions to the ones I've already stored. I hope the Elders will spare the time to appease my curiosity."

Zachara laughed. "I think we all will be delighted in having an inquisitive being amongst us again, my dear. It has been a long time since anyone here has had the opportunity to see things from a fresh prospective. Come, Shana. The Elder's wait."

Zachara offered his arm.

Shana glanced over her shoulder to see Ryder's strange expression. "Will the Elders allow Ryder to accompany me?"

Zachara looked up into Ryder's eyes then turned to meet her gaze. "Since the meeting this morning will be to explain the histories of your ancestors, Ryder is welcome to join you. Knowing more about our kind will help him with his own questions as we all work through the stages of training you will receive. I believe Ryder may discover some interesting facts about his own people in the days to come." Zachara accepted Shana's hand on his arm and led her from the chamber.

Ryder followed closely behind.

* * * *

As they entered the Elders Chamber, thirteen men and three women attired in the same blue robes Shana was given to wear, stood and bowed their heads in reverence.

Shana studied the Elders in an attempt to judge their age. All appeared at least as old as Hilda, and some older. She tucked another question into the cache she held in her mind and bowed her head in response.

"Elders of the Chosen," Zachara said. "Before you stands the daughter of our beloved Dedra. She comes before this group to gain answers to the many questions that cause her great concern.

"It is our privilege to answer her questions fully to erase the many speculations she has about the Chosen and the powers that lie dormant within her.

"For the next few weeks, her training will be extensive. Each of you will have the pleasure of fulfilling your destiny by helping to awaken the dormant gifts still hidden away in her mind.

"I will not take time to introduce each of you individually. Each participant will become well acquainted with Shana as she attends your particular lessons.

"For now, I ask only that you state your name as you answer any question she

might have.”

Zachara then turned to Ryder. “This is Shana’s companion, Ryder L’Syr. Ryder is on a two-fold quest. He has sworn a Warrior’s Debt to defend Shana’s life as she makes the journey that will restore her birthright. He is also a warrior of the Freelands, sent to Menila by the armies of his homeland to observe the evil blight that has afflicted our lands.”

Shana turned to face Zachara, a startled expression on her face. “What? How do you know this?”

Zachara smiled and shook his head. “All will be explained to you and Ryder as we progress through this meeting. Please understand that among the gifts we still possess, the gift of foresight is strongest.”

He turned his attention to Ryder. “You are in no danger from us, Ryder L’Syr. Your presence here is essential to both Shana’s quest and her training. And, as we explain your destiny, we will also examine your possession of the sword you carry across your back.”

All present bowed their heads again and whispered, “Chosa’den.”

“Now, I suggest we begin our assembly.”

Zachara directed Shana and Ryder toward two chairs left vacant around an enormous ebony wood table. After they were comfortably seated side by side, he took his own seat at the head of the table.

Shana stared into the eyes of each person seated around the table. She felt a tingling sensation creep up her spine as she sensed each individual mentally assessed her capabilities. She forced her body to remain still and not give in to the urge to fidget as she felt each gentle touch in her mind.

“Shana, my name is Nansemon,” a woman at the far end of the table announced. “It is my pleasure to finally meet you, my dear. I loved your mother as a sister and mourned deeply at her passing. It will be my great honor to assist you as you learn the many wonderful things inherited through your mother’s bloodline.”

Shana nodded respectfully at the elderly woman as more questions added to those already filling her head. “I look forward to talking with you in depth about my mother. I feel a great loss in my life because I never had the opportunity to know her or my father.”

Several others around the table introduced themselves, offered condolences for her parents, and expressed their delight in having a new pupil to teach.

“Before you ask your many questions, Shana, I believe I must first explain our history. Knowing how we came to be might take away some of the doubts and fears that clamor in your mind,” Zachara said.

Shana smiled. “Hilda told me a little about the Chosen, but I sense she held much back. I welcome the knowledge you pass to me about my ancestors.”

“I am sorry to say Hilda was prohibited from disclosing any information about the Chosen while she resided outside the walls of Havenshire. For her own protection--and yours. When she traveled as a guardian for your mother while Dedra journeyed to Soras to wed Mordith, Zandicol’s hatred of the Chosen had already reached fanatical proportions. In order to keep Dedra safe, Hilda was instructed never to reveal any information that might be detrimental to Dedra’s health or welfare.”

“Why could she not explain more of my mother’s gifts to me?”

“Your birth and Dedra’s death were foreseen, Shana. Many among the Chosen

protested greatly when Mordith visited Havenshire to claim his bride. We also had foreknowledge of Mordith's death, and knew he would not be able to protect the gifted child Dedra would birth."

"We had made a sacred promise to the Sorians over a century ago that a bride from Havenshire would be awarded to each Sorian ruler for protection against any forces that would attempt to destroy the Temple. We could not go back on our word."

"That sacred vow was broken at Dedra's death."

Shana gripped the edge of the table hard. She drew several deep breaths to slow the pounding of her heart. Ryder placed his large hand over hers, giving her comfort as she tried to regain her composure.

"Throughout my life, I've lived a lie. I grew into womanhood believing I was the orphaned daughter of a healer apprenticed to Hilda to learn my deceased mother's skills. The strange things that happened to my mind and body constantly frightened me as I grew. The visions. The horrible burning that would start in my chest whenever I became upset. For the first twelve years of my life, I was convinced something was seriously wrong with me and I shunned the people in my village because I believed I might afflict them with my disease.

"Once I reached puberty, Hilda finally explained the strange feelings that would overtake me were the emergence of my fictional mother's powers. Though her explanation did little to appease my sense of doom, it did, at least, confirm I was not crazy. But, it doesn't excuse the fact I've been lied to my entire life."

Zachara and several others around the table shook their heads. "Necessary lies, Shana. And, though it may seem cruel, it was imperative that you not be told at an early age. Your life was always in danger of discovery. Though Zandicol believes you dead along with your parents, any innocent slip on your part might have disclosed your survival."

"Then all would have been lost."

"I still don't understand. How would Zandicol have learned of my presence so many leagues away from Soras?"

Zachara shook his head. "To our utmost dismay, Zandicol has secreted his spies all over the continent of Menila. Anyone could be suspect. We did the only thing possible at the time to assure your growth to maturity so you might be trained to use the many dormant powers you possess."

"Perhaps it is time to tell her of her ancestors, Zachara," an Elder at the other end of the table said. "Knowing more of our history might help her understand our circumstances better."

Shana felt Ryder's hand tighten on her own. She turned to look at him, remembered his lies and omissions. She slid her hand away from his and folded her hands together on top of the table. Ryder would confess everything to her once this session was over.

"I am going to ask you to refrain from questioning what I am about to tell you, and need you both to swear an oath that what I disclose will not leave this chamber."

"I give my oath," Ryder said.

Shana stared at Ryder for several seconds then said, "I also vow not to disclose any information you give me."

Zachara rose and paced the chamber. "Our Sect has not always been known as

Chosen. Centuries ago we were called Druids and we made our home on the continent now currently known as Ryder's homeland, the Freelands."

Shana heard Ryder's sharp intake of breath. She ached to reach out and grasp his hand, but resisted. Until she knew more of his part in spying on Menila, she would try and remain distant.

"Our calling was to teach the Old Rights and protect the people within our sphere. Throughout the many years we walked the earth as Druids, we were persecuted by resistant forces and killed off slowly by other evil sources set to destroy our Sect.

"As many years passed, and the few remaining Druids grew older, they realized their time was near an end. In order to assure the continuation of their lines, the Druids then changed the name by which they were identified to Prophets and mingled with other magical Sects whose names are now forgotten, and married to increase their numbers.

"Through association with these other Sects, the Prophets grew stronger. Their magic enhanced to the point their powers were almost unlimited.

"Until a dark warlord invaded their lands.

"Black Vengeance, he was called. His armies named Black Death. For two hundred years, his forces searched out and destroyed every Prophet they could find. It is believed Black Vengeance grew stronger with each essence of will his armies captured by feeding on the souls of the dying. The remaining Prophets only chance of survival was to flee. Numerous members banded together and went into deep hiding, scattering over the continent now known as the Freelands. Many more fled what is now called the last war of the Black Forces before any more of their kind could be slaughtered.

"These Prophets crossed the Great River and settled the continent of Menila.

"Fearing the Black Forces would discover their flight, the Prophets who had claimed Menila as home forever abolished the title Prophet from their vocabulary and began life anew as Chosen when they built the Temple of Havenshire.

"Over time, our remaining powers have weakened until we do little more than protect the Temple from the evil that lies in wait for a break in our magical forces.

"We have no knowledge of the Prophets that remained behind in the Freelands. We suspect their numbers have dwindled until a few remain. And, even those few hold little of the power they had forsaken in order to live out their lives in their homeland."

Nansemon took over Zachara's tale. "With foreknowledge of your coming, Shana, we have strived to hold on to the gifts that remain between us. We prepared every day for over twenty years to serve you in your rightful home. While our kind lives to a very old age, we are not immortal. Many of our members have already passed beyond this realm during our time here at Havenshire. As our powers weakened, we lost many of the abilities that once assured our continuing existence.

"It is through due diligence and very hard work that we have retained the necessary gifts to awaken the channels in your mind and allow your full powers to bloom. However, it has not been without many sacrifices from each one of us. We have dedicated ourselves to your existence.

"As you walk through the grounds of Havenshire, you will notice there are no young among us. We gave up the ability to reproduce in order to retain enough of our powers to tutor you properly.

"I am sure you felt our minds searching yours when you were first seated at this table. We mean you no harm but, you must understand it has been many centuries since

we have felt powers as strong as the ones you carry. Each of us eagerly awaits our time with you.”

Shana shook her head. “I know only the gift of healing, which was explained to be a part of my fictional mother’s magic. During my life, I have experienced some evidence of foresight. Hilda also taught me how to separate my body and mind, using nature to escape into a peaceful trance.”

Nansemon nodded and said, “Those are only a tiny fragment of the unexplored gifts within you, my dear. Many more await awakening.”

Everyone around the table agreed.

“May I ask some of the questions I feel need answering now?” Shana asked.

“I believe you should postpone your questions for a little while longer, Shana,” Zachara said. “I think we should go into some of Ryder’s history before we move ahead. I am sure he will also have a number of questions he would like to ask.”

Shana glanced at Ryder. It was apparent by the expression on his face that he eagerly awaited whatever Zachara had to say about his homeland.

“Ryder, your people are descended from a race of the great warrior Sect. Centuries ago also, a displaced army of vigilantes darkened the shores of an unnamed continent on the opposite side of the Great River. There they found waste and destruction caused by the remaining members of the Black Forces. After a conflict that lasted several decades, your ancestors were able to finally defeat the last surviving Black Forces and claimed what they called the Freelands for their own. Over the years that followed, your ancestors continued to make war on the continent, and when they had overrun all available lands and people, they finally invaded Menila.

“Expecting Menila to fall as easily as their conquered homeland, they were unprepared for the defense of Menila staged by the Sorian armies. In a war that lasted almost twenty years, the Sorians defeated the invaders and sent what was left of their numbers retreating toward the Freelands.

“But not before the fleeing armies looted and pillaged everything they thought valuable.

“Now, this part may not be to your liking, Ryder, but by all that is sacred, I pledge it is true. Your ancestors came to Menila not to gain land to enhance their holdings, but to enslave the people of Menila.”

Shana heard Ryder’s sharp intake of breath. She gave in to her need to comfort and touched his hand. He grasped her fingers and held on as he awaited Zachara’s next words.

“Before you protest my statement, I would suggest you look closely at the sword and scabbard that almost never leaves your back.”

Ryder reached up and touched the hilt of his sword.

“The sword you carry, Ryder, is actually a very old Chosen relic stolen over two centuries ago when your ancestors invaded. That sword is a part of the bounty they carried with them back across the Great River.”

“This sword has been in my family, and passed through generations, since my great, great grandfather, Fallimar’s day.”

“Yes, Ryder. It was Fallimar who led the Freelands army to enslave the people of Menila.”

Ryder rose quickly to his feet. It was not enough that he’d listened to Zachara tell

of his ancestors attempting to enslave the Menilan people, but now he had gone too far. He had accused his great, great grandfather of theft. Something that would never be tolerated in the Freelands.

"I know how hard this must be for you to understand, Ryder. I also understand you will rebel against any negative words against your people, but I can prove what I say is the truth."

Zachara walked around the table to stand at Ryder's side. He motioned to the sword and held out his hand. "May I?"

Ryder thought about refusing until Shana touched his hand. He looked down at her pleading gaze and nodded his acquiescence. He then unbuckled the strap around his waist and removed the harness from his shoulder. Instead of placing the sword into Zachara's hand, he laid it in front of him on the table.

"Do you know what these runes say, Ryder L'Syr? Can you read the message embedded in the sheath?"

Ryder shook his head. "The marks have always been thought to be decorations."

Zachara reached forward and lifted the scabbard. "This scabbard is many centuries old. The sword was forged with Druid magic. Throughout the passing of time, the sword has been renamed many times by the different warriors who carried it, but fortunately, without the sword's true name, no one has been able to key it. More years ago than most of us can remember, it was carried across the Great River and placed within a sacred vat by the Chosen."

Zachara ran his fingers slowly over the runes. "He who holds this sword carries the power of Chosa'den, but only one of a pure heart may key it."

He then withdrew the sword from the scabbard and held it gently across both of his hands. "Chosa'den is awakening, Ryder. And, when it comes fully awake, great power will pass to he who wields it."

CHAPTER 12

Ryder knew he held no magic inside, and he wasn't sure how pure his heart might be. He only knew the sword had been passed through his father's generation for longer than anyone could remember. The leaders of the Freelands considered it a great honor when the sword passed from father to son.

"I know nothing about keying this sword. But, of one thing I am certain. I hold no powers of any kind that would affect a magical sword," Ryder said.

Zachara smiled. "You do not have the power to awaken Chosa'den, Ryder. It will eventually awaken on its own because it now senses Chosen powers."

Shana spoke up. "How will this power manifest itself?"

"Chosa'den has been sleeping for many, many decades, Shana. Though its power is vast once awake, it will triple in strength when it is keyed for the first time." Zachara said. "As yet, it has only been searching for the power it feels is very near. I suggest you are that power, Shana."

"Me?"

"Ryder is the bearer of the sword. You are the key."

"And would this search manifest itself in arcs of fire to burn one's hand that comes near?"

"It could." Zachara rubbed his chin. "Have you experienced such a burn?"

"I've experienced many strange things since I first met Ryder."

"Would you care to elaborate?" Nansemon asked.

"I will, but first, I would like you to answer another question for me."

Zachara nodded.

"Does Chosa'den hold the power to physically transport someone from place to place?"

Zachara furrowed his brow then looked at the others seated around the table. After staring into each individual face for several seconds, he glanced toward the sword.

"We would appreciate it if you would speak aloud instead of mind to mind. Ryder and I do not seem to share your ability."

Zachara smiled. "You do, Shana. And Ryder can be taught to hear your thoughts, also."

"I'm not ready to understand mind speech. Please answer my question."

"Why do you believe Chosa'den could transport a person?" an Elder who identified himself as Setter asked.

Ryder answered, "I was wounded in the aftermath of a storm as I crossed the Great River to reach Menila. I recall that I lost consciousness on the shoreline of the river, but I awoke in Hilda's cottage, many leagues from the shore."

"Were you wearing Chosa'den at the time?" Setter inquired.

"I don't know."

"I can answer that question, Setter," Shana said. "I found Ryder in the forest of Verdun, wounded and unconscious. He was wearing Chosa'den."

"Perhaps, he regained consciousness near the river and walked to Verdun. His injury might have caused temporary amnesia."

"If I had temporary amnesia, do you not think I would have remembered by this time?"

"I do not know, Ryder. This is all a mystery to us. We will have to consider it further."

"Hilda said she had many dreams of a warrior carrying a magnificent sword coming to Menila to aid in its survival. She also told me many signs were present that could not be ignored. Hilda considered these dreams and signs as a warning she could not hold my destiny secret any longer. She then made preparations to enlighten me of my past and the quest I had to make to claim my heritage."

"Were you aware of any strange occurrences during this time, Shana?" Nansemon asked.

Shana bowed her head before she answered, "From the first moment I discovered Ryder, my gifts were disturbed. When I reached forward to find out what his ailment might be, I felt very strange when I noticed his sword. The moment I touched his hand, arcs of white fire burned my fingertips."

"Later, after the village men brought Ryder to the cottage, and Hilda tended his wounded shoulder, I could not control the impulse I had to keep as far away from him as possible because of the strange sensations that erupted over my body when I got too close."

"This phenomena with the arcs of fire only appears when I touch his hand while he'd wearing the Chosa'den."

"Zachara, I suggest what has occurred was, in fact, caused by Chosa'den. I also suspect Chosa'den sensed Shana's powers in Verdun and performed whatever magic it could control in its dormant state to bring itself nearer to that power. This would explain Ryder's loss of memory. It would also clarify Shana's discomfort," Setter said.

Zachara gazed from Ryder to Shana. "I believe the time has come to bring Chosa'den fully awake. Are all in agreement?"

Each Elder around the table nodded.

"Shana, please rise and step away from the table."

Ryder stepped forward to block her action. "What are you planning? I will not have her harmed in any way."

"We have no intention of harming Shana, Ryder. You have no magic to key the sword. Shana must use her hidden gifts to bring Chosa'den to life."

"What will happen once the sword is fully awake?" Shana asked.

"Nothing painful, I assure you. Chosa'den has made its presence known to both of you. The arcs of fire you experience when you touch Ryder's hand are only the sword's way of seeking its rightful master. Ryder can be that master, but it will take your powers to key the sword."

Shana looked up into Ryder's eyes. "Are you willing to do this?"

He appeared skeptical at first and turned his gaze to Zachara. "Will Shana benefit from this?"

"You will both benefit from keying Chosa'den. Now, step away from the table into the open, Shana."

Shana walked slowly to the middle of the floor.

Ryder stepped to her side.

Zachara picked up Chosa'den and joined them in the middle of the floor. "Shana, I will place Chosa'den into Ryder's hand. You must place both of your hands over his then lift the sword toward the sky. Blue fire will engulf your hands, but it will not burn."

"Is this the same blue fire that covered my fingertips and Ryder's entire body when we touched the curtain?"

Zachara nodded. "Like Chosa'den, the curtain is also a magical construct brought into being many, many decades ago as Havenshire was built. I will explain more of this magic to you later.

"Are you ready?"

Shana looked up at Ryder and nodded.

"Ryder, you must have blind faith that nothing Shana does will harm you. You must concentrate on the sword, feel its power move over and through you. You must become its master."

"And, how will I do that?" Ryder growled.

"Chosa'den will guide you, Ryder L'Syr. Now, raise your joined hands higher." He waited until Chosa'den was raised toward the ceiling. "Shana, concentrate on waking a sleeping giant. Use your mind to call Chosa'den forth from slumber."

Zachara placed his hands over Shana's for a moment and whispered, "Ryder you must also call Chosa'den. You must say its name." Zachara dropped his hands away from the sword.

Ryder spoke the sword's name and looked up to follow the length of the blade. He felt Shana's hands tighten over his and suddenly heat poured through their combined hands, past his fingers, and slowly up the length of the blade.

He watched as the sword of his nightmares materialized in their combined hands. A shaft of pure golden light emerged where the blade had been. The same whistling noise he had heard in his dream almost caused him to pull his hands free.

"Absorb its strength into your body, Ryder. Do not be frightened by the warmth. You must master Chosa'den."

Zachara's words penetrated his nightmare-induced terror. He flexed his muscles to shake off the dream's ill effects and watched the golden glow seep back down, revealing the blade as the warmth from the glow swept through his body.

He then reassured himself Shana was at his side and had not disappeared as in his dream. She still stood with her hands wrapped firmly around his and watched the golden glow disappear completely.

"Do you feel differently?" she whispered.

"Now that the warmth has gone, I feel nothing."

"You may release his hands now, Shana," Zachara said. "Ryder, recall the glow." "How?"

"Command it. Say its name. Hold its power."

Ryder tightened his hands upon the hilt. "Chosa'den."

The golden glow immediately reappeared.

"How can I do battle with a sword that glows in the dark?"

"It will never glow like this again, Ryder. The next time you key the sword, you will hear a low internal buzzing, but see no light."

"How do I make it stop glowing?"

"Command it."

"Chosa'den, cease glowing." Ryder watched as Chosa'den became an ordinary sword in his hand.

"Chosa'den will remain inactive until next you key it," Setter said. "When you wish to key it, you only need to say its name. The magic of the sword will not expose itself. Only you and Shana will know of its power."

Shana met Ryder's curious gaze. "How do you feel now?"

"The same," he answered.

"Well, the Chosen welcome you into their care, Ryder L'Syr. We honor your presence as our champion."

All nodded.

Nansemmon stood and walked around the table to stand at Zachara's side. "I believe we should take our meal before we begin answering the many questions Shana and Ryder must have."

Zachara agreed. "We will meet back here in one hour."

Shana welcomed the time she could be alone with Ryder. She had some very serious questions she intended to have answered.

* * * *

"When were you planning to tell me you were a spy?" she asked as soon as she shut their chamber door.

"It's not what you think, Shana."

"Really? What am I supposed to think? I've spent quite a bit of time with you over the past few weeks, Ryder L'Syr. I think you might have had the opportunity to explain your presence in Menila to me.

"So tell me, are you planning to take information back to your people so you can attempt to invade Menila again?"

Ryder walked across the carpeted floor and dropped Chosa'den on the table. "I'm not in Menila as a spy so the troops of the Freelands can invade your continent, Shana. I was sent here to investigate the blight our Prophet claims is destroying your lands and will soon cross the Great River to infest the Freelands."

"You were sent here. Alone. By whom?"

"My father."

"Your father sent you to Menila to find out about the blight destroying Menila? Why could you not disclose this information to me? After everything we've shared."

"My journey began that way, but things have changed."

"How?" Shana looked up into his blue eyes and felt her heart sputter. Though he towered over her by almost two feet, and his physical strength was enormous, he'd never harmed her, and since leaving Verdun, he'd never caused her to believe he was anything other than what he'd claimed to be.

She'd been suspicious when he asked so many questions of Hilda at the cottage, but over time, her suspicions had lessened. He took the Warrior's Debt he swore to heart and protected her in every way possible.

He'd been gentle. Warm. Passionate. He'd awakened things inside her she wasn't aware she was capable of feeling. He'd taken her to sexual heights she never dreamed possible.

He'd shared her heart, her dreams, and her love.

"My Father is Regent Commander of the Freelands. He has an army one hundred thousand strong ready to fight to save Menila, Shana. Not destroy it. It took me months of hard travel to reach your lands. At present, my father's army awaits my return and report so a decision might be made about Menila's ability to defend itself.

"So far, I've nothing to report."

"Are you trying to tell me your father is willing to assist Menila in its fight to destroy Zandicol?"

"We knew nothing about Zandicol, Shana. All we had to go on was our Prophet's vision. And, we all knew not to ignore his predictions." He went on to tell her of everything Prophet Jordan had shared in Travol's tent so many months ago.

"I know now Prophet Jordan is a descendent of your Chosen. I also realize I must believe in your ancestors as you should believe in mine. We have no desire to go to war again. The Freelands is a peaceful nation. That peace was won by many, many years of war.

"No one in my homeland seeks to see our peace end."

* * * *

Shana took a seat in one of the pink and gray chairs next to the center table. "Menila and the Freelands appear to want the same thing, Ryder. Why would it be so hard for you to tell Hilda or me your purpose for being here? We would have offered our help willingly."

"I was confused, Shana. I'd been shipwrecked, wounded, and woke up in a strange environment. I had no memory of how I got to Hilda's cottage, and no way of knowing who I could and could not trust."

"But, we've shared everything possible between a man and a woman, and still you do not trust me?"

"I trust you with my life, Shana."

Shana watched his eyes, the tension in his big body, the way he opened and closed his fists. She believed him. With all of her heart. And, she wanted him more than she could have ever imagined she'd want another person.

In her life. In her heart. In her body.

The question was how much did he really want her?

She stood and stepped close enough to look up into his haunted eyes. "Ryder?"

He raised his hands and placed his fingers under her chin to lift her face higher.

"Shana," he whispered.

"Are you hungry?"

His gaze narrowed as he sought her meaning.

Shana untied the sash that held her blue robe together and let the robe slide off her shoulders to pool near her feet. She stood before him, offering all she had to give, and waited for his answer.

He dropped to his knees before her, wrapped his large hands around her waist, and pulled her closer to suckle each exposed breast, tracing his lips from one taut nipple to the other until Shana thought her knees would buckle.

She pressed her fingers into his thick, dark hair and held him to task as he drew each nipple into his mouth, grazed it gently with his teeth, swiped it with his tongue.

Moisture pooled between her thighs, sending her temperature higher and higher until she thought she'd melt.

She groaned as his mouth left her breasts and he stood. Until he took her into his arms and stalked toward the bedchamber. He dropped her in the middle of the enormous bed and Shana watched as he removed his tunic. Impatience led her back to his body, then to the laces on his leggings.

She unlaced the cords holding his leggings together, then slipped the soft leather partially down his thighs. Her fingers caressed his engorged flesh, stroking up and down his extended length.

Bending closer, she swiped her tongue over the dew that formed on the tip of his erection then ran her tongue around the lip.

Ryder grasped her face and tried to lift it away from her sensuous play, but Shana shook her head and opened her lips over his length. She took as much of him as she could hold into her mouth and used her tongue and teeth to gently massage the length that throbbed against her tongue.

* * * *

Ryder had never experienced such explicit pleasure and torment at the same time. His body trembled. His muscles bunched. Heat tore through every vein, each artery. He shifted his hands from her face to the back of her head and rocked gently against her mouth as he felt his groin knot and spasm, ready for ejaculation.

He knew he couldn't hold out much longer and tried to pull away from Shana so he could come inside her body, but she'd have no part of it.

She suckled him harder, used her hands to grasp and massage his sac, trailed her fingernails over his buttocks and pushed him into the most erotic climax he'd ever felt in his life.

Yet, she wasn't finished with him. She held fast to his hips as she continued to caress him, using her tongue and teeth to stimulate his partially deflated shaft. With each swipe of her tongue and every soft scrape of her teeth, he felt himself instantly responding. Growing again inside her mouth.

This time he would not be daunted. He reached down and grasped her arms and lifted her away from his engorged length. He pushed her back upon the bed then removed his boots and shoved off his leggings.

"Stay right where you are," he whispered as he left the bedchamber. Seconds later, he returned with one of the berry pastries. He smiled when he saw the excitement in her beautiful eyes.

"My turn," he said as he used one hand to hold her body against the covering while, with the other, he smeared the sticky berry juice over the tips of her glorious breasts and between her thighs.

Ryder took his time gently lapping and suckling the sweet juice from her breasts, and then as she thrashed and moaned, he trailed his lips slowly down her body as he pushed her thighs apart.

He licked and bit at the sweet folds of her womanhood, lapping deep until he found her core. He then suckled the tight bud until she squirmed and moaned beneath his tongue.

"Ryder, please, come inside me. I need you. Now."

"Beg me, Shana. Tell me what you want."

"You. Deep inside. Please."

He placed his hands beneath her hips and pulled her body closer to the edge of the

bed. He then turned her over until her breasts were against the covering. He slipped his hands beneath her body, grasped her breasts and squeezed as he entered her waiting sheath from behind.

Each powerful thrust of his hips, and each strong stroke of his erection he knew pushed her closer and closer to the edge. She wiggled her bottom against his groin. Moaned in delight when he plunged deeper. And deeper. She reached over her head to grasp handfuls of the covering and arched her back higher to feel each penetration deeper and longer inside her core.

He leaned forward enough to swipe his tongue down the middle of her back. He slipped his hand from one breast and eased it down until he could manipulate her sex while he plunged into her willing body. Each stroke of his fingers against her tender flesh brought a deeper response from Shana. She pushed her bottom harder against his length, wiggled her breast more firmly into his hand, and panted.

“Please, Ryder. More. I need more,” she shouted. “Please, I’m so close.”

He released her breast and brought both hands beneath her thighs to lift her bottom higher. He felt his own climax building as he pushed inside of her again and again.

And again.

Shana screamed out when her orgasm came, drenching his length with her body fluid.

Ryder pushed into her harder, felt her internal muscles squeeze him tighter. He came with a shattering force that buried his seed deep within her body.

She turned her head to the side and whispered, “Next time I get to use the berry juice.”

CHAPTER 13

Shana tied the sash on the blue robe tighter around her waist as a knock sounded at the chamber door. She glanced over her shoulder to find Ryder standing behind her, a decadent smile on his face.

"Are you ready to hear everything the Elders have to tell you?" he asked. "I know from experience, when one asks for answers, one may not like what they hear in response."

"Too much has been withheld already, Ryder. I need to know what else has been omitted before I enter the next stage of my training."

Ryder nodded.

Shana reached for the handle and opened the door to find Zachara waiting on the other side. "It is time for your many questions to be answered, Shana. The Elders await your arrival in the meeting chamber. Please, come with me."

They followed Zachara down the stairs and through the courtyard to the meeting chamber and took their original seats around the table.

"There are some things I would like to tell you before we begin, Shana. I hope you will indulge an old man a few more moments," Zachara said.

Shana nodded.

"As I explained to you before, each of the Elders seated around this table will help you to uncover a specific gift hidden away in your mind. Each will take as much time as necessary to ensure you have mastered one gift before learning another. While this will seem to take an inordinate amount of time away from your journey, it is vital that you are able to protect yourself before you begin the last leg of your quest. Ahead of you lies the most dangerous path you will ever undertake," Zachara said.

Nansemon added, "Between the Temple of Havenshire and the high walls of Soras Keep, many natural and supernatural aspects will enter into your realm. Zandicol has resurrected his own version of the Black Forces that destroyed the Freelands centuries ago. Though these forces are not magically enhanced in their own right, Zandicol does exert an enormous amount of control over their thoughts and actions.

"We have no factual knowledge how he attained the sheer numbers of his force, but we suspect he has activated constructs of some type that think and act as one.

"A few among us believe he has animated the bodies of the villagers he massacred and somehow bound them to his will," Nansemon said.

"How is this possible?" Ryder asked.

"We do not know."

"Hilda told me Zandicol has grown so powerful the Chosen cannot defeat him. Who is Zandicol? Where did he come from? And, how did he become so powerful this close to Havenshire?"

Zachara stood and paced the chamber as he began his tale. "We have told you of our ancestors, Shana. Of our escape from the Black Forces that threatened our very lives. What we have not disclosed was the fact many of the evacuees brought children with

them across the Great River. Most of those children were refugees left behind by our fallen comrades. But some were orphaned by the other magical Sects many of our brethren chose to join.”

Nansemon took up his tale. “Over the many decades that have passed since our Sect’s escape to Menila, hundreds of children were born and died under Chosen care. Many died at birth because of disease or mutations caused by the mingling of two opposing bloodlines.

“Others grew into adolescence before the destructive disabilities appeared. Yet, as our history tells us, some grew to adulthood and died of old age, long before those of us present today were born. We do not have all of the answers for you, my dear. We only have what was inscribed in the ancient texts to go by, but we are certain a number of offspring who originated from the Black Forces were included among the children in the migration.

“The texts tell us many of these children were cast out of Havenshire due to inappropriate behavior. It goes on to explain how they were exiled and left to die alone. The texts also describe a great gift of evil found in these children. We can only assume this was caused by a mixture of mutated blood between the original Druids and the mysterious magical Sect they chose with which to breed.”

“Are you telling me that Zandicol was bred from one of the children excommunicated from Havenshire as Hilda said?” Shana asked.

“It is almost certain, Shana. We have no actual way to trace his origin, but most probably his original bloodline comes from those children thought long deceased,” Zachara answered softly.

“How did Zandicol end up in Soras Keep?”

“That we do not know,” Nansemon responded. “Our texts do not make mention of any child surviving exile.”

“What you’re actually trying to tell me is you don’t know what type of magic Zandicol possesses. Not only that, but you can’t be sure whatever gifts lie dormant within me will be strong enough to defeat his evil.”

“Your gifts are pure, Shana. Mordith held no magical powers of his own so everything inherited in your blood comes directly from the Chosen. Dedra’s bloodline dates back thousands of years and has always bred true, my dear. What you carry within you is as ancient as the texts that are so carefully guarded within these hallowed walls,” Zachara said.

“Have Chosen gifts ever been used for destruction, Zachara? Have you ever taken a life with your gifts? Have any of you here ever harmed anyone or anything with your skills?” Shana demanded as she met the eyes of each Elder seated around the table.

“We have done what we must over the passing of time, Shana,” Setter said. “The Chosen throughout the ages have protected our people with whatever means necessary to assure our line continues.”

“But you’re not continuing, Setter. Your line is dwindling away each day. Look around this table. Look outside at the Chosen who live within Havenshire. How much longer will the Chosen continue if no one here can reproduce offspring? How much longer will the walls of the Temple stand if no one is here to protect the Old Rights?”

“We do what we must, Shana. For your sake,” Zachara answered.

“For my sake? What can I, one individual, do when all else is lost? Will I be able

to maintain the Temple? Will I be able to destroy any evil that threatens what you hold so dear? Will everything you've strived so hard for your entire life depend upon my fledgling gifts and Chosa'den?"

"All will be explained to you in due time, my dear. For now, we must endure as we are able and make sure you are prepared for whatever you will face beyond the Temple," Nansemon whispered.

"Perhaps you should ask your questions now," Ryder said.

Shana studied each Elder's face before she sighed and shook her head. "Is it the way of the Elders to teach in riddles?"

"Not riddles, Shana. Facts. Until you have begun your training, you will not understand what it is we are trying to convey."

Shana's chest tightened until she thought her ribs would crush her chest. She reached for Ryder's hand and held tight to still the trembling that started deep within her body and radiated outward from her shoulders to her fingertips. She wanted desperately to escape the chamber and seek refuge in the peaceful pool within her mind, but this was not the time.

Instead, she exhaled several times to ease her discomfort and forced her tense body to relax.

"I agree to wait until my training to look for answers to the questions that have been discussed up until now, but I must have answers to some of the other questions that clamor within my mind."

Everyone around the table nodded in agreement.

"First, I want to know about the organic life form disguised as yellow grass and why it's destroying every available nutrient in and around Havenshire."

An elderly gentleman at the other end of the table spoke up. "My name is Dieter, Shana. I take care of the horticulture of Havenshire. It is my duty to collect species of flora and fauna and make sure it thrives within Havenshire's walls. I also gather any species of fish, fowl, or creature seeking refuge."

"And, in order to do this, you must leave Havenshire. How is this possible?"

Dieter bowed his head. "My gifts are earth magic, Shana. You also carry nature's power within you and I will explain everything when you are in training."

"Then you know the flatlands on the northernmost side of Hyden Shelf all the way to Havenshire is devoid of life."

Dieter nodded.

"You must also know the soil is dead as ash. No nutrients of any type survive that can support life. Not only on this side of Hyden Shelf, but also in my beloved forest on the southernmost side. Everywhere we have traveled so far has been afflicted with this evil species, except in the mountains where solid rock prevents its growth."

Dieter shook his head. "Magic of any type is an affront against nature, Shana. Every byproduct of the unnatural has an adverse affect on objects around it. Trees can be made to grow into mammoth specimens but the nourishment needed to support such growth takes away from the life giving forces within the soil that produces other life."

"Are you telling me that you've siphoned off nutrients from around Havenshire to support the extraordinary gardens that flourish in Havenshire?"

"No. No, my dear. You misunderstand me. The gardens that thrive within Havenshire have done so for many, many decades. The original inhabitants of the

Temple brought seeds and cuttings with them to feed the people and beautify their surroundings.

"Havenshire is separate and apart from the rest of this area, Shana. Nothing done within the walls of the Temple harms anything beyond."

"Evil produces evil, Shana Kerr," someone said from across the table. Shana looked up to meet the soft gray eyes of a woman who had not given her name.

"I am sorry, Shana. My name is Judith. I am sister to your guardian, Hilda."

"Sister? Hilda never told me she had a sister."

"This is another thing she was forbidden to disclose. Though, over the term of your life, I have kept constant contact with my beloved sister and have shared my knowledge with all that reside in Havenshire. It has been a pleasure for us, knowing your gifts, and watching you grow into young womanhood. We have happily awaited your arrival for so many long years."

"I am very pleased to meet you, Judith. I wish I had known of you sooner," Shana said softly. "Now that I think back, I should have realized Hilda obtained her knowledge of the happenings surrounding Verdun from an outside source. There was no way she could have known otherwise."

"Hilda and I share mindspeak, Shana. She inquires always about your health and welfare."

"Is she all right? Is she lonely? Will she now journey to Havenshire?" Tears wet Shana's eyes at the thought of the loving woman she'd left behind.

"Hilda will come to us in due time, Shana. She stays behind to teach another her skills so she may leave Verdun in good hands."

"Thank you for sharing this with me, Judith. I worry so much about her being alone."

"She wishes you success, Shana, and looks forward to the day you take your rightful place upon the throne of Soras."

"Thank you, Judith."

"And, I thank you, Shana Kerr, for it will be my place to teach you to use your own mindspeak then you may converse with Hilda at your leisure in times to come."

"I'm sorry," Shana apologized to everyone about the table. "News of Hilda distracted my original thoughts."

"Judith, what did you mean when you said evil produces evil?"

Judith reached across the table and grasped Shana's outstretched hands. "Evil is a strike against nature, Shana. Each time evil is used for any purpose, negative energy is created. This energy affects everything it touches in strange and unreliable ways. We have heard tales of creatures that have evolved bearing no resemblance to any species ever noted. Before it became too dangerous for all of us to travel beyond the walls of the Temple, several of the Elders located the decayed remains of animals they could not identify. Plants and grasslands foreign to this area began to thrive where they had never grown before. No one could even recognize the species.

"Some of these abominations were discovered to be even more evil than the source that spawned them. Fortunately, most were destroyed before they could spread beyond their original location.

"The yellow grasses you have described are one of these abominations we have been unable to identify as any sort of plant or animal life. We understand it spreads by

spores, but we have no idea where it originated and can only assume it is of alien nature and has been caused by some type of magic we do not understand.”

“You have no way to stop it from spreading?” Ryder asked.

“Not at this point, but we suspect when the host is destroyed, the grasses will lose the source of its nourishment and cease to exist.”

“Are you suggesting Zandicol is responsible?”

“We can only assume, my dear,” Nansemon answered.

“It is getting late, Shana. Perhaps we should finish answering your questions tomorrow,” Zachara said.

“I would ask just one more question before we retire, if I may, Zachara.”

Zachara nodded.

“I understand it is my destiny to travel to Soras Keep and confront Zandicol. I also know whatever powers the Elders awaken within me will aid in my quest. What I don’t understand is how I will prove my identity to the people of Soras.”

Setter stood and walked around the table to stand beside Shana. “Within the Sanctuary of Soras Keep, a special stone in the Keep wall has been denoted with a tiny pair of golden wheat shafts. Behind this stone lies proof of your claim to the throne of Soras, and your birthright to rule Menila. Once you have removed the special block, your claim to Soras and your lifelong destiny will be told.”

“What hides behind the block?” Shana asked.

“We have been given no knowledge of what lies within, my dear. We only know the Fate of Menila lies in your hands.”

Shana shook her head in defeat. She certainly didn’t need the Fate of an entire continent on her shoulders any more than she needed more questions without answers.

“Come, all,” Zachara said. “A great feast has been prepared to welcome our beloved Chosen child home. Tomorrow will be set aside for additional questions and for Shana’s initial instruction to begin. Tonight we rejoice.”

* * * *

Shana snuggled closer into the warmth of Ryder’s big body, her thoughts in turmoil even after the leisurely bout of lovemaking had eased Ryder into deep slumber. She listened to his even breathing, felt the steady beat of his heart through the veins in his arms that held her tight against his chest, and wished for the sweet allure of sleep to settle her mind.

But sleep wouldn’t come.

They’d spent a pleasant evening meeting and speaking with numerous members of the Chosen who had not attended the Elder’s briefing earlier. They had enjoyed a vast array of delicacies both familiar and strange, sampling each new fruit or vegetable offered by their hosts.

Many of the Chosen present spoke fondly about her mother, letting Shana see through their thoughts and memories, the wonderful woman her mother had been. Some also added insight to many of her mother’s special powers. Others remembered the sadness all shared when they learned of her mother’s ultimate demise at the hands of Zandicol and had taken time to explain the plans made to protect Shana from also meeting Dedra’s Fate.

They knew little of her father, Mordith, other than he was a good man and a strong leader. And, that he had loved Dedra from the first moment he met her.

She'd also had the opportunity to speak with each Elder who'd attended her briefing and to learn each participant's special place in her forthcoming instructions.

But none would explain the methods to be used that would open the blocked channels of magic inside her mind.

Ryder stirred and pulled her closer. Shana felt his breath against her hair, his fingers tighten around her abdomen.

"You are not sleeping?"

She twisted until she could face him and lifted her hand to brush a stray lock of midnight hair from his eyes.

"I'm afraid, Ryder. I can't stop thinking about all we heard in the Elder's meeting. I dread what will happen once my training actually begins. What if I'm unable to grasp the lessons they teach? How do they sense such magical structures within my mind that I have no idea exist? What if I'm not the savior they expect me to be and doom all of Menila?"

Ryder pulled her closer and kissed her lips. "I'll never allow anyone to hurt you, Shana. If you still have doubts, there are other options available to you."

"What options? I've been called to serve the people of Menila by defeating the evil Zandicol. The Chosen claim it's my Fate to accomplish this task."

"Before reaching Menila, I'd never heard of people naming themselves Chosen. Until Zachara explained their origin, I believed the people of the Freelands and the inhabitants of Menila were a separate race. I had little knowledge of magic in our world, no idea the sword my father passed to me was a relic capable of great magic.

"Over the course of my life, I've heard tales of the war my great, great grandfather initiated against Menila. I know little about that war other than knowledge passed through our people that the Freelanders were defeated by the forces of Soras. They returned home to foreswear themselves to making the Freelands into a peace-loving nation. No one mentioned magic, or how the Sorians actually overthrew the warriors of the Freelands.

"I now know at one time our people fought together to destroy the Black Forces. Through the history told to us by the Elders, I've also learned our Prophet Jordan is a descendent of the Chosen. I also believe the only talent left to him is the gift of foresight, for many times he's predicted events that happened exactly as he described."

"And this foresight is what caused your father to gather an army and send you alone to Menila as a spy?"

"This was not my father's choice. I was chosen by the leaders of the many regiments he commands as best suited for the task. My father wasn't happy with their choice, but, in the end, he agreed with my appointment."

Shana sighed. "So we're both cast into the hands of Fate and sent from our homes to protect our people. Do you think our partnership was somehow predestined?"

"I believe if Prophet Jordan is actually a descendent of your Chosen as they have stated, our Fates have long been joined."

"Hilda told me she thought the Chosen had a part in bringing you to Menila. She explained the dreams she had about a warrior carrying a magnificent sword that would be instrumental in the salvation of Menila.

"Somehow, I'm beginning to believe we are both pawns in a much larger scheme than we could ever imagine."

CHAPTER 14

Shana stepped into the rounded room designed to thwart any magic gone stray and looked around. Padded benches filled the outside walls of the room, but the circle created in the center of the floor remained bare. She glanced overhead to the domed roof then chose a seat on the bench nearest the door to await Hilda's sister, Judith, and the lessons she would begin to awaken her gift of mindspeak.

Trepidation clouded her mind at the thought of what was to come. She grasped her hands together to thwart the need to fidget. Every nerve ending tingled. The familiar warmth began in her chest, radiated outward toward her fingertips, and brought with it a different type of fear than she'd ever experienced.

What if the Chosen were wrong? What if she was incapable of the quest she'd been set upon?

What if the dormant gifts within her were just that? Dormant.

"Good morning, Shana," Judith said as she hurried into the room. "I hope you are feeling up to learning how to speak with your mind. Actually, I believe you will discover it easier to learn than you might imagine since the curtain opened your pathways when you appeared at the gateway."

Shana stood and assisted Judith as she positioned a thick mat in the center of the room. "I know I was terrified when I heard a strange voice inside of my head."

Judith laughed. "The curtain only speaks to the Chosen, my dear. And, I can only guess at the feeling that must have overcome you when suddenly you felt as if you were hearing things that were not possible."

"I still don't understand. If the curtain opened my mind to such speech, why could I not hear you and the other Elders when you conversed silently?"

"The magic is not only the ability to speak with another mind to mind, but you must learn how to listen," Judith said as she motioned for Shana to join her on the thick mat.

"In order to finish what the curtain began you must be completely relaxed. I suspect many times during your youth you have escaped your current situation by retreating inside of your mind."

Shana nodded.

"You spoke earlier that Hilda had gifted you with the ability to escape to an alternative environment. My sister is good at escaping into a dream realm where she can be one with the elements. It's a wonderful way to be one with nature, and it also serves as a powerful tool if you feel threatened in any way. Or, even if you feel you need guidance. This is a gift Hilda and I share, but we each achieve our trance differently. It would make your training easier if you would share with me how you attain peace."

"The forest of Verdun has always been the object of my focus. Whenever I'm distressed or feeling blue, I go to my favorite place in my mind.

"I seek the sheltered pool deep in the forest. Smell the abundant fragrances of the varied species of wildflowers. Listen to the gurgling of the tiny pool as it tumbles over

the rock base of the stream. I will my mind to drift. Hear the blood whisper within my veins until I become one with the pool, still as the rock I sit upon.”

“Do you actually see this pool in your mind, Shana? Is it so real you feel you can touch it?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Are you aware of time passing while in this trance?”

“No.”

“Concentrate with me for a moment, Shana. Visualize your pool, the forest with its many fragrances. Close your eyes and experience everything you feel while in such a trance.”

Judith placed her spread hands over Shana's ears and also closed her eyes. “Take me with you to this beautiful place. Let me see your safe haven. Smell the flowers, hear the gurgle of the pool.”

“I don't know if I can.”

“Reach out to me with your mind. Mentally grasp my hand and show me your special place.”

Shana reached deep inside and drew from her very essence as she touched Judith's hand. “See the pool. Hear the insects in the trees, the gentle flutter of the leaves overhead. Smell the damp earth and wild roses.”

“This is a beautiful haven, Shana. It is everything you have said and more. The way the moonlight filters down through the trees to sparkle in the pool like gemstones. The way the mists rise in the warmth of dusk to greet the night.

“I envy you this special spot, my dear.”

“Now that you have been here, can you revisit whenever you choose?”

“Perhaps later, Shana. Now, open your eyes.”

Shana blinked several times then stared into Judith's kind face.

“Do you realize our entire conversation since we entered the forest was spoken mind to mind?”

“How is that possible?”

“As I stated before, the curtain opened your channel, all you have to do is to learn how to focus your thoughts to others and listen to their response. This is something you will be proficient in before you leave Havenshire. Unfortunately, though you are extremely gifted in this area, you will not be able to hear Ryder's thoughts because he has no ability to project.

“You will, however, be able to use mindspeak to convey simple messages to him. It will be our duty to tutor him in this very unnatural gift. But, be warned, your gift also carries a negative aspect when dealing with ungifted humans. Though you will not be able to hear Ryder's actual thoughts, you will feel his distress and his pain. Know if he is in danger and you will experience tremendous anguish should something drastic happen to him.”

Shana trembled at the thought of Ryder being harmed in any way. She forcibly shoved all negative thoughts aside as she watched Judith's eyes. “Is there a limit to the distance I can project my thoughts?”

“All will be determined once we have actually begun more intense training,” Judith replied. “The gifts you possess actually work together. Mindspeak, foresight, earth magic, your ability to trance, healing, and command of fire and water, are used in

tandem to create your abilities.

"Foresight works with mindspeak when you wish to converse mind to mind. Foresight helps you seek out the person to whom you wish to convey a message. Earth magic, along with fire and water, are used in your ability to affect the weather and growth. The ability to trance also includes earth magic.

"And, these are but a few of the gifts you possess. As you complete each section of your training, you will understand more of the combinations you might use to reach your desired results.

"Now, I would like you to try to project into another's mind. We will do this very simply so you can see how each step is developed. The first step is to compose what you actually wish to say in your mind, and then use foresight to seek out the individual with whom you wish to converse. For the purpose of this lesson, Zachara is expecting your mind touch. He will assist you with foresight and help you identify his location. He will listen as you attempt to speak with him.

"Are you ready to try?"

Shana nodded.

"Close your eyes and think of Zachara. Mentally search for him within Havenshire. Once you believe you have found him send a seeking trance out over the Temple. To do this, remember the way you escaped to your pool in the forest. Fine Zachara the way you travel to your hideaway."

"Zachara?"

(Speak with your mind, Shana,) Zachara responded.

Shana's eyes flew open. "I hear him."

"Of course you do. Now respond to him. Tell him where he is."

(Zachara, you are in the garden near the fountain,) Shana projected.

(You are correct, my dear. Now, what is it you wish to tell me?)

(I never thought I might be able to accomplish something like this, Zachara. I never even knew mindspeak was possible.)

Shana heard Zachara's mental chuckle deep within her mind.

(Do not tire yourself out,) Zachara said. *"You have another lesson this afternoon.)*

Shana turned to Judith. "I heard him. I actually spoke to him with my mind."

Judith laughed. "This is just your first attempt, Shana. Imagine what you will accomplish once you learn to use all of your magic together. What took moments to accomplish today will transpire in less than seconds."

"May I try to speak with Hilda?"

"Not yet. We have not worked with distance speech. Until you have mastered the ability to speak without consciously thinking through all of the different magic's involved it will put too much strain on your fledgling powers to attempt."

Shana nodded.

"Now, I suggest we start from the beginning and build your skills slowly until you are ready to move on to higher concepts."

* * * *

"Try harder, Shana. You *can* do this. You've mastered the other elements over the past two weeks, this one should not be that difficult," Nansemon said. "You have no trouble with earth, wind, and water. You are certainly more proficient than anyone here

who might try to instruct you in the primary elements. You are more than proficient in your abilities to trance and heal, and therefore the last element should come naturally to you. Yet, to achieve mastery over fire you must push aside these primary elements and concentrate only on fire's unique aspects."

Shana shook her head. Frustration grew as the moments passed. "I believe it's because my thought processes don't quite work the same as yours. Where you see this as a simple task, my mind tries to analyze each step and, most of the time, though the end results are similar, they are not the same. I feel the heat of the fire first, not last. I sense the essence of the element flow slowly through my body rather than unfolding within the element itself.

"My mind composes the necessary pattern the fire should take, and then my magic apparently oversees the process. As an end result, I have little power over the creating of fire, but I can control it once it appears."

"What do you mean by saying you can control it once it appears?" Nansemon asked.

Shana shook her head. "It's not easy to explain. Somehow the fire seems to grow within my body instead of being released through my fingertips as you have taught me. I feel the heat of the flame inside me, but it does not burn. It's almost as if I'm storing the warmth for some other purpose. For something different."

"I must speak with Zachara regarding this. Perhaps, he can offer some suggestions about how we should proceed from this point. Fire should be your primary element.

"Your mother was very proficient in creating flames that danced upon her hands and warmed her flesh, and she actually could command the flames to act upon her command. I must confess, I believed you would share that strength.

"We'll end this lesson for today, my dear. While I'm speaking with Zachara, perhaps, you should spend the rest of your day meeting and talking with the many others who wish to know you."

* * * *

Zachara had watched Shana as she quickly went through all of the training she had been given over the last twenty days. He recalled her thirst for knowledge, and her astonishment when each new task was completed to perfection. He had also watched her frustration when it took longer than she anticipated to perform each function properly.

In the beginning of her training, she had found it hard to work through the element of fire, but in the end, she understood that fire was one of her weaker points, and moved on to the other elements.

Her delight when she had finally mastered mindspeak and she now could project her thoughts over a long distance still amazed her. And, to no one's surprise, her first attempt was to her mentor, Hilda.

Zachara now understood they conversed daily.

Today marked the last part of her training, and he had the task of guiding her through her most difficult lesson.

At a special meeting of the Elders before this session began, Zachara had revealed something none of the Elders had considered.

Throughout Shana's training, each Elder involved had discovered it hard to match Shana's particular gift with their own, because of slight differences in the way Shana

performed each task assigned.

After each session, the Elder involved always sought out the ancient texts in hope of finding an answer, but each came away without an explanation.

After many discussions about her abilities, without Shana's knowledge, the Elders had formed one opinion.

With the exception of fire, Shana Kerr carried magical gifts stronger and more complex than anything ever recorded in the ancient texts. Her gifts had mutated somehow, showing not only deep signs of her mother's heritage, but something else, something they could not understand.

The only things they had to possibly explain her strange gifts were not recorded in the texts passed through many generations, but stories told of the Druids from thousands of years ago. Stories of an ancient Druid Sect that were given not only the power of creation, but the power of destruction.

In theory, according to the ancient stories, Druids carrying these particular mutated gifts could reverse good and evil. With the ability to affect the weather, instead of rain they could bring drought. Their earth magic could turn famine into feast or feast into famine. And most of all, with their healing abilities, the Druids could save a life or take a life.

Zachara had debated for three moon risings whether he should tell Shana of these unusual gifts. He still did not have an answer and his time was running out.

"Hilda sends her well wishes to everyone, Zachara," Shana said.

He nodded. "Shana, come with me, please. We will walk through the gardens as I give you your final lesson."

CHAPTER 15

Soras

Zandicol stood in the middle of the village surrounding Soras Keep and watched his warriors burn the cottages to the ground. Smoke and ash filled the midnight air and obscured his sight of the full moon. Hundreds of peasants now stood in a huddled mass in the middle of the dirt roadway.

Others were slain as they tried to escape into the forest that surrounded the village.

The ones who were lucky enough to escape his warriors' pursuit, were no longer his concern. The forest had been barren of life for the last decade. The escapees would find no food or shelter to sustain them. They would eventually die, or they would realize their plight was hopeless and return to the Keep.

No matter. They all were not his concern. He could care less if every woman, boy or girl were slaughtered. He wanted the men.

Men he could strip of their essence and place them entirely under his control as he fought to destroy the Chosen.

He had waited long enough for these peasants to bend to his will. But he would wait no longer. Now, with nothing left, their choices were gone.

Zandicol watched as Larus picked his way over the disemboweled bodies to make his way through the rubble and ashes that littered the dirt roadway. Soon, his need for the idiot Ruler would end. Larus would then face the Fate of his people.

When Larus stepped to his side, Zandicol said, "Go back to the Keep, Larus. You are not needed here." He watched as the thin man turned without question to do his bidding.

Zandicol surveyed his accomplishment. Pigs, dogs, and a number of scattered chickens pecked and ate at the bloody entrails of the masses who had not been quick enough to flee his warriors advance, or who thought they had the courage to defend their humble cottages.

The steam from fresh, open bodies rose to mingle with the flakes of ash and the smoke that still lingered from his destruction.

Though nauseating, it served his purpose well. Those who remained alive would never forget the carnage he created. They would think twice the next time he made a demand and it was not carried out.

Tired of listening to the cries of the dying, or the wailing of the loved ones left behind, Zandicol stepped around a particularly gross peasant who had fallen at his feet. The man was not yet dead and would be useful.

Zandicol reached down, grasped the man's thin shirt, and lifted him up until he could see the man's face.

"You see my power around you, peasant. You know what destruction I can bring down upon you. Do you give your essence of will to me now, or must I finish what my warriors have started?"

The man stared up into his eyes but he did not answer.

Deciding to make this gross peasant an example for all left alive to witness, Zandicol placed his right hand upon the man's bloody forehead and closed his eyes.

The peasant screamed out in agony then dropped to his knees.

A few moments later he regained his footing and stood before Zandicol.

Zandicol was pleased the peasant's face now resembled a death mask. His eyes unfocused as his body quaked and his hands trembled.

"Go now, and join my warriors in destroying these horrible peasants," Zandicol demanded as he gave the man a sword he'd taken from the littered ground. He watched as his newest construct turned to murder his own people.

CHAPTER 16

Shana wiped tears from her eyes as she placed a soft kiss against Judith's cheek. "I'm so glad I had the opportunity to meet you," she whispered. "I enjoyed spending time alone with you, learning about your childhood with Hilda and experiencing first hand the wonderful way you each have changed my life in such a short time. I'm going to miss you dearly and look forward to the day that Hilda returns to Havenshire so we might get together again."

Judith squeezed her hand. "You are a delight to know, Shana. It's been rewarding to help you over these last many weeks as you embraced all of your gifts. I know Hilda is very proud of you, as I am. I wish you nothing but success as you begin this last part of your quest. Do not worry, Shana. We will meet again. And, when we do, your beloved Hilda will stand by my side."

Shana nodded and stepped back. She wiped another tear from her eyes as she moved to give Setter a hug, and Dieter a soft peck on his cheek. "I will miss all of you," she whispered.

"I thank each of you here for the sacrifices you've made on my behalf," she glanced at the dozen or so Elders who made a wide circle around her. "I promise to use the gifts you have awakened within me to do everything I can to restore peace to our lands."

"But, you I think I will miss most of all," she said as she turned toward Zachara.

Zachara placed his hand upon her shoulder and said, "Walk with me once again, Shana."

She nodded and stepped to his side.

"You must remember everything I told you in the gardens, my child. Know that the mutated gifts within you can be controlled easily if you continue to rely on your sense of good will and peace. I will repeat again, that I do not believe you should ever disclose these gifts to anyone. Especially Ryder."

"But, I love him, Zachara. I feel as if I'll be betraying him in some manner if he doesn't understand all of the strange powers I possess."

Zachara shook his head. "There are some secrets that should never be shared, Shana. An innocent slip of the tongue could cause a disaster, especially if Zandicol discovers what you carry inside. I will remind you also, if you find yourself in desperate need to use those gifts, do everything you can to prevent others from witnessing your actions."

Shana nodded. The things Zachara had disclosed to her as they had walked through the garden, were nothing she even wanted to think about, much less use.

"Remember what you learned about crossing the leagues between Havenshire and Soras. You will discover numerous things that cannot be explained, and many could cause harm if you are not careful."

"Trust in Ryder and Chosa'den, Shana. Throughout the days of your training with the other Elders, Ryder and I have worked closely together as he learned the power

he holds not only in his warrior's body, but with the aid of Chosa'den," Zachara said.

"Go now. The hour grows late and you will need to reach the Kelt River before nightfall."

Shana watched as Zachara stepped away. She turned to face the others who awaited her departure. She nodded to each then to Ryder as he stepped to her side.

He grasped her hand and led her back to the curtain they had used to enter Havenshire and, without another glance back, they exited Havenshire together.

* * * *

Twilight filled the countryside as Shana followed Ryder cautiously through the barren patches of bare earth that covered the boundaries beyond Havenshire. Ahead, league after league of empty land spread out in all directions, as it had on the opposite side of Havenshire. Only, in this parched land, the earth was not soft and dusty like they had seen before. Instead, the ground beneath their feet resembled a cracked, dry riverbed.

Zachara had made it clear that they must reach the Kelt River before total darkness fell. He claimed the land between the northern side of the river and Soras could become hostile during the darkness, and numerous creatures, natural or otherwise, roamed the dry lands in search of prey.

Shana watched the orange sun slip slowly beyond the horizon. She studied the sky, now burnished orange streaked with swirls of deepening gray. "How much farther must we travel to reach the Kelt River?"

Ryder glanced overhead then met her gaze. "A couple more leagues. Zachara said we would start to feel the land rise beneath our feet as we traveled northward. At the pace we've been traveling, we should expect to reach the river within a few hours. He also explained that the Kelt River marked the boundaries between the flatlands and the hilly terrain we must cross before we reach Soras."

Shana watched Ryder as he tread across the cracked earth beneath their feet. During the time she had been in her training sessions to awaken all of her gifts, he'd been working with Zachara to learn the lay of the land and the possible safe points where they could spend their evenings.

Shana glanced over her shoulder to see the full moon rise above the distant boundaries of Hyden Shelf. She gazed up to the stars as they winked into view. The night was cool, and she was thankful for the additional clothing the Chosen had provided. She now had soft stockings to cover her feet and protect her flesh from blisters. She'd given up her leggings for woolen trousers that warmed her legs. Her golden tunic, now repaired and cleaned, was covered with a woolen shawl that she'd knotted at her waist.

Ryder had been given a heavier tunic constructed of lamb's wool that he covered with his etched vest. Chosa'den still rested across his back.

"We must be getting closer to the river," he said. "The land is starting to rise."

Shana looked around. Though the ground beneath their feet was still barren and pockmarked, the terrain was rising. "This must be what Zachara meant when he said the land would change as we pushed farther north."

Ryder shook his head. "Since leaving Havenshire, I've had the distinct feeling that we are being watched. I believe we should pick up our pace a bit and get to the protection of the river as quickly as we can."

"Who could possibly be watching us? There is nothing but cracked ground for leagues and leagues," Shana said.

"I believe this sword is trying to direct our footsteps. It's nothing I can identify with, but I sense a danger and I don't want to be caught out in the middle of nowhere should something or someone decide to investigate further."

Shana quickened her steps to match Ryder's pace. She shifted the bundle she wore strapped to her back into a more comfortable position and tested one of her newfound gifts to scan their immediate area. The same feeling of being watched encompassed her, but she couldn't determine who or what caused her uneasy feeling or which direction any threat might come from. She eased closer to Ryder's side.

She couldn't stop thinking of the unnatural creatures she'd learned about in the Council meeting. What if these abominations still roamed the leagues between Havenshire and Soras?

"Ryder," she whispered.

He turned to gaze in her direction.

"We need to hurry to the safety of the river. I, too, sense something watching and I don't think it's friendly."

She looked up as a deep shadow passed over the moon. "Did you see that?"

Ryder grasped her arm. "We need to run, Shana. I don't know what that might have been, but we can't take any chances. We're too vulnerable out here in the open."

He reached over and grabbed the pack from her back then propelled her forward.

Shana's heart felt as if it had stalled in her chest, but she forced her trembling legs to run as she remembered the beasts they had encountered on the other side of Hyden Shelf.

The terrain around them grew steeper as the cracked ground crunched beneath their boots as they ran, each casting a glance over their shoulder for whatever had passed across the moon.

Shana stumbled. Ryder held her upright and pushed her faster as they struggled to navigate the harrowing path up the first incline, then another as they sought shelter from whatever circled above them.

A sharp cry echoed off the empty terrain. Another, from the opposite direction, answered the call.

Shana glanced up to discover an enormous bird the likes of which she had never dreamed possible, circling like a buzzard over their heads. She watched as a second, then a third joined the first. Circling lower. Closer and closer.

Ryder reached for his sword. The blade slipped silently from the etched scabbard. "Keep running, Shana. Straight ahead. You should reach the river in a few moments."

"No. I'm not going anywhere without you." Shana reached deep to summon the lessons the Chosen had taught her. She raised her fingers high over her head and began to call forth the power of fire.

Ryder placed his hand upon hers. "No, Shana. Remember what Zachara said. Magic attracts magic. If you destroy the beasts with your gifts, you might alert whoever's directing them to our position."

"But, you can't fight them alone. Not even with that sword."

She watched as Ryder looked down at Chosa'den.

Though he kept the weapon in his hand, he nodded and reached to propel her forward. "Run. I'll be one step behind you the entire way. Go now."

Shana drew a deep breath and began to run. She watched over her shoulder to

make sure Ryder followed. She struggled up the rise as the ground beneath her feet angled upward. She slipped and slid over the cracks in the earth, and struggled to keep her balance as she felt Ryder's hand settle into the small of her back.

She could hear the sound of running water over the loud drumming of her heart. Kelt River was near. The thought gave her extra stamina as she forged forward. Up another incline, down through a small valley, and then up again to a higher peak.

Ryder remained at her back. He steadied her when she faltered.

She continued to run, taking time only to look over her head and see the strange creatures still following.

Heart choking her throat, she gasped for breath and ran on, up another taller hill, down a steeper valley. She struggled up to the crest of the next hill, and screamed out when she took another stride and her foot found no ground beneath her.

Ryder grasped her arm and yanked her back from the precipice.

Shana panted as she looked down into the murky waters of the Kelt River several spans below the cliff they now stood upon.

"What now?" she struggled to ask. She watched as Ryder tried to steady his own breathing.

"We find a way down this cliff and locate sufficient shelter to protect us until sunrise."

What started out as a good plan turned into a slippery, muddy mess as they used protruding tree roots to make their way hand over hand down the face of the cliff until they happened upon a large indentation carved into the side of the cliff left as the waters of the Kelt River eroded the soil along its banks.

Shana sat as far back in the indentation as she could manage and tried to clean the sticky mud from her clothing. She watched as Ryder produced the glowstone from his pack and placed it on the mud that formed the floor.

"I'm afraid we'll have no fire tonight," he said as he slid closer to her side.

"Thankfully, the Chosen packed fruit and staples in our provisions." He reached inside his pack and produced a piece of the purple fruit they had sampled in several ways in their suite at Havenshire.

The glowstone was just bright enough to see the twinkle in his eyes as he handed her the fruit.

Too exhausted to chew, Shana bit into the purple fruit and sucked out the marvelous juices that tempted her tongue. She watched as Ryder devoured his own.

She then leaned back against the muddy opening and listened to the strange calls the enormous creatures made as they apparently still searched for their prey.

Ryder placed his arm over her shoulder. "Zachara said we would be safe if we crossed the hilly terrain in daylight. These night creatures should be in hiding during the light of day. We will rest until the sun is fully up before we begin our trek tomorrow."

Shana nodded and picked at another clump of mud stuck to the sleeve of her tunic.

Ryder placed his hand over hers and said, "Your clothing will be cleaned in the morning."

She stared into his eyes.

"Do you swim?"

"Yes. But, what has that got to do with my clothes being cleaned?"

“The river will wash our clothing as we swim to the other side.”

Shana shook her head. “Our clothing might be cleaned, but what about our packs and the sword?”

Ryder smiled. “I expect this sword has seen more than its share of river dousing. And, as far as our packs are concerned, they will dry.”

Shana nestled closer to his tall body, needing the reassurance her own mind failed to give. She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of his heartbeat, steady and sure in his chest.

Exhaustion robbed her of the ability to remain upright. She inched closer to his side and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER 17

Morning dawned bright and clear with not a wisp of clouds to mar the vibrant blue sky. Shana struggled to the edge of their muddy hideaway and looked down at the rolling water of the Kelt River.

"Are you sure we can swim through that?"

"What other choice do we have? Besides, we won't get very far with all of this mud covering our clothing. Once the sun is high over head, the mud will dry and make our trek that much more difficult," Ryder said.

"It looks dangerous and I'm not that strong a swimmer," she confessed. "I don't know if my training in the element of water will have any affect on this raging river."

Ryder reached up to touch the side of her face. "I'll tie you to my waist with the rope. That way I won't lose you."

Shana leaned back against Ryder and sighed. "How much farther did Zachara say we had to travel before we reached Soras?"

Ryder placed his arms around her waist. "He said it would take at least six days, provided we didn't run into any trouble. I suppose we witnessed the type of trouble he spoke of last night when those creatures appeared in the night sky."

Shana shuddered at the thought of the enormous winged creatures that had chased them into the tiny haven they now occupied. Thoughts of the beasts from the forest on the other side of Hyden Shelf surfaced. "I've been thinking about those beasts that attacked us on the other side of Hyden Shelf. Do you suppose they could also have been a species of the unnatural creatures the Chosen warned we might encounter? If they are, apparently Zachara wasn't aware that they had migrated so far southward."

Ryder shook his head. "Anything's possible. After everything we learned at the Elder's meeting, I don't know what we might expect next, but I do know we have to get across this river as fast as possible. We will need to find more adequate shelter before nightfall."

Shana sighed. "I agree we shouldn't wait. Let's get the rope and get this over with."

* * * *

Strong river currents buffeted them as they tried to cross the Kelt River, pushing them farther and farther down the bank until Ryder was able to grab hold of a protruding root that grew through the high banked river wall.

He struggled against the currents to hold Shana as close to his side as the sword across his back and their packs would allow. Fortunately, he found several hand holds in the muddy terrain and was able to climb high enough to escape the water.

Ryder tugged on the rope attaching Shana to his body and pulled her up slowly. She coughed and choked the entire way until they managed to reach solid ground.

"Are you all right?" he asked as he watched Shana shake her head and crawl slowly away from the riverbank.

"I just need a moment to catch my breath." She turned to survey the area. "Is it

my imagination, or are those hills growing taller?"

Ryder laughed. "When Zachara said we would cross higher terrain as we progressed, I assumed he meant rolling hills, not boulders." He glanced side to side to study the terrain, hoping to find an easier way to make their way north.

He watched Shana struggled to her feet. He then looked up to judge the distance the sun had traveled during their struggles across the Kelt River. "Perhaps, we should take time to eat now, before going farther. We may not find another spot before nightfall as we travel north."

Shana reached down to squeeze the water from her woolen trousers. "I can imagine the state my clothing will be in once it is dry. Wool doesn't really take to water well," she said. "Thankfully, we have other clothes in the packs."

"I don't think we should take time to change now. As soon as we've eaten, we need to be on our way. I don't want to take a chance of encountering any more strange creatures out in the open," Ryder said as he glanced overhead to study the sky.

"I see no reason why we can't eat and walk at the same time," she said with a smile as she untied the rope that tethered her to Ryder.

* * * *

The terrain rose higher and higher as they walked across fields of cracked mud that crunched beneath their boots and sent small clouds of dust up in their wake. The shadows created by the large boulders that protruded through the dry earth made their trek harder, especially as the sun began to set.

"How far do you think we've traveled since leaving the Kelt River?" Shana asked.

Ryder shook his head. "No more than five or six leagues. From the position of the sun, I would say we only have two or three hours of light left before shelter will be desperately needed."

Enormous boulders now blocked their path spanning outward to cover at least a league. Shana looked from side to side. "Do we go through or around?"

"It would probably be safer to travel around, but we don't know what we might encounter on the other side. I do know we have to make a decision quickly, before our daylight is gone," Ryder speculated.

Shana glanced up to the top of the nearest boulder. "Suppose we climb up through the spaces between the boulders and try to see what lies on the other side? Maybe, if we're fortunate, we might find a place to hide within the rocks."

"You stay here. I'll climb," Ryder said as he dropped his packs to the dry ground. He kept Chosa'den strapped to his back.

Shana watched as Ryder slipped and slid along the outer edge of the boulder, trying to grasp a foothold to push himself higher. When he finally reached the peak, he shook his head.

"There are dozens more boulders beyond this one, Shana. They are spaced too close together to navigate between them. We'll have to go around."

He slid back down the face of rock and bent to grab the packs from the ground. He looked at Shana then studied the sky. "We'll have to pick up our pace. If we expect to find adequate shelter before the sky grows too dark, we'll have to do it quickly."

Shana glanced upward and noted the sun had almost finished its trip across the sky. She judged less than an hour before it would disappear beyond the horizon.

"Which way?" she asked.

Ryder indicated left.

Shana took his hand and fought to maintain the pace he set as he lengthened his strides to the point she almost had to run to remain at his side. She was thankful for the stockings that now cushioned her feet and prevented blisters. She was also pleased that the woolen trousers had not turned stiff as they dried and suspected the fabric had been woven by Chosen magic.

She silently trudged along at Ryder's side, past the enormous boulders that blocked any indication of what might lay beyond. She studied Ryder and noted he continuously shifted his head left and right, as if he searched for more night creatures as the terrain grew darker.

"I don't like this," he whispered. "It's too quiet. By this time last eve we had creatures threatening us." He looked up. The moon was well over the horizon.

"Maybe we've crossed beyond their area?" Shana speculated.

"Do you really believe that? Those were winged creatures. The sky has no boundary."

Shana shook her head. "What I believe is that we must find somewhere to hide fast, before those creatures or others decide we might make a good meal."

"Keep as close to the boulders as you can as we travel the last few spans. If necessary, we'll take refuge within the boulders," Ryder said. "But as long as we have this slight reprieve, I want to cover as much ground as possible."

Shana and Ryder reached the end of the boulders seconds before the moon rode full overhead.

"Keep moving, Shana. If we stay within the shadows created by the moon against these boulders, we may be able to get to the other side before we're detected."

After another hour's walk feeling their way around the end boulders in darkness, they came upon an area where the land simply dropped away to nothing. By this time the moon was full overhead and gave them a spectacular view of a deep valley below the edge of the cliff they stood upon. Though the moonlight cast almost everything in shadow, there were actually trees and what appeared to be a fresh water stream running through an area that disappeared around a sharp bend in the cliff.

"Now what? How do we get past this?" Shana asked.

"We're not going past. We're going through," Ryder whispered.

"How will we get down there?"

Ryder glanced left and right as he surveyed each edge of the cliff he could see in the darkness. Though the cliff walls beneath him were steep, it wasn't a straight fall and he believed there would be a sufficient angle upon which they could descend. He looked up to study the sky again. The moon had shifted in its orbit enough that he could make out the cliff wall directly beneath him.

He then scanned the opposite cliff that faced him from the northern wall. He judged the valley to be no wider than a half league.

"We don't have enough rope to scale down that wall," Shana said. "Even if we did, we'd still have to climb back up the other side."

Ryder glanced overhead. It still bothered him that the creatures they had faced last eve were not evident in the sky. He expected to see one of the creatures fly across the moon at any second, and he didn't plan to be out here in the open when it did.

"Maybe we should follow the cliff line a while longer before we attempt to

descend. We might find a lower edge."

* * * *

Shana followed as Ryder walked carefully along the edge of the cliff. She paid careful attention to where she placed her foot with each step. One misstep would send her down the side of the cliff wall into the valley beyond. Ryder paused and she almost plunged into his back.

"What's wrong?"

He stepped back several paces and looked down. "I believe there's some sort of an animal trail here. It appears to lead down into the valley. I can't really see all of it in the darkness, but it might be wide enough to support our weight."

She tried to glance over the cliff to find the trail he spoke of, but it was too dark from her position. "I don't see that we have another choice. We can't go around this valley. We must go through it."

Ryder adjusted the packs on his back. "We'll use the rope again." He reached into one of the packs and withdrew the length of rope approximately four arm spans in length. "Tie this tight around your waist."

Shana pulled the knot snug and made sure it would hold before she gave the other end to Ryder. She watched as he looped the rope around his waist and secured the knot.

"We are going to do this slowly, Shana. One step and stop. All the way down the trail."

Shana nodded then watched as he dropped to his stomach against the side of the cliff and reached his left leg downward. When he'd found solid ground, he eased his other leg over and raised his hand to her.

"Carefully, Shana," he said as she eased onto her stomach and inched closer to the edge. "Hold right there a moment." He reached into the sheath at his waist and pulled out his knife.

"What's the knife for?" she asked.

"I can use the blade to secure my hold as we travel slowly downward."

Shana didn't question him farther as she wiggled her bottom over the side of the cliff and, trusting Ryder to keep her safe, she dropped until her feet touched the protruding path downward.

"Remember, Shana. One step and stop. We have to be sure of our footing if there's a break in the pathway."

"What happens if it becomes too dark to go any farther?"

"Let's hope that doesn't happen. But, if it does, we'll continue on as planned. Only our steps will narrow until we are sliding our feet only inches at the time until we reach the bottom."

"Are you ready?"

"Do I have another choice?"

"No."

"Then, I'm as ready as I'm likely to get."

"Remember. One step and stop."

Shana eased her right foot sideways and stopped. She waited while Ryder took a step. She slid her left foot over to meet her right and stopped. Ryder followed.

This went on for about fifty steps until Shana's right foot met empty air. She struggled to right her balance on her left foot and had to grab a protrusion in the cliff wall

to prevent a dangerous fall as her right foot hung suspended in mid air.

"There's nothing beneath my right foot," she said, desperately clinging to the side of the cliff wall.

"I'm holding the rope tight. Just don't make any sudden moves. Try to ease your toe over just a little bit more, Shana. See if there is a surface close to your foot on the other side.

Shana carefully eased her right foot over to search for something solid on the other side. "There's nothing here."

"Give me your right hand," Ryder said.

Shana reluctantly gave up her hold on the cliff wall. She placed her hand into Ryder's.

"Now, ease your foot over just a little more, but be careful."

Shana shut her eyes and lifted her right foot again. This time she spread her legs a little further and felt dirt beneath her feet. "There's another bit of path about with width of my foot away. But, I'm not sure there's anything on the other side."

"Hold fast. Don't do anything until I move," Ryder said. "I'm going to ease closer until my right foot is against your left. Once I've taken that position, I'll steady you as you release your left foot and try position it against your right."

"I'm afraid. I don't want to fall."

"You can do this, Shana. I have faith."

Shana sucked in a long breath and closed her eyes. She tried twice to lift her right foot, but her brain wouldn't allow her to give up the solid ground beneath her foot. She blocked out any chance of failure and slowly lifted her left foot. It dangled in midair for several seconds while she wiggled her right foot over then she placed her left foot on a solid surface.

She breathed a huge sigh of relief. "Done."

"Since my arm span is longer than yours, I want you to take another step with your right foot and then move your left. Slowly."

Shana complied.

Ryder pulled his blade from the cliff side and plunged it back in about two feet from its original position. He lifted his right leg and crossed the opening until his boot met a solid surface. After waiting for several seconds, he lifted his left leg and crossed.

Over and over they completed this same ritual, easing ever downward to the valley below.

Shana risked a glance overhead to find the full moon had disappeared beyond the banks of the cliff wall on the other side of the valley.

Another step. Two more. Downward. Slowly. Until something blocked her path.

"Ryder, something's blocking our path."

"Can you tell what it might be?"

Shana reached out and tried to touch whatever halted her progress. "I'm not close enough."

Ryder inched along the cliff wall until he stood by her side. "Try again. This time ease closer."

She used Ryder's hand to steady her balance as she reached. "It's a tree."

"Is our path completely blocked?" Ryder asked.

"I can't tell, but I think it's leaning against the side of the cliff wall."

"I believe it's time you used some of your newfound gifts, Shana."

"My gifts?"

"Fire, Shana. We need light to determine how to get beyond this tree."

Shana groaned. Her weakest element was the one they most needed. She closed her eyes and imagined a candle in her hand. She blew out her breath to fan the flame. Higher. Higher still. She opened her eyes to see her fingertips sparkled with bright orange light.

"I don't know how long I can hold this, Ryder. Do what you have to do quickly."

"Move your hand near the tree."

Shana eased her fingers closer to the leafy branches she could feel beside her.

"Will this help?"

Ryder shook his head. It was apparent the tree had fallen against the cliff wall. The branches were too thick to maneuver through.

"We may be doomed, Shana."

"Why?"

"The tree is leaning against the cliff. I have no idea how far the branches and leaves may span."

"What if we tried to climb down the tree trunk?"

"We'd have to take the chance that the branches against the cliff wall are sturdy enough to hold our weight."

"Do we have another choice?" Shana asked.

"I guess I could awaken Chosa'den, but that might cause us any number of problems, especially if there are any unnatural creatures near."

"No, not Chosa'den. We can't take the chance. We've got to try, Ryder. We can't get around the tree, we must go down it."

Ryder sighed. "I'll go first."

"No. Me. I'm lighter. If it has to fall--"

"Don't even say it," Ryder warned.

"I'm closer. I'll still be tethered to you. If anything happens, you can pull me back up."

"I don't like this," Ryder said.

"We don't have another choice." Shana stood still as Ryder eased closer to her side. She waited while he tested the rope knot around her waist then released her grasp on the cliff wall and reached for one of the branches closest to her. She slowly slid her hand through the dying leaves and found a branch about the size of her wrist.

"Wait until I've descended several feet before you try it, please," she whispered. "I need to make sure there are enough large limbs to hold your weight."

The branch she grasped groaned beneath her as she eased into the limbs. She heard the branch snap seconds after she'd placed her foot on a larger, sturdier limb.

"Shana, are you all right?"

"Fine. Just be careful where you step. Some of these branches are not very sturdy. As soon as I reach the trunk, you come."

Shana untangled the length of rope that had caught in one of the branches and eased downward. Each step offered a larger branch upon which to balance.

"Come slowly, Ryder."

She heard the trunk crunch beneath Ryder's weight as he stepped off of the cliff wall and found his footing on a branch. She held her position against the branch she occupied until Ryder was upon her.

"We do this slowly, Shana. Don't try anything foolish that will get you hurt."

Shana smiled. Ryder had no idea she'd been climbing trees in the forest of Verdun for years. She pushed past the branch that offered her current perch and wrapped her legs around the trunk. She allowed her body to slide slowly down the surface of the trunk until her bottom hit the next branch.

She waited for Ryder to catch up.

When he was one branch over head, she slipped over the branch she currently sat upon and eased down to the next one below.

And then the next and the next until her feet finally touched solid soil.

CHAPTER 18

Ryder left the protection of the fallen tree and walked several paces until he was in an open area. He looked overhead to see splotches of moonlight still lit the treetops just before the northernmost ridge.

He glanced back to find Shana had taken a seat beneath the fallen tree. "I want you to stay there under the tree until I return. I'm going to explore our surroundings and try to find some place that will shelter us as we gain a few hours of sleep." He looked up to the last light of the moon as it slipped behind the northern valley wall.

"Be careful. You don't know what you might find out there," Shana said.

"I'll be careful."

Ryder walked several spans to his right then entered a grove of trees. He stopped to listen for any sound that might indicate something or somebody near. Hearing nothing, he turned and walked farther across the open grassland. After several more minutes, he heard the sound of running water and guessed he neared the small body of water that ran the length of the valley he'd observed from atop the southern cliff.

He cautiously stepped closer and paused when his feet were at the edge of a shallow stream. He reached down and captured a handful of the water and brought it to his nose. Thankfully, the water was pure and clean.

Dismissing the water for the moment, he continued his exploration of the darkened terrain. He stumbled over what appeared to be another fallen tree and stopped to investigate.

Upon closer inspection, he found that a tree had wedged against a large boulder. He pushed several branches aside to discover an opening about four spans wide between the tree trunk and the boulder. After checking to make sure no creatures inhabited the open area, he turned and made his way back to Shana.

"I believe I found us a place to spend the remainder of the night. Come with me," he said.

Shana struggled to her feet and stumbled to his side. "I don't know when I've ever been this exhausted. I look forward to somewhere that I can lay down for a short rest."

Ryder grasped her hand and led her to the fallen tree.

"It's as cozy as we are likely to find in the darkness," Ryder said as he pushed back a branch to allow her to enter.

"I don't care, as long as it's shelter. I'm really too tired to complain," she said.

Ryder opened his large pack and withdrew the fur tent. He spread the tent across the packed earth. "Since we don't need the tent for shelter, we can use it to cushion our bodies against the ground." He returned to the pack to produce the blue glowstone.

Shana smiled. "Thank you."

"Are you hungry?"

"Not really," she said as she lay back against the tent.

Ryder slipped in next to her. He listened to the soft sound of her breathing and

stared at the features of her beautiful face in the faint blue light, her high cheekbones, the pert nose turned up slightly, and her parted lips.

He leaned forward, unable to resist the temptation as he placed his hand gently beneath her chin and turned her head into a more accessible position as he kissed her sweet mouth.

She welcomed his kiss as her tongue met his and demanded more. She groaned when he broke the kiss and moved far enough away to lift her as he pulled her tunic over her head and dropped it on the fur tent. He pushed her gently backwards until he could remove her boots, stockings, and trousers. He wanted nothing to separate his flesh from hers.

Once he'd removed all of her clothing, he shifted until he could shed his own.

He then stared, mesmerized by the beautiful woman before him. He reached out to run his fingers through her golden hair and spread the heavy locks over her shoulders. He traced the contours of her face before he dropped his hand to caress her soft breast, and then lower to touch her navel. He slipped his hand lower still until he could embed his finger into the soft down that shielded her warmth.

He pushed her thighs apart and touched her opening. He inserted one finger to rub her bud, and watched in amazement as she spread her legs wider. She pushed hard against his hand, and lifted her bottom off the tent as she arched against him.

Ryder accommodated her silent demand by inserting another finger and leaning over to suckle her delicious pink nipples that stood erect and begged for his attention.

He added a third finger and Shana groaned as he stretched her, using his thumb as he plied his attention to her sensitive bud. The pad of his thumb continuously stroked her as she bucked and wiggled against him.

Her tight lower muscles began to contract. He experienced the rush of hot moisture that drenched his fingers as her internal muscles squeezed him tighter and tighter.

His erection grew harder, longer, with each tight spasm of her body. He shifted his lips from the tip of first one breast to the other and then drew away to place a series of soft kisses down her torso until he could bury his face into her hot sheath. He pressed his fingers in tighter and continued to manipulate her until every muscle in her tight opening clasped around his hand as she climaxed.

He leaned close enough to whisper in her ear, "Tell me what you want, Shana?"

She opened her eyes. "You." She pushed him over on his back and straddled his waist.

She surprised him by easing her hand between their bodies and grasping his erection. When she tried to maneuver him into her heat, he helped her along as he eased first the thick head, then slowly, the rest of his length deep into her.

She rocked against him, begging for all he would give. He was happy to oblige. He raised his thighs, pushed deeper into her body, each time harder, faster, until she rode him like a prized stallion.

Shana clutched at his shoulders, tossed her head from side to side, swinging her hair over his face, across his shoulders, over her breasts.

He captured one hard nipple between his teeth then swiped his wet tongue over her flesh. He gave her other breast the same attention, followed by the same wet slide of his tongue before he captured her mouth in a searing kiss that left him craving more until

he could feel his sac draw up into his body with the need to ejaculate.

But he had no plan to allow this seduction to end. He pushed into her harder as he grasped her buttocks and maneuvered her body up and down his rigid length.

She tangled her fingers into his hair, kissed every inch of his face, traced her fingertips along his chest to rub his nipples, and continued to ride him.

The tremors Ryder could feel building in Shana's body fueled his own release. He pumped every ounce of fluid his body released into her waiting opening before he lifted her off of his erection and spread her slowly across the tent. He buried his hands into her hair and held the side of her face as he kissed her sweet mouth.

* * * *

Shana watched Ryder sleep. She then closed her eyes against the faint light of the glowstone reflected from the sides of the fur tent they had erected. She dropped her forehead into her hands and tried to understand the strange premonition she'd experienced only a few minutes before.

Horrible images had filled her mind. Something terrible was about to happen. She didn't know what, but her premonitions had never failed her.

In dire need to turn away from her current thoughts, Shana closed her eyes and thought of her haven in the forest of Verdun, the cool brook that had soothed away many hours as she sat in a trance, inhaling the scents of wildflowers, listening to the night creatures wake to face the darkness.

As much as she needed the soothing balm, her mind refused to cooperate. The horrible images played continuously through her head, warning of great danger, of heartache and pain.

"Shana?"

She opened her eyes to find Ryder sitting beside her, a strange look on his handsome face.

"What's wrong?"

Shana chewed the flesh on her bottom lip, wondering how much she should tell him. She drew a deep breath then said, "I've had a horrible premonition, Ryder. One that frightens me very much."

"Is this something that might happen, or could it possibly be a dream?"

Shana shook her head. "It wasn't a dream. But, my premonitions have never failed me before. I can only hope this foretells of a distant event instead of anything that might happen during our trek to Soras."

"Is it anything specific?"

"Nothing specific. Mostly the images are vague."

"I know not to ignore premonitions, Shana. Our own Prophet Jordan had numerous premonitions that were always very close to certain events that would eventually happen. I don't take anyone's premonitions lightly."

Shana nodded.

"Do you feel that this is something that will happen to us immediately?"

Shana sighed and touched his arm. "I don't even know if this is something that concerns us, Ryder. I only know that I can't push this out of my mind. I only pray it doesn't mean we will suffer any more hardships before we reach Soras."

"Try to sleep, Shana. By tomorrow you may understand what may happen."

Shana leaned back against the tent floor closed her eyes. She tried once again to

visit her special haven in Verdun, but her mind refused to cooperate.

Determined to get at least a few hours of rest, she willed her mind to wander until she drifted off into a troubled slumber.

* * * *

Ryder eased out of the tent, determined to allow Shana to sleep for a while longer as he explored the valley floor in the sunlight. He pulled Chosa'den from the scabbard and held it before him as he walked across the mossy ground toward the flowing water he could hear before him.

He glanced side to side at the strange trees that grew in patches that appeared to have been planted into small groves. He then searched the valley floor closer and wondered why no creatures of any kind inhabited this fertile place.

He stared into the blue sky and noted no clouds floated above his head.

Ryder came upon the narrow stream that flowed through the valley floor. He turned to wonder what lay beyond the bend he could see in the cliff wall to his left. He then stepped through the shallow water in the stream to explore the other side of the valley closest to the northern cliff wall.

After several hours' search, he came upon what appeared to be an abandoned animal trail several spans wide that wound up the cliff face to the edge of the cliff high above. Sure he'd found a easier path to escape the valley, he turned back to awaken Shana so they could break their fast and be on their way before the sun rose too high overhead.

Shana woke to find she was alone inside their temporary shelter. She pushed up from the fur beneath her and looked around. Ryder was nowhere to be found. She fumbled for her clothing and dressed quickly. She pulled on her boots as Ryder pushed back a large branch and entered their hideaway.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"I've been up for a few hours. Since you were still sleeping, I decided to explore some of the valley. I believe I might have found an easier way to exit this valley. There appears to be some sort of an animal trail that climbs up the other side of the valley wall. It doesn't look like it's been used for a while, but it should accommodate us as we climb to the top of the ridge."

Shana dug into her pack and produced some of the sweet-meat the Chosen had provided. She chewed on the meats and drank water from the flask Ryder offered as he ate his own meal.

"In light of the premonition you experienced last eve, I don't believe we should tarry here too long. I would like to make it to the top of the ridge before the sun climbs too far overhead. I want to be able to see as far as we can before we begin our trek northward."

Shana nodded. She rolled up the fur tent as Ryder placed their provisions back into the pack. She watched as he stowed the glowstone carefully then followed with the rolled tent. He positioned their packs over his shoulder closer to the scabbard that held Chosa'den.

They stopped near the small stream to refill their flasks, and used the fresh water to wash their faces before they began their trek across the northern valley toward the trail Ryder had found.

After several hours of climbing, they finally reached the top of the valley wall.

* * * *

The sun was at its zenith when they topped the first hill and looked down into to the lush grasslands below.

She gazed overhead to the light blue sky and the sleek white clouds, then to the fertile grasslands beneath her feet. "Don't you think it odd that we didn't find any evidence of insects or wildlife in the valley? I can't help but wonder why creatures wouldn't be abundant in such a fertile land. I also wonder why that valley was full of mossy grasslands and water when the land between the southernmost cliff and Havenshire was nothing but dry, parched earth."

"I wish I could answer your questions, Shana, but I just don't know."

Shana glanced overhead again and traced the path of the sun. "How much more sunlight do you think we'll have before we have to seek shelter?"

Ryder grasped her hand and pulled her up to the top of the hill. "About three hours. But, from the looks of things ahead of us, we have several more large hills to climb before nightfall."

Shana sighed and held tight to Ryder's hand as they worked their way down into the valley below. She continuously looked down to the abundant grasslands that covered the high hills, wondering why this land wasn't filled with the same yellow grasses that had destroyed the area between the Kelt River and Hyden Shelf.

She pushed her thoughts aside for the time being and trudged along behind Ryder as they began their ascent of the next hill.

Shana stumbled to a halt at the top of the hill. She grasped Ryder's hand in horror as she jerked him back from the edge. Hundreds of black clad men marched in perfect step across the deep grass that blanketed the floor of the small valley.

"What is that?" she asked, pointing to the valley floor as she sank to her stomach against the thick grass.

"Look's like some type of an army," Ryder responded as he eased down beside her.

"They don't look like any army I've ever seen. Watch them. There must be at least two hundred down there. What are they doing?"

Ryder rubbed his forehead. "I suggest they are patrolling the boundaries of where ever we are."

"I don't think they need to know we are here," she said.

She watched as the rows of black-clad men marched in perfect precision. "Look at the way they are marching," she whispered. "It's like they are moving as one." She watched as they turned precisely north at a sharp angle and climbed the hill beyond them.

Ryder leaned close to whisper, "Perhaps, we are closer than we thought to Zandicol's stronghold. If I remember correctly, Zachara said Zandicol used magical constructs with no will of their own to do his killing."

"What are we going to do?"

He glanced overhead to judge the position of the sun. "Follow them."

Shana stared into his blue eyes. "Follow them?"

"It's the quickest way to make our way to Soras Keep."

"What if they discover us?" Horrible memories of the beasts on the other side of Hyden Shelf surfaced. Those beasts numbered no more than twenty, but they were powerful enough to tear Shana and Ryder into shredded flesh. She could only imagine

what a force of men so strong would do if they knew she and Ryder were near.

"We'll stay back enough so they won't know we are near."

Shana didn't like the prospect of being so near those creatures, but she followed Ryder's advice and shadowed him as he walked slowly up the side of the next hill, and then the next.

Until Ryder pulled her back as she attempted to top the next hill. "Get down," he whispered in her ear.

Shana crawled forward slowly until she could stare at the destruction taking place in the valley about fifty spans below their position. Hundreds of the black-clad constructs were attacking a large group of people as they tried to make their way across the valley floor.

Blood covered the valley floor. The cries of battle and the stench of waste filled the air. One after another, the fleeing people fell beneath the swords of their attackers. Each swing of another sword brought the scene below them into sharper focus as body parts of the fallen people littered the valley.

The Black army struck indiscriminately, hacking down anything that moved. Men, women and innocent children. No one was spared their assault. Hundreds lay dead or dying across the valley floor. Women cried out for their mates, their children, but none were left alive as the Black army moved quickly and viciously through the hordes of people still trying to flee the certain death that was upon them.

"We've got to do something to stop this," Shana whispered, as she wiggled her way closer to the edge and attempted to crawl over. There had to be something she could do to stop this horrible destruction. She had to save these people. She couldn't just watch as innocent people were slaughtered.

"I have to help these people," she said as she attempted to scramble over the edge and reach the valley below.

"There's nothing we can do. We are in danger ourselves if those constructs realize we are here," Ryder said.

"There must be something," she whispered. "We can't just sit here knowing those people are being slaughtered." Chills spread rapidly over her flesh as her gifts emerged. The warmth in her chest, and the need to heal within her fingertips spread quickly throughout her body.

"How can we just hide here, knowing what's happening in the valley below and doing nothing to stop it? Listen to them, Ryder. Those awful screams. I can't take it."

Ryder pulled Shana into his arms. He held her close as he whispered, "The only way to stop this destruction is by defeating Zandicol, Shana. In order to do that, we need to make it safely to Soras. I suggest we find a safe shelter to use until morning," Ryder suggested.

* * * *

At first light, Ryder and Shana made their way carefully down into the valley below them. They walked carefully around the masses of bodies spread out across the valley floor.

The smell of human waste and the stench of exposed, rotting entrails belched awful fumes into the hot morning air. The buzz of millions of flies filled the air as they took advantage of the unbearable waste. The ground was covered with blood, human remains, and insects that gathered to feast.

Shana reached up to wipe tears from her eyes. "This is awful, Ryder. How could anyone be so cruel? There must be at least two hundred or more people that were slaughtered here last eve."

Shana raised her hand to cover her nose and mouth as she picked her way through the multitudes of bodies that lay one atop the other along the ground. Tears continued to pour from her eyes as she stepped over the slaughtered body of a boy child no more than four or five years old. Beside him, a woman, obviously very pregnant, cradled her bloody hand around her enlarged stomach in an effort to protect the child within her womb.

Tears traced her cheeks as she reached down to touch the woman's cold face and wipe a lock of hair from her forehead. She dropped to her knees and placed her palms against the woman's abdomen, hoping by some miracle she'd find the unborn child alive.

She shook her head, stood and turned away from the awful slaughter and forged her way past numerous beings that had died for nothing other than being game for a bunch of Zandicol's creatures.

She stumbled over the body of a large man sprawled out across the valley floor. She gagged when she realized there was a body, but no head.

The stench of death and bodily waste was nauseating, but Shana covered her mouth and forged on, hoping to find someone alive in this vast sea of mutilated bodies.

She closed her eyes against her memories of the premonition she had last eve. Why did her premonitions always ring true? She forced her eyes open and continued to explore the valley floor closer.

A sudden dizziness overtook her. It shook her greatly, because she had never had visions filled with such clarity. Shana raised her hands to her ears. Another premonition. This one more horrible than the previous one she'd experienced last eve.

Corpses of the men began to rise from the bloody ground. Their bodies distorted due to missing limbs and twisted trunks. The corpses began to move in mass, plowing over those of the women and children still lying upon the blood soaked valley floor.

Shana tried to force the awful images from her mind with no success. Still the corpses rose. Stumbling. Some crawling. Each making his way closer and closer to the northernmost hill and tried to climb.

She dropped to her knees and cradled her head in her hands.

"Shana?"

Shana shook her head and opened her eyes to glance first at Ryder standing beside her then over the multitudes of dead bodies that lay as they had before her dire premonition.

"What's wrong, Shana?" he asked as he placed his large hand upon her shoulder.

"Another premonition," she whispered. "Many times more frightening than the one from last eve."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

Shana shook her head. She needed to forget the horrible images that had passed through her mind, not keep them alive by expressing what she'd seen. "Not now, please," she said as she reached for his hand and allowed him to help her slowly to her feet.

"We need to get out of this valley immediately," Ryder said.

Shana met his intense gaze. "I can't leave until I am certain no one survived this

vicious attack.”

“Look around you,” Ryder said. “How could anyone have survived this massacre?”

She leaned against Ryder’s side as she raised her hands and pressed her fingertips against her temples. She reached deep for the training she’d received to use her foresight.

In her mind’s eye, someone twitched against the bloody ground. Barely alive. She mentally searched over the valley floor, but could find no evidence of life. She used her mind to make a broader sweep. Still nothing.

Suddenly her fingertips began to tingle as heat radiated through her chest, down her arms and settled in the palms of her hands.

She opened her eyes to stare into Ryder’s handsome face. “Someone out there is still alive and I have to save that person.”

Ryder touched her cheek. “Do you know where this person might be?”

“No. I only know I cannot leave this valley until I have found the person who needs my help.”

Ryder nodded as he stepped over several fallen bodies and walked at her side as she eased across the bloody remains of the unfortunate people who were littered across the valley floor.

“There is someone still alive amongst this bloody carnage,” she whispered as she touched one body and another as she searched for that tiny thread of life.

Shana turned about. “Not behind us,” she whispered. “Ahead.”

She followed Ryder carefully as he reached to touch each individual they passed, hoping for warmth instead of cold flesh.

After several moments, he gazed back at her and shook his head. “Nothing, Shana. Now what?”

“There are many more here,” she whispered and bent to touch the side of the woman’s face beside her. Again, shaking her head, she moved on.

From one bloodied body to the next, Shana refused to give up. She knew deep in her heart that someone out there needed her desperately.

Her chest still tingled and warmth flowed through her body to her fingertips. She felt a strange warmth grow as she eased closer and closer to the northern edge of the valley.

She stumbled over the arm of a tall man lying upon his stomach. When her hand met his flesh, she felt mild warmth.

She dropped to her knees beside the fallen man. “Ryder. Here. This man is still warm.”

Ryder hurried to her side. He turned the man over onto his back and discovered a gaping wound in the man’s abdomen.

Shana immediately placed her fingertips over his wound as Ryder searched for a pulse in the man’s neck.

“His pulse is weak, Shana. If there is anything you might do to help him, you better do it quickly,” Ryder said.

Shana placed both of her hands over the length of the man’s wound and closed her eyes. She used the new gifts the Chosen had awakened within her and mentally assessed the damage done to his body. She found torn tissue and separated muscle, but no broken bones.

She reached deep, feeling the healing power within her build until her body felt as if it were pure energy.

Shana pressed her hands harder into the man's wound and drew several deep breaths. Her fingers began to tingle in a way she'd never felt before. Her hands seemed hot, but her fingers did not burn. She allowed her essence to flow through her body and center upon the man's injury as she entered a deep trance.

Shana could feel the blood flow increase through the man's veins, his breathing growing steadier as each second passed. She continued to apply her healing touch, though she appeared to see herself from the perspective of an outsider. It was as if she watched someone else helping the man, rather than herself.

She felt a touch upon her shoulder and shook her head to break the trance. She looked up to see Ryder staring at the man's wound.

No outward trace of damaged flesh appeared.

Shana thought about her walk with Zachara in the gardens of Havenshire on the eve before she and Ryder began their northward trek. She remembered Zachara telling her of the special powers her body held, not purely Chosen powers, but powers mutated from an ancient Druid Sect that lived thousands of years before. He had explained that her difficulty in using the element of fire was derived from this mutated blood. Because fire in any application was destructive, her mutated gifts from the Druids denounced the ability to create fire at will. No matter what fire might be used for, it had power to destroy. A hearth fire was more than warmth on a cold night. It was an object of destruction that could kill as well as warm.

Shana pushed past the many other examples Zachara had given and considered the other mutated gifts she'd inherited from some ancient Druid Sect. Those powers were both a curse and a blessing. Famine could become feast. Drought could become floods. Good could become evil. Or evil good. The perspective of the wielder controlled the faiths. In the case of the Chosen, fire could produce good. Zandicol would use his power of fire to cause evil.

Shana felt the man stirring beneath her hands. She opened her eyes and watched as the man's eyelids fluttered.

"Cyr?"

She leaned closer to understand what he was trying to say. "I'm sorry; I didn't understand what you said."

The man opened one eye. "Cyr?"

"I still don't know what you are asking," Shana said.

The man opened his other eye slowly and turned his head to the side. He pointed toward a woman lying face down in the blood beneath her body.

"Cyr, my mate," the man said softly.

Shana nodded to Ryder who stood by her side. "This woman is apparently his mate. He believes she still lives."

Ryder reached down to touch the woman's neck. "She also has a weak pulse."

Shana scrambled to her feet as Ryder turned the woman over so she could search for an injury. She found a gash longer than Ryder's hand slit down her left thigh. She also discovered a large lump on her bruised forehead that was obviously the cause of the woman's unconsciousness.

"Help, Cyr," the man whispered. "Please, I will not survive without her."

Shana glanced once again around their surroundings. "We must get these two people away from this carnage, Ryder. The decay and the stench is enough to kill all of us."

Ryder helped the man to his feet and led him about four spans away to a clearing. He positioned the man on his back and returned to pick up the woman.

Once both were on solid ground, Shana poured water from her flash over the woman's wounded flesh so she could remove the dirt before she closely examined the wound.

"Cyr?"

Shana glanced at the man lying beside the tall woman. "She is still alive. She's lost a great deal of blood so I must work quickly."

The man nodded and closed his eyes.

Shana pressed both of her palms against the wound on the woman's leg. She again entered a healing trance as she worked to restore the woman's torn flesh. After several moments, she opened her eyes and looked weakly up to Ryder.

"She really has lost a lot of blood, but I believe she will survive," she whispered, and then placed her palms over the large bump on the woman's forehead.

Seconds later, Shana collapsed against Ryder's body.

CHAPTER 19

Soras

Zandicol sat straight up in his bed out of a sound sleep. His heart thundered within his chest and cold chills broke over his body. Intense pain wracked his entire body and almost caused him to retch.

He drew several deep breaths to ward off the pain and threw aside his covering as he edged closer to the side of the high bed. He dropped his feet to the floor and stood carefully, supporting his trembling body against the side of the bed until control of his limbs returned.

Zandicol reached for the flowing black robe draped across the foot of his bed and pulled it over his shoulders. He then walked slowly toward the open portal that led to a small balcony beyond his chamber.

He stared up into the dark night sky.

As each second passed, the pain receded until he could breathe freely.

He closed his eyes and projected his thoughts outward and searched for the powerful magic that had almost killed him in his sleep.

He had never encountered such power.

He inhaled deeply then projected his mind toward the Temple of Havenshire, hoping the incredible magic was a weakening in the high Temple walls.

Unfortunately, nothing had changed. The shield still repelled his touch.

Whatever this strange magic was, he must have it. With the power he'd felt, he would be unstoppable as he destroyed the horrible peasants that littered the continent of Menila. With such power, the world would be at his command.

Zandicol raised his fingertips to his temple and summoned the Captain of his Black Force. When the man arrived at his chamber door, Zandicol ordered his army southward to find who or what had created the powerful energy he had experienced and to bring that person or thing to him immediately.

Knowing his Captain had no other choice than to comply, Zandicol turned back into his chamber, removed his robe, and sank back against the thick mattress to resume his rest.

* * * *

"Cyr?"

Shana pulled away from the side of the hill where they had made a temporary camp. She eased to the man's side.

"Your mate is sleeping peacefully," she whispered.

The man tried to sit up.

Shana noted the lean muscles in the man's arms, the length of his deep brown hair, and the exhaustion obviously etched across his face.

She touched his arm. "Be careful, your wound has been healed, but you need to rest and recuperate to regain your strength."

The man's strange black eyes met her gaze. "I must change in order to fully

heal.”

“Change?”

The strange man eased up slowly until his spine rested against the side of the hill. Shana noted he was almost as tall as Ryder, but he didn't have Ryder's muscular build. She watched his dark eyes as the man squinted through the darkness to find his mate.

Shana edged closer. “My name is Shana. And, this is Ryder L'Syr. Will you tell me your name?”

The man studied her face carefully before he replied, “I am Lykos. My mate is Cyr. I am forever in your debt for saving our lives.”

Ryder edged closer to Shana's side. “What happened in the valley? Why were your people being slaughtered?”

Lykos closed his eyes and dropped his head against the side of the hill. “My people have always been persecuted by humans,” he said as he glanced once again at his sleeping mate.

“The usurpers on this continent forget this land mass has been the home of our kind for many centuries before humans invaded what they call Menila.”

Shana scooted closer. “Your kind? What did you mean when you said you had to change before you fully recovered?”

Lykos met her gaze then reached over to place his palm against her forearm. “You are one of great power, Shana. But it is a gift that should not be taken lightly. Too many in the distant past have had such power and used it to turn from good to evil.”

Ryder spoke up, “I don't think there is any chance that Shana will use her gifts for evil.”

Shana eased closer to Lykos' side. She reached over to touch his arm. “Won't you tell us why were your people being forced from their homes?”

The tall man sighed and said, “We were not being forced from our homes. We were in the process of attempting to find another place to raise our families. The land beyond this valley is covered with strife. Our water sources have been polluted, our grasslands have dried up.

“Zandicol's dark magic is destroying everything and everyone who stands in his way as he wages his war against the Chosen.

“We were unfortunate enough to stumble upon one of Zandicol's patrols as we attempted to cross the valley in hope of finding fertile land to begin a new village, far away from Zandicol and his constructs.”

Shana turned as Cyr moaned and tried to shift to her side. She placed her fingertips against the woman's broad forehead and felt cool flesh.

“Your mate will wake soon, Lykos. Would you please explain what you meant by the statement you had to change before you could fully heal?”

Lykos shook his head. “My kind as survived for many thousands of years because of our ability to adapt to our surroundings. We are not of the human race, though we live most of our lives in human form.” Lykos glanced toward his mate. “Cyr looked forward to this migration. We had hoped to begin our own family once we found a safe place to call our home.”

Shana placed her fingertips against his arm again. “If you are not human, please tell me what species you are.”

Lykos stared into her eyes. “You have touched my flesh, can you not detect that

we are of a different race?"

Shana nodded. "I feel something different yes, but I am not repelled by what I feel. Please, explain what you meant when you said you live most of your lives in human form."

"We are Shifters."

"What is a Shifter?"

He shook his head. "Humans do not believe in our kind. You will not believe what I tell you."

Shana smiled. "You know what I am, don't you? Do you believe I don't exist?" she asked as she studied the lean angles of his face, the full brown hair that swept his shoulders. His eyes were black beneath his thick lashes. She turned to his sleeping mate and noted she carried the same stark features, the same brown hair.

Lykos shook his head. "You are many things, Shana. The combination of the races mingled within you are astounding. I sense many different cultures and ancestors. All once powerful in their own right, and now that power has grown inside of you. You are Prophet, Druid, Chosen, and Healer. Your gifts are too numerous to understand."

Cyr stirred and sat up slowly. Shana watched as the woman surveyed their campsite. "Lykos?"

Lykos leaned closer to kiss the side of his mate's cheek. "We are alive because of these people, Cyr. We owe a great debt of gratitude."

Cyr nodded.

Shana eased closer to the woman and said, "How do you feel? Are you hungry? We have sweet meat to share."

She noted the woman looked first to Lykos and then back to meet her gaze. Shana felt the strange stirring inside of her chest she experienced in the chamber of Elders at Havenshire.

"You speak mind to mind?"

Cyr and Lykos looked at her strangely.

"You know we speak with inner voice?" Lykos asked.

Shana stared into his dark eyes as she sent her thoughts to his mind.

(I know you speak privately, but I can't hear your words.)

Lykos laughed. "You are as I said and much more, Shana. Now that Cyr has awakened, we must leave you. In order to complete the healing you have done, we must change."

"What is this change you speak of? And, if you leave, where will you go? Are there other's like you close by?"

Cyr said, "There are no more like us now, Shana. Lykos and I are the last survivors of our kind." Tears slipped from her eyes. Lykos reached over to wipe her tears away.

Shana closed her eyes and reached deep to extract the information she had been given in Havenshire about other creatures that inhabit the continent. She remembered Dieter and Setter telling her of the many races that once shared the continent of Menila.

When she opened her eyes, she stared directly into Lykos' face. "When you mention change, you actually mean that you will transform your body into another species. Can you actually change your physical appearance? Will this change enhance the healing I used to strengthen your bodies?"

Lykos nodded.

"Then you must do so immediately. We have no way to determine if Zandicol's constructs are searching for us as we speak."

"Why do you accept us so freely, Shana? Most humans would run screaming away if they discovered they were in the company of Shifters," Cyr said.

"If I could only explain the amount of knowledge that has been forced into my head over the last few months, you would be amazed. I no longer take anything for granted. I seem to accept any new knowledge as I accept food to replenish my body."

Lykos shook his head.

"If you and Cyr are the last of your kind, why would you risk your lives to cross Menila alone? Ryder and I have spent many months traveling across this forsaken land. We have witnessed the destruction of Menila, and the hardships one must face to transverse such devastation.

"We are on a quest to see this destruction stopped. Our objective is Soras Keep and Zandicol. I would ask that you consider joining us in our quest so that one day we might all live in peace."

Lykos looked again at Cyr.

Shana realized they were once again speaking mind to mind and turned away to watch as Ryder placed another patch of dried grass upon their fire. When he met her gaze, he nodded his agreement that these two special people, these warriors, should accompany them on the last leg of their journey.

Lykos turned and touched Shana's arm. "Our presence would only draw attention to your quest," he said.

"Nonsense, do you actually believe Zandicol doesn't have a suspicion that something or someone comes to challenge him? Having you and Cyr with us will double our ability to protect each other." She glanced at Ryder then back to Lykos. "Ryder and I welcome your company."

"But you do not completely understand our nature," Cyr added.

"I know enough to realize when you change, your body transforms into another form. I accept this as long as the form you choose doesn't attempt to eat us," Shana said with a laugh.

"I, too, welcome your company," Ryder said.

Shana watched Lykos meet Cyr's gaze. She saw Cyr's subtle nod of agreement.

"We will accompany you as long as our presence causes you no additional trouble," Lykos said. "But, now you must excuse us. To fully regain our strength, we must change our appearance. You should understand that the process of changing also works as healing for our kind."

Lykos stood slowly and helped Cyr from the ground. He looked over his shoulder as he led his mate away from their campsite and disappeared into the night.

CHAPTER 20

Ryder reached to the hilt of Chosa'den when two enormous brown creatures entered the clearing. He slipped the sword swiftly from the sheath and held it before him.

Shana reached over and placed her hand upon his forearm. "I believe our new friends have arrived, Ryder. I don't think the sword is necessary."

She watched as the two enormous creatures, resembling the werebeast they had found on the other side of Hyden Shelf, walked slowly into their camp. She glanced toward Ryder and noted the beasts appeared to be as tall as Ryder when he was seated. She also noted that the larger of the two looked directly into Ryder's eyes, almost as if in challenge.

"Lykos?" she whispered.

The large beast turned its head in her direction.

Shana reached forward to stroke the thick brown fur on the creature before her. She witnessed the nod of his head then as he turned to the other beast behind him.

"Cyr?"

The smaller beast made its way cautiously into camp.

Shana glanced toward Ryder as he placed his sword back into the sheath against his back. She watched him nod his acceptance of the two that stood before him.

She rose to her feet and walked closer. Shana traced her fingertips along the heavy fur at Lykos' neck, and then reached over to stroke the soft fur along Cyr's jawl.

"What magnificent creatures," she whispered. "I wish I knew if they can understand me in their present forms." Fear of the creatures vanished as she rubbed her hands slowly over Cyr's previously injured thigh and found no trace of a wound. She eased closer to Lykos and ran her hand beneath him to follow the path of his ribs to the place she assumed his wound had been.

Shana reached up to scratch behind his ear when she found nothing but solid, healed flesh.

"They must be hungry, but I have no way to convey to them that we have prepared food in our packs," Shana whispered to Ryder.

Suddenly, both Lykos and Cyr backed away until they stood in an open area. Shana watched in awe as bright light filled the area where they stood only seconds before. She squinted to see through the light, but found nothing.

When she tried to rise to her feet, Ryder's hand upon her shoulder held her back. "I don't believe they wish us to see them return to human form, Shana."

"This is magnificent, Ryder. I've never thought of species that might change form. Before seeing some of these barren plains, you could never have convinced me that such strange things might happen. As it is, I'm still in awe of the wonders and dangers we've faced over the past months."

Ryder grasped Shana about the waist and pulled her to his side. He looked down into her trusting eyes and smiled. "I am of a place where magic of any kind is only performed by our own hard work, and by heeding the teachings of our Prophet. How do

you think I feel when I see things I never dreamed possible?"

Shana kissed his cheek. "We are both learning that things aren't always as they seem."

Moments later, Lykos and Cyr entered the clearing in human form. Lykos bowed his head and said, "We believed it would be best if we allowed you to see us in our natural form. Doing so now might prevent any accidents in the future."

Shana looked up into his dark eyes. "Can you change into other species?"

Cyr met Shana's gaze. "We are adaptable in our forms. We use whatever creature necessary when danger strikes."

"If you could change your appearance, why didn't you do so and attack those horrible creatures pursuing you?" Shana asked.

Lykos took a seat before the fire. "Many among us were unable to change. The old, the women carrying offspring, and the little ones under the age of fourteen summers. Our ability to alter our forms at will comes with a Right of Passing that is performed by our High Priests. Unfortunately, our High Priests were the first ones murdered by Zandicol's needless slaughter."

"This is fascinating, Lykos. Forgive me if I ask foolish questions, but I am trying to understand how you perform this surprising task," Shana said as she glanced from Lykos to Cyr.

Cyr spoke up, "We do not think you foolish, Shana. We are pleased to find humans that will accept us as we are and allow us to live out our lives as we were meant to be. For too long, we have hidden in the shadows and hunted only by moonlight in fear of just the sort of thing that happened to our people by Zandicol's hand."

"Are there more of you on Menila?"

Cyr shook her head. "Sadly, we do not know. If it was so easy for the Black Forces to destroy everyone in our migration, it could be that Lykos and I are the only ones left of our pack."

"You said you've lived on the continent of Menila for many hundreds of years." Ryder waited when Lykos nodded. "Then, how is it the people of Menila do not know of your existence?"

"We are careful only to present ourselves in human form when danger strikes. And yes, we have lived on Menila for as long as any of the Alphas could remember. Some told us that our race has existed since the Great Druid Sect roamed our world. If this is true, our power of transformation is as rare as Shana's numerous gifts that were handed down from her Druid ancestors."

"Please, I'm forgetting my manners. Won't you please now take food to replenish your strength?" Shana asked.

Lykos looked at Cyr then met Shana's inquiring gaze. "We have already taken our meal."

The alarmed look in Shana's eyes caused Lykos to laugh. "I see you suspect us of feeding off of our dead, Shana. I assure you, we do not prey on our own kind. Cyr and I were fortunate to locate a small deer as we roamed the valley and were provided with a sufficient meal to last several days."

"I never thought--"

"You did for a moment, Shana," Cyr countered.

"I admit the idea crossed my mind momentarily, but I assure you it did cross and

not linger.”

Cyr smiled and reached to grasp Lykos hand. “I believe we all should get rest before we start toward Soras Keep.”

Shana nodded then eased from Ryder’s side. “If I’ve forgotten to say it before, I wish to say now that I am deeply sorry for the lost of your people.”

“Our people are in peace now, Shana. All of the centuries of war and strife are behind them. Even those who died young will be rewarded in their afterlife,” Lykos said as he led Cyr away from their campsite.

* * * *

Shana woke to find Ryder and Lykos in deep conversation. She shifted against the fur of the tent beneath her and watched as Lykos gestured with his hands and Ryder nodded his head to whatever Lykos was trying to convey. She glanced around the campsite for Cyr, but found her oddly missing.

Shana sat up and stretched her arms over her head. She smiled when Ryder turned his head and nodded. Climbing slowly to her feet, she made her way across their small clearing and noted that a thick broth bubbled over a spit fashioned from several tree branches. She leaned close enough to sniff the broth.

“Cyr used some of the sweet-meat and staples the Chosen packed for us to make a stew broth. Lykos has captured several rabbits and Cyr has left the campsite to prepare them. Once we have filled our stomachs, Lykos and I both believe it best that we leave this area immediately,” Ryder supplied.

Shana nodded and walked to his side. She took a seat on the ground beside him. “What is absorbing you two in conversation?”

“We were discussing the best route we should take to cross the lands between here and the outskirts of Soras Keep. Lykos has explained that he and Cyr saw a large group of Black Forces when they scavenged for their meal last eve,” Ryder said.

“Those troops were heading through the valley between our current position and the boundaries of Soras,” Lykos added.

“If they are between us and Soras, how will we avoid making contact with them while we head north?” Shana asked.

“Cyr and Lykos have agreed to scout ahead, Shana,” Ryder said.

“Isn’t that dangerous for you? I don’t want you to place your lives in needless danger.”

Lykos shook his head. “We are in danger from them only in our human form, Shana. Cyr and I can transform into several different species. I suggested to Ryder that for this occasion we attain the form of birds and fly ahead of you as you make your way northward.”

“Birds? You can actually change into a bird?”

“Not small birds as you are used to seeing, Shana. We can take the form of a large Eagle or of a Gryphon if necessary.”

“Gryphons? I thought they were mythical creatures, not actual beings.”

Lykos smiled. “You are in a land of mythical creatures, Shana. Just because they are believed not to actually exist does not mean that they do not live among us. People will always denounce what they believe is not possible.” He paused.

“Consider yourself, if you would. Other than the Chosen, can you count on your hand the number of persons who inhabit our world that are actually capable of

performing real magic? Can you actually say that with the gifts you hold inside you do not believe anything might be possible?"

"I've never even considered the other species that might inhabit our lands," she confessed. "I suppose I should be counted among those of the mythical creatures who are not supposed to live," she said with a laugh.

"Consider yourself very lucky, Shana Kerr," Cyr said as she walked into their camp. "Too few of the special species that inhabit our tiny world use whatever gifts they have for good. To be able to survive, most will use any horror necessary to extend their lives. Most also do not care whom they exploit to strengthen their powers."

Shana watched as Cyr sat beside her and folded her legs beneath her body. She noted the torn strip in the animal fur leggings Cyr wore, and was thankful nothing of a wound showed between the gaps.

"I can see I still have much to learn before I attempt to take my rightful place in Menila," Shana whispered. "I am thankful that I have friends to help me with my task, and to explain the numerous things I obviously must learn before I can lead the people of Menila."

"Answer one question for me, if you would, Shana," Cyr said.

Shana nodded.

"Are we to believe that throughout your life, you never realized that your name was the same as the current Ruler of Soras? That Larus Kerr's name was never spoken in your presence?"

Shana looked at her hands instead of meeting Cyr's gaze. "Throughout my life, I have been sheltered in a tiny haven hidden in the woods of Verdun. It wasn't until several months ago that I actually learned of my true heritage. I was led to believe that my mother was a healer for one of the southernmost havens around Menila and when she died, Hilda of Verdun took me into her home to teach me my deceased mother's healing skills.

"It wasn't until I reached my twenty-first birthday that Hilda finally confessed my true heritage and explained why my mother was murdered during child birth, and my father died several months later from poisoning. The fact that my actual name was Shana Kerr was hidden from everyone in Verdun. Only Hilda knew my true name because she was the one who rescued me as a newborn and stole me away to live in Verdun in secrecy. Once Hilda finally revealed my true name and position, she confessed that she couldn't reveal my name to me because if it was discovered I was still alive, I would be in great danger by Zandicol's hand."

"Zandicol has no conscience, Shana. He doesn't care who or what is threatened as long as he attains his ultimate goal of revenge for those he believes were responsible for his great downfall many long years ago."

"Can you tell us anything about the Black Forces Zandicol has managed to raise?" Ryder asked.

Lykos responded, "We know only that the Black Forces are simply Zandicol's magical constructs. It is said that Zandicol thrives in such strength because he drains the essence of will from those peasants who inhabit the areas around Soras Keep. I do not understand how he accomplishes this, but I have been told that once these peasants are under Zandicol's control, they no longer have free will. Their every move is controlled by Zandicol's magic."

"That would explain why they all acted as one in the valley," Ryder said.

"How is it possible to remove someone's essence of will?" Shana asked.

Lykos shook his head. "No one knows."

"I believe your meal is ready," Cyr said. "We must not stay here long. Should Zandicol send more of his troops back to investigate the destruction in the valley, we will be vulnerable as we attempt to cross the remaining hills and valleys between here and Soras Keep."

* * * *

Ryder glanced overhead at the rapidly darkening sky. The sun had slipped beyond the horizon, leaving little light to see with as they walked quickly toward the next valley.

He saw what he thought might be great clouds of smoke off in the distance toward the north, then turned to find Lykos at his side, nose lifted into the cooling air.

"Smoke," Lykos said.

Ryder glanced over his shoulder to watch Shana and Cyr as they walked a few steps behind. He also noted that Cyr raised her head and stared straight ahead at her mate.

"What's wrong?" Shana asked.

"There's smoke ahead," Lykos answered.

"Smoke?"

Lykos looked at Cyr. "Perhaps, we should investigate?"

Cyr stepped to his side. She then glanced to the night sky. "There are several small villages between our position and Soras Keep. We have seen several other small villages burned to the ground on the western side of Soras. Perhaps, Zandicol is attempting to purge more of the peasants he finds so deplorable."

"Either that or he's continuing to burn down the remainder of the forest that surrounds the Keep," Lykos said. "We will go ahead and investigate."

"But how--?" Shana started, then watched in amazement as Cyr began to run. Shana noted that Cyr's form blurred for a moment then, seconds later, a huge black creature, wings spread wide, soared over head. Seconds again passed as Lykos preformed his own transformation and joined Cyr in the sky. Before she could comprehend what she had actually seen, the creatures disappeared into the night.

"I believe we have seen those creatures before, Ryder. If I remember correctly, they strongly resemble the creatures that flew over us several times before we made camp beneath the tree in the valley."

Ryder shook his head and placed his hand upon her shoulder. "I believe we better take advantage of the advanced scouting our new friends will provide," he said as he dropped his hand to take hers and continued over the knoll.

CHAPTER 21

Daylight brought cooler air and delightful shade beneath the trees that filled the ancient forest and afforded a comfortable place to rest. After emptying their packs, Shana placed all of the various foodstuffs provided into a shallow pot and allowed it to simmer over an open fire as they sat to discuss their strategies for the next two moon risings.

"I believe we should wait for the cover of darkness to forge further. While I have never seen one of Zandicol's Black Force during the light of day, I still believe our chances will be better if we travel by night," Lykos said.

Ryder shook his head. "It's easier to fight an enemy we can see rather than one who hides beneath the cover of darkness."

"Lykos and I are not hindered in darkness, Ryder. We are able to see quite well," Cyr offered.

Ryder smiled. "Unfortunately, Shana and I do not share your gifts, Cyr. On your last flight over the land between our current position and Soras, you have seen no sign of any more Black Forces. But, we still must be cautious. From what I've learned from Shana's guardian, Hilda, and from the Chosen at Havenshire, Zandicol will stop at nothing to reach his ultimate goal. To this point, it has been necessary to keep Shana's presence and gifts secret. If we expose her to the Black Forces, and they truly are Zandicol's constructs, it's just possible he could share their knowledge. If that happens, all will be doomed."

"Do you believe he did not notice that rain fell from the sky last eve? Could it be possible that he is now concentrating his forces in and around the Keep in an effort to fortify his position?" Lykos said.

"If I remember correctly, the Chosen claim that magic draws magic. If Zandicol is as astute as everyone believes him to be, he already knows that something comes to challenge his power," Shana said.

"That would give him even more reason to fortify his defenses," Lykos argued.

"The Chosen explained to me that Zandicol feels himself above everything and everyone on the continent of Menila. He believes it is his right to Rule and he thinks his magic is so strong, nothing could compare to his talents," Ryder said.

"If that's true, why does he continuously send his Forces out to destroy the people he believes he will one day Rule?" Cyr asked.

Shana closed her mind to the conversations around her and shifted through all of the lessons she'd been taught both by Hilda and by the Chosen. She searched for some way to accurately determine Zandicol's actual position within the Keep. Since she had no idea how he formed his thought patterns, or how he might summon his Black Forces, touching his mind would be nearly impossible.

After several moments and no idea, she reached farther into her mind to develop a seeking trance that would allow her to once again converse with Hilda. Over the past six or seven days, when no one was aware of her mental lapses, she and Hilda had discussed

this same problem numerous times.

(Shana, dear. You are still well, I hope.)

(I am sorry to disturb you again so soon, Hilda, but I hope you can answer another question for me.)

(I will do what I can, Shana.)

(While Judith was teaching me how to use a seeking trance, she failed to enlighten me on how one might seek out a person with whom I had never had contact. Is it possible to sense someone far away without ever having seen that person or heard him speak?)

(I assume you are speaking of Zandicol. At present I am on my way to Havenshire. The young woman I took in to learn my healing skills is well suited for our village in Verdun. She has the basic knowledge of most healing, and what she does not quite understand at this time, she will learn quickly. She no longer needed my assistance, so I solicited two of the Hunters to see me safely to Havenshire. At present, we have three more days of travel ahead of us.

(Where are you now, my dear?)

(Ryder claims we are three or four leagues out from Soras.)

(Why don't you seek out Zachara and ask him your question?)

(Do you believe he might have come in contact with Zandicol?)

(Anything's possible, child. Just ask.)

(Thank you. I hope to see you soon.)

"Shana?"

Shana opened her eyes and glanced into the odd expression on Ryder's face. "I'm fine. I was having a short conversation with Hilda. I asked her how I might touch another's mind when I had never met that person."

"She suggested I speak with Zachara and see if he could offer any help."

"Have you tried?"

"Yes, but the only answer Zachara could give was to seek out the most evil source around me and concentrate on that source."

"Have you tried?" Cyr asked.

Shana shook her head. "Zachara said that touching his mind would leave a path he could mentally travel back to me."

"I propose we all try to get a few hours of rest before we begin our next sojourn across this cursed land," Lykos offered.

He held out his hand to Cyr. "We shall seek our own shelter for our rest." He nodded then led Cyr away.

Ryder placed his hand upon Shana's shoulder and pulled her closer to his side. "We've just been given a short reprieve, Shana. Perhaps, we should take full advantage of it for we might not get the opportunity in the days to come."

Shana smiled and ran her fingertips across his lips. "I was just thinking the same thing."

Ryder stood and grasped her hand to pull Shana to her feet. He placed his arm over her shoulder as he led her to the fallen tree that offered seclusion.

Once inside, Ryder laid back against the tent he'd positioned over the soft ground beneath the tree and pulled Shana down upon his chest. He ran his fingers through her abundant hair and mapped the features of her beautiful face.

For several moments he stared at her. The delicate features of her face, the high cheekbones, the pert nose turned up slightly at the end, her full, parted lips.

He felt her gentle breath against his cheek. He then placed his hand beneath her chin and turned her into a more accessible position before he dipped his tongue between her open lips and covered every inch of flesh within her delightful mouth.

She followed his example and covered his face with soft kisses, then with the tips of her fingers. She licked his lips, dueled with his tongue, and demanded more. She groaned when he broke their kiss and moved her so he could pull her tunic from her trousers to remove anything that would prohibit contact between his flesh and hers.

Once her clothing had been removed, he relieved himself of his own as he stared, mesmerized by the beautiful woman before him, golden in the soft sunlight that filtered in through the branches of the tree.

He touched her golden hair. Traced again the contours of her face. Caressed each full breast softly before he slid his hand lower to touch her navel, lower still until his fingers were embedded in the soft down that shielded the portal he planned to conquer. He pushed her thighs apart and touched the heat of her opening.

Ryder inserted one finger to rub her bud and watched in amazement as she spread her legs wider then reach down to grasp his hand and push him deeper. She rode his finger, pushing against his hand, lifting her bottom off the tent as she arched against his other hand still caressing her breast.

He accommodated her silent demand by inserting another finger and leaning over to suckle the delicious pink nipples that stood erect and begging for his attention while she continued to hold his hand, pushing him harder and farther into her moist heat.

Ryder felt the muscles within her sheath begin to contract, experienced the rush of hot moisture that drenched his fingers as her internal muscles squeezed him tighter and tighter.

His erection grew harder, longer, with each tight spasm of her body. He shifted his lips from the glorious tip of first one breast then the other and drew away to place a series of kisses down her torso until he could bury his face into her hot sheath. He pressed his fingers tighter and continued to manipulate her tight bud until she climaxed.

Ryder then leaned close to her ear and whispered, "You want me inside you, don't you, my love?"

She surprised him by easing her hand between their bodies and grasping his erection. When she tried to maneuver him into her heat, he helped her along as he eased first the thick head, and slowly, the rest of his length deep into her.

Shana rocked against him, begging for all he would give.

Ryder was happy to oblige. He raised his thighs, pushed deeper into her body, each time harder, faster.

Shana clutched his shoulders, tossed her head from side to side, swinging her hair over his face, across his shoulders, over her breasts.

Ryder captured one hard nipple between his teeth then swiped his wet tongue over her flesh. He gave her other breast the same attention, followed by the same wet slide of his tongue before he captured her mouth in a searing kiss that left him craving more.

She tangled her fingers into his hair, kissed every inch of his face, traced her fingertips along his chest to rub his nipples.

The tremors he could feel building in Shana's body fueled his own release. He

leaned back against the tent and pulled Shana into his arms before they both fell asleep.

CHAPTER 23

Hours later as daylight slipped into dusk, Shana struggled out of the leafy hideaway to meet Cyr. Ryder and Lykos had left camp hours earlier to survey the land between several leagues south of Soras Keep to the vast fortress itself.

"Do you have enough fresh water in that flask to spare a bit so I might wash my hands," Shana asked.

Cyr smiled. "I had to do the same thing myself after I rose. There is plenty of water." She handed the flask to Shana.

Shana gave the flask back to Cyr and watched as the woman stirred the left over stew from earlier that morning.

"There is enough for us to have a filling meal," Cyr said as she sat down beside Shana. "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions, Shana?"

Shana glanced at her new friend and replied, "I will be happy to answer anything I can."

"I wish to know more about the Chosen. For my entire life, I have heard stories about the wonderful magic these people create, but I have never met any one who has first hand knowledge of their race. Since the stories first began of strange persons building in Menila, the members of our pack have been curious about the Chosen. We understand that they crossed the Great River many, many years ago and built their Temple."

"Yes, that's true," Shana answered. "They were being destroyed in their own land by armies that were similar to the Black Forces here. Thousands of their kind were murdered. Those lucky enough to escape the massacre fled deeper into the continent now called Freelands and mingled with others Sects. Others who were able, escaped to Menila and began anew as Chosen."

Cyr nodded then smiled. "So, is it true that the Chosen hold great magic? Are they also capable of the wonders you might create?"

Shana wondered how much she should tell Cyr about her ancestors. Even the hint that their powers were weakening could be dangerous to their survival. It wasn't that she didn't trust Lykos or Cyr, it was simply because the least number of people who knew of the Chosen's destiny the better.

Not wanting to actually lie to her new friend, Shana disclosed only what she thought Cyr might want to hear. "The Chosen carry great amounts of power, Cyr. But, unlike mine, their powers are spread across a great number of people who inhabit Havenshire. Each of the Chosen within the walls may carry one or several different gifts that add to the overall power within the Temple."

Cyr nodded. "It is like our pack used to be. Some could perform things others could not. Many were blessed with several gifts, some with only one. I understand this. I now see how it might have been impossible for the Chosen to venture forth and meet the people around them."

"It has always been dangerous for the Chosen to leave Havenshire, Cyr. There

has always been some enemy waiting to destroy those they could not understand. Now, as Zandicol has become a serious threat to the people of Menila as a whole, it is imperative that he be stopped before he can inflict any more havoc upon our homeland."

"I agree," Cyr said. "Zandicol has destroyed our pack and left Lykos and I homeless. It is only by the grace of what little good is left in our lands that we were spared. We will not forget this, Shana Kerr. We will count you as our friend and a welcomed member of our pack forever."

"Is that broth ready?" Lykos asked as he stepped toward the fire. "We need to be leaving this place anon."

Ryder walked past the fire and paused at Shana's side. "Are you well this eve, Shana?" he said with a smile.

Shana couldn't help returning his smile. "Perfect, warrior," she teased.

"Good. I will break camp while Lykos gathers any evidence of our passing." He turned and walked to the tree they had spent such a pleasant day in and began to fold up the fur tent.

Cyr met Shana's gaze. "I've been wondering about the strange sword your warrior carries across his back. Do the symbols etched into the leather have specific meanings?"

Ryder obviously heard Cyr's question and looked over his shoulder to study the woman's face. "This sword was handed down through generations of forefathers. It's symbolic because of the passing of time it has existed." He hated lying to Cyr, but he couldn't divulge the sword's true nature.

Lykos nodded. "We used to have similar objects that were great artifacts and were also passed from father to son. These items are all gone now," he said, sadly.

Shana reached across the opening between them and placed her hand upon Cyr's shoulder. "Zandicol will soon be destroyed, my friends. Menila will once again return to its former glory."

"And you know this how?" Lykos asked.

"I know this in my heart, Lykos. I feel this as we get closer and closer to the evil that threatens all of Menila."

"Then I pray your heart is correct, Shana Kerr. For if it is not, all of Menila is doomed."

* * * *

No moon filled the night sky and clouds hid the stars as they traveled up one knoll and then the next on their trek closer to Soras Keep.

Shana glanced apprehensively from side to side, expecting what she did not know. Something very near bothered her, yet she could not determine what that something was. Her gifts were sending strange signals along her nerve endings, but nothing specific that she could understand.

Several times over the last four hours she'd sent out a seeking spell, hoping to discover what caused so much distress. Each time she felt nothing. But the closer they got to Soras, the more she felt unease.

"Something is very wrong here," she whispered to Ryder. "I can't determine what that something might be, but I feel as if we are being followed."

Lykos heard her comments and stepped to her side. "How do you feel this, Shana?"

"One of my gifts is to manipulate the atmosphere surrounding me. When I feel something that isn't right, I have the ability to reach out with my mind and discover what that something might be. Unfortunately, either my gift is not working properly, or whatever is haunting me is not in solid form. It's more like a horrible nightmare that keeps repeating itself over and over."

"Do you believe Cyr and I should search for this source of evil?"

"That's the problem, Lykos. I don't know where you should search. I can't detect anything at all around us, but my gifts keep telling me something is amiss."

"I suggest we keep going forward," Ryder said. "If Shana's distress is any indication, we may need a sturdy fortification to defend ourselves from whatever is tracking us."

Lykos nodded and took Cyr's arm. "We will stay several steps behind you."

Ryder dropped his arm over Shana's shoulder and assisted her down into the next valley.

"Do you hear that?" Shana asked as she stopped dead in her tracks.

A strange thumping noise filled the silence.

"What is it?"

Ryder placed his hand upon Shana's shoulder and propelled her forward. "Run, Shana. Lykos and Cyr, I'd suggest you take to the air."

"What is it?" Shana repeated.

"Marching, Shana. Many men marching," Lykos supplied.

Shana immediately closed her eyes and sent out a seeking spell. Within seconds, hundreds of black clad bodies drew nearer to their position in the bottom of the valley.

"No!" she whispered. She then turned to look up into Ryder's face. "Black Forces. This is why I felt danger but could not recognize the source. These creatures have no souls."

"Run now!"

Shana heard the swishing noise Chosa'den made as Ryder pulled the sword from the scabbard. She leaned close enough to whisper, "Don't key the sword unless it's absolutely necessary, Ryder. Remember what Zachara said."

Ryder nodded and pushed Shana forward. She ran as fast as she could, trying to reach the top of the next knoll. Once they reached the top, they stopped dead in their tracks.

Hundreds of black clad constructs blocked their path in the valley below.

She searched side to side only to find even more of the creatures surrounding them.

"What now?" she whispered.

"We fight our way through," Ryder said.

"We can't fight through all of those awful creatures. It would be suicide."

"Do we have another choice?"

Shana inhaled then exhaled deeply. She shook her head. Think, she thought. There must be something she can do to help our situation. But what? She mentally worked through each lesson the Chosen had provided. But, then again, perhaps, she could. Maybe, just maybe...

She glanced overhead to the clouds covering the black sky. Rain wouldn't help their situation now. She needed fire. But her fire element was not reliable.

Perhaps, she could use earth elements to disturb the ground beneath the army's feet.

She looked up when she heard Lykos shrill cry above her head. She watched as he swooped down into the valley and rose with one of the creatures captured firmly within his claws.

Cyr followed, capturing another of the creatures and rising skyward to drop the wiggling, squirming bundle down upon the heads of numerous members of the Black Forces as they attempted to climb up the valley wall beneath them.

Ryder placed his hand upon her shoulder. "Listen carefully, Shana. Lykos, Cyr, and I are not important. You must do everything possible to protect yourself. Use whatever gifts necessary to see you safely to Soras."

"I'm not leaving here without you, Ryder L'Syr, so get that thought out of your mind. I'll stand by your side until the very end if necessary."

"Here. Take this." Ryder thrust the sharp knife she'd used to kill the beasts on the other side of Hyden Shelf into her hand. "Hack away at anything that moves."

Shana grasped the knife tightly and remained close to Ryder's side as they made their way through wave after wave of black clad creatures down to the valley floor. She stumbled over more bodies than she cared to count as Chosa'den cut a wide swiipe through Zandicol's Black Forces. Again, for every four that Ryder managed to incapacitate, she struck down one. On and on, over more and more prone bodies, and more until adrenaline alone fueled her movements. She hacked and chopped at anything that came close.

Overhead, Lykos and Cyr continued to demolish more and more of the creatures, tearing them apart with sharp claws and enormous teeth, leaving a path of destruction in their wake.

Ryder continued to wield Chosa'den with a precision that could only come with help from the sword. His sword never failed to strike true.

More bodies fell at their feet, making it almost impossible to hurdle the thick mass of what once was human flesh but now lay dormant beneath their boo.

Shana fought to keep the perspiration out of her eyes with her tunic sleeve as she slashed wildly before her. She had no idea how many of the creatures she'd actually cut down. Twenty? Thirty? She had no way to keep count.

The stench that filled the valley floor was horrendous. It choked her lungs, clung to her flesh, and made her eyes water. She kept as close to Ryder as she could and pressed on. Over more corpses, then more until the bile rose into her throat at the thought of another kill.

She looked up to see Cyr drop another corpse into the middle of a group of the black clad creatures and watched as the creatures fell upon the saturated ground beneath her feet.

"Stay close to me, Shana. When I say run, I want you to run as fast as you can. We only have one chance to escape this battle and it has to be done now. Run!"

An opening in the horde appeared before her. Shana didn't hesitate to follow Ryder as he continued to hack and cleave the creatures from their path. After several moments, they found themselves in a clearing that reached outward for several spans.

Shana couldn't take time to be thankful for their brief reprieve. She needed to catch her breath before Ryder pushed her forward again.

Over and over they continued to push forward, stopping only to clear more of the creatures from their path. Shana stole one moment to look overhead and noted that the sky was lightening and that Cyr and Lykos still flew overhead.

Exhausted to the point breathing hurt, Shana continued to swing the knife back and forth before her as she fought her way through the creatures determined to end her life. She cursed Zandicol with every exhale as she dismembered another creature, cleaving off its head and then watching it drop to the ground beneath her feet.

Then, as suddenly as the battle started, it stopped. The Black Forces stood motionless for several moments before those few that were left turned with the precision of a trained army and left the valley.

Shana bent over at the waist to gather her breath. She watched as Lykos and Cyr landed and with claws extended walked forward her as she stood at Ryder's side.

Ryder bent down to wipe the sticky residue from Chosa's den upon the uniform on a black clad creature before him before he placed the sword back into the scabbard.

"What just happened?" he asked, astonished.

Shana shook her head. She had no idea. She hadn't had time to work her earth element before she was thrown into battle.

"I suggest Zandicol has ordered his army back to Soras," Lykos said, his voice unnatural coming out of the beak of a Gryphon.

"You can talk in that form?" Shana asked.

Lykos nodded.

Ryder turned toward Lykos. "Did you see anything else in our path from your vantage point high in the sky?"

Lykos shook his head. He turned with Cyr at his side and walked away. Moments later, dressed in the clothing they had worn before transforming into the Gryphons, they stepped to Ryder's side.

"I would suggest we make our exit from this valley now," Lykos said. "If Zandicol learns of this defeat, we well may be facing many more of his constructs by nightfall."

Ryder nodded and took Shana's hand. She followed him up the next hill and down another. Finally, when all were almost to the point of lying on the valley floor to regain their strength, Lykos discovered an abandoned old shack that some peasant must have used before being evicted by Zandicol's forces many months before. Though the cottage was in ramshackle condition, the inside was at least partially clean and offered enough space for them to make a pallet for a few hours sleep.

* * * *

Shana awoke to a delicious aroma that filled the shack and teased her taste buds. She shifted against Ryder's side and sat up to find Cyr stirring something over a spit she'd erected in the middle of the dirt floor.

"That smells wonderful," Shana said. "How were you able to find sufficient foodstuffs to fill the pot?"

Cyr met her curious gaze. "Fortunately, the area surrounding this shack is filled with nice fat rabbits. We took only enough to fill our bellies and give us energy to resume our trek."

"Thank you. After last night's adventure, I could really use something to fill my empty stomach." Shana helped Cyr put the rabbit stew she'd prepared into the earthen

ware plates they each carried in their packs.

As soon as their meal was ready to eat, she walked over to the fur tent she and Ryder had used and placed her hand upon his shoulder. "Our meal is ready, Ryder."

He opened his eyes and met her tender gaze.

"Are you all right, Shana? Were you harmed in any way by those beasts?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she whispered as she leaned to kiss his forehead. "After a few hours of sleep, my body and mind feels rested and ready to meet the new day."

"I'm sorry, I didn't ask last eve, but--"

"You were overly tired, Ryder. I don't believe either of us felt up to speaking when we finally had the opportunity to lie upon that soft tent," she teased.

Ryder rose to his feet. The first thing he grasped was Chosa'den. He strapped the scabbard over his shoulder and then buckled the band about his waist as he walked to the fire to accept the plate Shana placed into his hand.

"Where's Lykos?" he asked.

Cyr met his gaze. "He left several hours ago. He wanted to explore the terrain we must cover before we reach Soras Keep. He should be back at any time."

"We can't tarry here long. If Zandicol sends another troop of his creatures, I don't know if we will be able to hold them off this time," Ryder said as he tasted the offer on his plate. "This is very good, Cyr. Thank you."

Cyr nodded and filled a plate for herself as Lykos entered the shack.

"We have two more knolls to conquer before we reach what's left of the forest of Soras. It appears Zandicol has burned everything surrounding the Keep. There is nothing to use as cover as we make our way to his stronghold."

"May I make a suggestion?" Shana offered as she sat beside Ryder and placed her plate into her lap.

"Please do. I'm out of ideas," Ryder responded.

"We have water here near the shack and there is plenty of dark earth. Suppose Lykos and Cyr take to the skies and you and I use the water and dirt to camouflage our flesh and sneak in to the Keep after darkness falls."

"It might work," Lykos said.

Ryder smiled. "Do you believe you could smear that awful mud over your flesh and crawl towards Soras?"

Shana lifted her chin. "I can and will do anything to see that bastard destroyed. If it takes smearing mud all over my body, I'll do it and more if necessary."

"Since it appears obvious that those Black Forces are not usually around during the day light hours, I propose we use this time to rest and plan our strategies," Lykos added.

"Good idea, my friend," Ryder responded and held out his hand to Lykos.

CHAPTER 24

Zandicol paced his chamber in fury. He ignored his Guard Captain as the man stood before the open doorway with his head down and refused to look up as Zandicol berated him for his failure to destroy the creatures that were coming to threaten his hold upon Soras Keep.

"You idiot, why couldn't you control that group of corpses long enough to destroy those infidels who come to challenge my hold upon Menila?"

The guard said nothing.

"Must I do everything myself? Am I to be constantly surrounded by a bunch of bumbling idiots for the rest of my days? Have you no pride in our achievements? No respect for what I'm trying to bring about in Menila?"

The guard continued to stand silent.

"Have you lost your tongue?" Zandicol shouted.

The guard shook his head.

"Well, speak then, you fool!"

"We have never encountered forces such as these, my lord. They do not fight as peasants. The forces that attacked us were well trained and we were quickly overcome."

"Overcome? By forces you believe are trained? Where would such forces come from? How would they be able to elude my Black Forces and get this close to my stronghold?"

"I cannot say, my lord."

"How many were there?"

"I do not know, my lord. Everything happened so fast it could have been hundreds."

Zandicol turned and stomped across the floor to stand before the Guard Captain. "Pray tell me how hundreds of beings crossed my land without my knowledge."

"I do not know, my lord."

Zandicol clasped his fists tight to avoid striking the officer before him. He drew several deep breaths to calm his escalating temper before he said, "You will take a larger regiment of the Black Forces with you this night and you will make sure that the threat fast approaching is destroyed. Is that understood?"

"Yes, my lord."

"I will tolerate no more excuses on your part. You *will* make sure this approaching army is destroyed before you return here to Soras, or your life will not be worth the effort I must make to end it. Is that understood?"

The Guard Captain nodded, and then whispered, "I do not believe we have enough constructs left to conquer this army, my lord."

"How many did you return to Soras with?" Zandicol demanded as he stepped even closer to the frightened man before him.

"No more than thirty, my lord."

"Thirty? We sent out over two hundred constructs, and you return with only

thirty? Curse you, we are running out of peasants to convert. How will I hold Soras if your incompetence continues to allow my creatures to be destroyed?"

"Something happened during the battle, my lord. The constructs became confused and turned upon each other. I have no way to explain this. There was no moon to offer light, and I can only assume the constructs struck out at each other in error."

Zandicol closed his eyes. "Get away from my sight. I have no wish to see you now. I would suggest you gather as many of the walking corpses we have left and see to it that no more *errors* occur on this night's raid. For if they do, you would be wise to find a hole and cover yourself up."

Zandicol dismissed the guard and turned away.

* * * *

"I should have considered how much this drying mud would itch before I made this suggestion," Shana whispered as she followed closely behind Ryder.

Ryder laughed. "It might itch, but I don't believe we are visible covered in all of this black mud."

Lykos landed softly before them. "We have one more knoll to cover before we reach the burned forest surrounding the Keep. So far, I see no more of the creatures that attacked us before, but Cyr and I are keeping a close watch. We're planning to survey the area over Soras Keep and try to detect any weaknesses that we might use to our advantage to enter the Keep. I would suggest you both use much caution as you near the Keep. Zandicol does not appear to use constructs to guard his fortress. The guards I have seen on the Keep walls are fully aware of their faculties."

"How many guards have you seen, Lykos?" Ryder asked.

"Cyr and I have counted about thirty, but they continue to move from location to location so it is hard to actually know how many there are. We will try to get closer and report what we find."

"Be careful, Lykos," Shana said. "We do not want you or Cyr harmed in any way."

Lykos nodded then, once again, took to the skies.

Shana watched his spiraling climb higher and higher into the darkness. She touched Ryder's arm. "We have trusted friends to guide our way, we must not waste this opportunity. Come, we must hurry."

Ryder bent and kissed her forehead. "Protect yourself at all costs, Shana. Forget everything the Chosen cautioned you about if you are forced to meet Zandicol on your own. I have faith in your abilities, and in our quest. One way or the other, we will succeed."

Shana reached up to touch his muddy cheek. "Take care of yourself, Ryder. I have plans for you after this is all over."

She turned and started down toward the valley below.

* * * *

Lykos perched on the high tower wall and watched the guards circle the high walkway that surrounded the entire Keep. He counted at least forty guards that continuously circled the walkway. He glanced overhead to see Cyr still combing the land surrounding the fortress and ready to sound an alarm if she discovered more of the creatures they had fought before in the valley.

Fortunately, to this point, the alarm was not necessary. It appeared Zandicol had

taken other steps to prevent their intrusion.

Lykos watched one guard with curiosity as the man continuously walked back and forth before a wooden door that obviously led outside of the Keep. He continued to study the man, waiting for whatever caused the man to hide in the dark and constantly watch the doorway.

After several moments, Lykos watched the guard open the wooden portal and allow a peasant woman to enter. Lykos noted the guard did not replace the heavy wooden slab across the opening but, instead, turned and led the woman into an area Lykos thought might be a stable. He watched for many moments for the guard to return, but after a length of time, no one appeared.

Satisfied he had found a way to sneak into the Keep, Lykos left his perch on the high tower wall and made his way back to Ryder and Shana.

* * * *

"I have found a serious breach in Zandicol's defenses," Lykos said the moment he touched the ground. "There is a wooden door on the northern side of the Keep that is currently unmanned. I watched the guard sneak a woman into the Keep through this entrance. He failed to brace the doorway as he led the woman into what I assume is a stable or outbuilding of some sort."

Shana and Ryder were hidden in an area of brush about two hundred spans from the Keep. "How can we be sure this guard has not returned during your flight here?" Shana asked.

"I will return to the Keep and keep watch as you move closer. If anything has happened during my absence, I will alert you before you enter into danger."

Ryder nodded. "Shana and I will leave our cover as soon as you are in the air. We will make our way slowly around the outer walls of the Keep in order to remain in the shadows. If you or Cyr discover anything that would cause the guards to feel uneasy, we will return to this position and wait for another opportunity."

Lykos nodded then took to the air.

"Are you ready to do this, Shana?"

"I've traveled many leagues and endured numerous hardships to make it to this point, Ryder. I have no intention of allowing anything or anyone to stand in my way. Lead on," she said with a smile as she grasped his arm.

With as much stealth as possible, Ryder led Shana into the deep shadows that hid their presence from those guards high above on the Keep wall. He followed the instructions Lykos had given him carefully until they reached the massive wooden door Lykos discovered. When he braced his hand upon the wooden panel, the doorway eased open several inches.

Ryder glanced up to find Lykos perched at the top of the tower. Knowing if anything was amiss, Lykos would signal, he pushed the wooden door open just enough so he and Shana could slide through, and then made sure the door closed behind him.

Ryder pushed Shana behind him as he eased out into the open and searched for more shadows to cover their passing. He took the opportunity to look up and discovered several armed guards walked above his head. Placing his finger to his mouth to warn Shana to be as silent as possible, he quickly led her to the other side of the building Lykos indicated across the way.

They stepped into the darkness on the other side of the building moments before

they heard Lykos' alarm.

Suddenly, they were surrounded by twelve armed guards.

Ryder drew Chosa'den as he pushed his knife into Shana's hand seconds before he shoved her behind his back and brought Chosa'den down to dismember the first guard that dared to approach.

He kicked aside the body at his feet as a second, then a third guard inched closer. "Remember the beasts in the forest, Shana," he whispered.

She pressed her back against his and swung wildly before her body with the sharp knife. He then glanced overhead to see Lykos swoop down and grasp another guard in his mammoth claws. The guard screamed and struggled to no avail as Lykos raised the guard nearly to the top of the tower wall, then dropped him to the packed ground beneath their feet.

Another swoop, and another guard fell. Then a third, and a fourth as Cyr arrived to assist her mate.

Dead bodies were covering the blood-soaked ground, making it impossible to maintain proper footing.

Ryder eased backward, pushing Shana along with him as he cleaved off another guard's head. When they reached firmer ground, he surveyed the area to find only one guard remained alive, and that guard was in the process of alerting others as he ran from the compound.

Lykos landed beside Ryder. Cyr followed.

"We have to get inside the Keep before more guards threaten us," Ryder said. "Shana, you should seek the cover of darkness until we have made sure all is clear."

She stepped to his side and placed her fingertips across his forearm. "How do I get inside?" she asked.

Lykos stepped closer. "Allow me to show you an entrance I found," he said in his odd Gryphon voice.

Shana nodded and followed as Lykos preceded her across the courtyard.

"Shana is well hidden, Ryder," Lykos said as he met Ryder in human form. "Cyr and I will accompany her into--"

A loud blast of thunder echoed across the courtyard.

Ryder looked up as a man dressed in black stood on the tall walkway with his hands raised and light dancing from his fingertips.

Lykos and Cyr moved quickly into the shadows as Ryder held Chosa'den high overhead. He felt the power of Chosa'den grow within him, demanding action, thirsting for a kill.

He did his best to ignore the sword's assistance, because he knew if something were to happen to him, he could not allow Chosa'den to fall into Zandicol's hands. If it did, all would be lost.

He backed up and almost tripped over one of the guards at his feet. Another step. Then another. He couldn't comprehend why Zandicol would allow his retreat until he heard Shana's desperate scream seconds before one of Zandicol's guards bashed something hard against the side of his head.

* * * *

Shana screamed out as Ryder fell to the ground. She ran to his side and was about to touch the wound on his head when one of the guards grasped her arm painfully and

pulled her away.

She fought with all of her strength to escape, but the guard only grasped her arm harder and threatened to break it if she struggled again. She ignored the guard's threat and continued to twist and turn against his hold. She kicked out, inflicting serious damage to his thighs as he lifted her off of the ground.

She struggled to breathe as the guard placed his large hand over her mouth and partially blocked her nose. She continued to fight against him, bashing her head against his chin, using her elbows and feet to inflict more damage on his body.

The guard finally had taken all he could of her punishment and dropped her to the ground. He placed his heavy boot against her spine and held her there until several other guards approached and offered assistance.

Moments later, Shana was dragged, kicking and screaming up an enormous set of stones stairs by two huge guards that paid little heed to the fact she was female. When she attempted to escape again, one giant fist met the side of her face and knocked her unconscious.

* * * *

Lykos and Cyr hid in the deep shadows beneath the tall walkway. They had purposely left the battle so they might offer a second line of defense against Zandicol's guards. They stood in silence as they watched Shana hurried away by the guards and several more guards grasp Ryder's heavy body and carry him inside. They were fortunate enough to hear Zandicol demand they were to place him into the dungeon until he had time to deal with the intruder.

"There has to be a way into this Keep we can use and not be seen," Lykos said. "I believe if we follow this wall to the stable I located earlier, we may be able to enter the Keep."

He grasped Cyr's hand and led her around the outside walls of the keep. Within moments, he found a broken door that appeared to lead inside.

He placed his finger over his mouth to warn Cyr not to make a sound as they descended a stone stairway not knowing where it might lead. Seconds later, they were forced to duck back against the shadows as several guards dragged Ryder down the stairs.

After the guards passed, Lykos motioned to Cyr and they followed the guards down farther into what appeared to be a dank dungeon. They then waited in the shadows for several moments while the guards dropped Ryder's unconscious body into a filthy cell, but failed to lock the door.

Cyr watched for anyone who might spoil their rescue as Lykos made his way slowly across the straw covered floor to the cell where Ryder lay. He knelt by Ryder's side and found a knot on the side of his head that was quickly turning dark blue.

Lykos turned and motioned for Cyr to accompany him.

"He's unconscious from the blow he received, but I do not think this wound is serious. We must find something to wake him so we may find Shana."

Lykos then rolled Ryder over and shook his head. "Fools. Those guards did not even remove his weapon."

Cyr slipped into the corridor of the dungeon and found a barrel of stale water. She looked around for something to hold enough water to splash against Ryder's face. She found an old ladle someone had discarded and dipped it into the barrel. The water was murky, but it would have to do.

She hurried to Lykos side and handed him the ladle. She watched as her mate threw the stale water into Ryder's face and then slapped him hard on each cheek.

Ryder came awake coughing and fighting. He fought against the hands that tried to hold him upright until Lykos finally hissed in his ear, "Stop this foolishness, Ryder. It is I, Lykos. Shana is in serious danger and you must regain your faculties or all will be lost."

"Shana?"

"Zandicol's guards have taken her away."

* * * *

Ryder tried to shake the wooziness that clouded his mind. He sat up slowly and automatically reached over his shoulder to touch Chosa'den.

"Where?"

"We do not know. I would suggest you get to your feet now. We are wasting precious time."

Ryder allowed Lykos to pull him upright. He swayed against the wall of the dungeon as he tried to take a step forward. Knowing he would never be able to find Shana without aid, he forced aside the Chosen Elder's warning and pulled Chosa'den from its scabbard.

He struggled to hold Chosa'den before his face as he rested his forehead against the sword. Without hesitation, he whispered the word Chosa'den.

The sword immediately came to life in his hands, offering him strength and stamina.

Ryder drew a deep breath, held it, and then exhaled. He pulled away from the dungeon wall and stepped out into the corridor.

"Which way?" he demanded as he stared into Lykos and Cyr's eyes and noted they watched him in awe.

"Which way?" he repeated, as he glanced toward Chosa'den to make sure it was not glowing.

"Follow us, Ryder. We are not sure where they have taken Shana, but we are guessing she will be presented to Zandicol."

Ryder followed them through the dungeon, up the ancient stone stairs that led to the first level of the Keep. He continued on behind them until they turned a corner in the stairway and met a force of armed guards.

Ryder could feel the hum of Chosa'den resonate throughout his body. He allowed the sword to guide him as he hacked his way through the eight guards that blocked their path. Nothing would stop him from going to Shana. Nothing.

Lykos and Cyr destroyed any guards who were brave enough to follow him as he continued to climb the stone stairs, higher and higher until they reached a dead end. The stairway simply stopped.

* * * *

Shana regained consciousness slowly. She looked around cautiously to determine her circumstances and found that she was alone in what appeared to be some type of tower. She quickly looked for a way to escape only to find there appeared to be no doorway.

Dizziness threatened to send her back into a dormant state, but Shana fought the waves of panic that streaked through her mind and searched again for an escape route.

Still she found nothing.

When her head finally stopped spinning, she stood slowly to explore her forced habitat. Huge tables and enormous vats filled the center of the tower. Books, to numerous to count, were scattered about as if someone had thrown them aside in carelessness. She looked up to find an opening several spans wide in the stones above her head, but she had no way to climb up to discover what might lie beyond.

Fear for Ryder engulfed her. When she had last seen him, he'd been unconscious. As she'd tried to help him, the guards had pulled her away.

She remembered the Chosen's words that Ryder could not intercept her mind speak. She also recalled that she would be able to feel any distress he encountered, so she concentrated hard of Ryder's presence. Many seconds passed and she felt nothing.

Tears streaked her muddy cheeks as she tried again and again to touch Ryder's mind.

Hopelessness washed over her as she circled the tower again, and continued to probe for some sign of life in the man she loved.

* * * *

Ryder turned and hurried down the stairway, followed closely by Lykos and Cyr. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, twelve armed guards were there to meet them.

Ryder didn't pause as he lifted Chosa'den over his head and cleaved off the head of the first guard. The second fell just as quickly. Then the third and fourth. The remaining guards backed cautiously away from the reach of Chosa'den. Seconds later, they fled the stairway, leaving a clear path for Ryder, Lykos and Cyr to escape.

Ryder made his way cautiously down another flight of stone stairs. He paused and hid in the shadows as two guards passed and were speaking of the woman that had been delivered to Zandicol's tower.

One of the guards stopped a serving woman in the corridor and advised her that Zandicol had ordered food and drink taken to his tower immediately.

The woman nodded and hurried on her way.

Determined to follow the servant to the tower, Ryder eased out of the shadows once the guards left the area and followed the woman as she gathered a plate of something he could not identify and a cup of what looked like wine.

He leaned back into the shadows and motioned for Lykos and Cyr as he followed the woman up another set of stone stairs.

* * * *

Zandicol watched the woman circle his tower through an opening in the tower wall. He noted that she touched numerous articles in her wake as she continued to circle the tower. He had no idea who this woman might be, but he could feel the abundance of power radiating from her body.

An abundance of power he was determined to have for his own.

He released the hidden lock on the secret door and, because the hinges were so well oiled, they made not a sound as he opened and closed the portal behind him. He made his way slowly across the tower floor to stand several spans away from the woman.

"And you might be?" he asked.

She jumped when she heard his voice. She turned and looked him in the eye. "No one you need to concern yourself over," she replied.

"I think you speak unwisely, woman. I sense in you a great power that I will take for my own," he said as he advanced.

Shana continued to stare into Zandicol's eyes as she seethed in anger. "Where are my companions?"

Zandicol raised his frail hand to his chin and stroked the graying beard that covered several portions of his wrinkled face. "So you are the one who breached my domain," he said. "How did you manage to get into my fortress?"

"I won't answer any of your questions until you answer mine," she countered.

"I know all, but I will not share my knowledge with anyone," he offered.

"What do you want with me if you know all?"

"I know nothing of *you*, woman. Nor do I care about your circumstances. All I need of you is the power you hold within. But first, you will tell me how you accumulated such powers."

"Not on your life, Zandicol. I've seen your evil. I know what forces reside with you. I will not allow you to take what is good and turn it evil like the stench that fills your body."

"You are a child. You know nothing of the forces that I control. I can strip the hide from your body at my leisure and feel nothing. I can destroy the entire continent of Menila and not regret the destruction. I do not care about the people who inhabit this horrid land. I feel nothing for those who are so weak that they will not even try to fight for the home they are so proud of."

"You're disgusting, Zandicol. Everything you have you've taken from others. First Mordith and Dedra, then the humble peasants that used to farm this land, and now you believe you can take my powers. That is not an option. I will never relinquish anything to you. If you kill me, my powers will be forever lost to you, for I will make sure nothing remains."

"You speak worthless words, woman."

"My name is not woman, Zandicol. I am Shana Kerr, heir to rule Menila. Daughter of Mordith and Dedra, and stolen away so you could not destroy me as you did my parents. I am a daughter of the Chosen, gifted with enough power to destroy you and everything you hold dear."

"You will not destroy me, girl, as long as the people you love are within my power."

"Don't think I do not know this, Zandicol. I realize you believe you have power over those I choose to call my own, but you are only deluding yourself. Evil will never take precedence over good, Zandicol. You have destroyed human lives, stolen away a Keep that is not your own. You murdered numerous peasants to create an army of constructs that act only upon your will. But, you will never, ever, destroy anyone or anything again, old man."

"And you are the person that will stop me?" he said with a laugh.

Shana simply nodded.

Zandicol raised his hands high and called fire to his fingertips. "You should know more of your heritage than was gifted to you by the Chosen, girl."

"I know all I need to know to destroy you, old man."

"Such confidence in one so young. You and I could reign over the entire world if we were to work together."

Shana laughed. "I wish no part of a world where you reside, Zandicol. You are not worthy to draw breath."

Zandicol advanced, closer and closer. "What I cannot have I destroy, girl. Those peasants were nothing to me. The Chosen are my rightful enemies. I used constructs was a ploy to pull the Chosen out of Havenshire. When that didn't work, I sent my constructs out into Menila to destroy the people the Chosen protect."

"You are a disgusting old man with no heart and no soul, Zandicol." Shana continued to bait her enemy as she remembered everything Zachara had explained in the garden. Zandicol obviously knew nothing of the ancient Druid magic she had inherited through her mother's bloodline. He had no idea that every word she spoke doomed him to a fate worse than the constructs he created to commit his crimes.

Shana took several steps closer to Zandicol. She paused only inches away and looked up into his cruel eyes. "By the power of the ancients that have passed their special magic to me, I render you dead, Zandicol. May you always burn in the fires of hell."

Shana reached forward to touch his hand as she closed her eyes and whispered the special words Zachara had provided. She felt his flesh grow warm beneath her touch and then blaze hotter and hotter. She resisted the urge to open her eyes as she felt the life flee from Zandicol's body, and his bones turn to ash beneath her touch.

When she finally felt nothing in her hand, she stepped back and opened her eyes to find a pile of ashes upon the tower floor.

She sank to her knees and buried her forehead in her lap seconds before the tower door was breached and loud footsteps crossed the floor.

"Shana?"

Her heart swelled in her chest as she heard the voice of the man she loved more than her own life. She raised her head and looked Ryder in the eyes.

"What happened here? Where is Zandicol?" he whispered.

Shana didn't think she could speak so she pointed to the pile of ashes on the floor.

"This? This is what's left of Zandicol?" Lykos said as he stepped to her side.

Shana nodded.

Lykos dropped to his knees beside her and placed his hand upon her shoulder.

"Praise to you, Shana Kerr. Savior of Menila."

Shana shook her head. "My mission here is not complete, Lykos. There is still one more thing I must do," she said as she rose slowly to her feet with Ryder's assistance.

"We have to find the Sanctuary, Ryder," she whispered.

He leaned closer to speak in her ear, "You will tell me what happened here once we are alone, Shana."

Shana nodded and took his arm as he led her from the tower and down the stone stairs. She noted that the guards that had served Zandicol stood silently against the stone walls that lined their path.

"Where is the Sanctuary?" she asked.

One guard stepped forward. "Follow me, please. I will lead you to the Sanctuary."

She glanced at Ryder and he reached over his shoulder to touch Chosa'den. "I believe you might have something to explain to me also, Ryder L'Syr."

Ryder smiled as they followed the guard down another corridor.

"Sanctuary," the guard said, pointing to an opening in the stone wall.

Shana didn't hesitate to enter. She stood in the dusty Sanctuary and studied the stone walls. "There are hundreds of stones here. How will I find the one I'm seeking?"

Lykos and Cyr stepped to her side. "What do we look for, Shana?"

"A stone identified by tiny wheat shafts," she said.

"I would suggest you and Ryder take one wall, and Cyr and I will take the other."

He didn't wait for her response as he walked across the floor and began to examine the blocks.

Less than ten minutes passed as they searched the walls before Shana placed her hands upon the proper stone. She closed her eyes and whispered the words the Chosen had taught her to release the stone from its mortar.

Inside the stone she found an ancient scroll.

Clutching the scroll to her breast, she took a seat on one of the dusty benches and carefully tore away the seal. Ryder knelt at her side. She spread the parchment across her thighs and read the contents.

"My darling Shana, I have seen the future and the trials and heartache it will hold. I know I will not be here when you open this scroll, nor will your father Mordith. Know that you were loved dearly, my child. Know that it is your place to Rule Menila. And, know also that we love you still throughout eternity, Shana Kerr. You are flesh of our flesh, daughter of our love. May you always live in happiness with a man who will treat you as you deserve. And, remember, the Chosen will always be your friends. Bless you, my daughter, from your loving mother, Dedra."

Shana wiped the tears from her eyes and handed the scroll to Ryder. She watched his eyes as he read the scroll.

He glanced up to meet her gaze. "Will you allow me to be the man who will always treat you as you deserve, Shana?"

A torrent of happy tears fell from Shana's eyes as she leaped into Ryder's outstretched arms. A hardy round of congratulations followed her acceptance.

"There are still things we must do, Ryder," she whispered as she stood and grasped his hand. "The people of Menila must know that Zandicol is no more and that all will now live in peace."

Shana then turned to the guards that filled the doorway of the Sanctuary. "You are free to remain here in the Keep if you pledge to do so honorably. I will not tolerate any evil in my home. The choice is yours. Go or stay. But you must know if you decide to go, you will not be welcomed on Menila's soil."

One tall guard stepped forward. "My lady, we were not here because we embraced Zandicol. Our homes and families were threatened. Our lives were in danger. We served only to save what little we could of Menila."

Shana walked toward the guards. "Are you willing to help us rebuild our land? Will you faithfully serve the people of Menila? Will you swear an oath to protect and uphold the peaceful nation we will become?"

Each guard pledged their oath.

"Then you will accompany us through the villages of Menila and help us convey the message that Zandicol is dead and no longer will our people be oppressed."

"May I offer one request, my lady?" the guard captain asked.

Shana nodded.

“My father once told me of an ancient custom that has not been practiced since Mordith’s reign. When happy news is to be spread over the area, there is an ancient bell that has not been used for a long time. When the bell is rung, the people of Menila know to gather for a celebration.”

“Where is this bell?” Ryder asked.

“Here, in the Sanctuary, my lord.”

“Produce it,” Ryder demanded.

“There is one thing we must take care of first, my lord.”

“And what might that be?”

“Larus Kerr is the rightful King of Menila.”

Shana shook her head. “Larus Kerr will be escorted to Havenshire where he will live out the rest of his days.”

The guard nodded. “It will be seen to immediately, my lady.” The guard backed away.

Epilogue

Shana walked at Ryder's side as they watched the people of Menila. Two weeks had passed since they recited their vows in the Sanctuary of Soras Keep. During those weeks many changes had occurred in their land. Numerous people came out of hiding deep within the forest to take up their lives again, to embrace family members who thought them deceased, and to join in the efforts being made to rebuild the houses that Zandicol destroyed.

The constructs that Zandicol had created were all buried, and the land had begun to show the promise of a better life for all.

Messengers were sent to all areas of Menila to tell of the peace that now ruled over the land.

A special team of messengers were sent to the Freelands with a missive drawn by Ryder's hand to advise his father and the people of his homeland that Menila was now free and they welcomed the people of the Freelands to visit whenever they wished.

Finally awarded a few moments of privacy, Ryder and Shana paused at the railing of the tower balcony and looked down on their new home.

Several dozen members of the Chosen were present in the Keep now, Hilda and Judith included. The curtain at the Temple of Havenshire had been opened to welcome all into their presence.

Children now played in the streets that wandered through the forests that would eventually show new birth.

Ryder had received a message from his father stating he would come to Menila to meet his new daughter, and Ryder couldn't have been happier.

"Do those lively children give you any ideas, my lord?" Shana teased.

"If you are thinking what I am thinking, I believe it is time to start planning for our heir," he whispered. "Come, my lady, our chamber awaits." He reached down and picked Shana up into his arms as he carried her to their bed.

"Did I ever tell you how much I love you, Shana?"

"More times than you will ever know, my love."

The End