



The Stolen Warrior

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By

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*Dedicated to Carol McKenzie who helped fuel my courage to write naughty things.
May she rest in peace and always be remembered.*

Chapter One

Hessa stepped into the hall, her arms weighted by the bundles of food. Through the bars, the men held out their hands, some missing fingers, others still bloody from fighting in the pits, but all too tired to taunt her. She walked along the cells and dropped the required amount into their palms. A round of bread, a chunk of dry cheese. Behind her, the water girl followed with her bucket and ladle. It was not difficult work for a servant of the Omi House to feed the prisoners kept for the fighting pits—certainly not as bad as what the more beautiful women were expected to do. But Hessa didn't hope her life would end in the place of her birth. She was a daughter of the brothel. An unfortunate act of rebellion as a child had scarred her face—but fortunately for her, she was considered undesirable as a result. Still, she longed for the company of a man who could love her and see past her imperfection.

She passed her reflection in the window of the miserable prison, and counted her blessings, smiling to herself. Hessa opened the door that led to the lower cells, her bundle lighter now for her work was nearly done. Someone down there grunted. She held her breath as she descended into the darkness. The men kept here had proved their worth in battle and now were required to breed more children to fight in the pits.

She set the food into the hands of the first three captives. They leered at her and muttered provocative words. The last man sat in the corner of his chamber, his mouth a grim, straight line, his body muscular and tense. He stared at the light from the doorway she had come through and held up one hand to shadow his eyes. He was handsome and dangerous looking, huge compared to the other men there. All he wore was a beaded, embroidered loincloth that barely covered his extremities, a piece of fabric that looked exotic, as unusual in the dungeons as he was.

When she stopped at his cell, he faced her and stood. She stared, her head tilting back so she could hold his steely gaze while he approached the bars parting them. She reached into the bag and set her fingers around a piece of bread, a fiery heat spreading through her body and settling in her womb. He was the most handsome man she had ever seen, impossibly large, impossibly

wild looking, and hardly scarred from the pits at all. She held the bread out. His hand closed over hers and remained there, hot, commanding.

“What is your name?” he asked, his voice low and deep, his dark eyes holding her attention.

“Hessa.”

“And your surname?”

“Hesssa Omi.” It was the name all wards of the Omi House took. It meant they were guildless, clanless, without family.

He grunted, and she knew it had been him when she first entered that made that guttural sound of disapproval. His rough fingers traveled over her wrist, along her upper arm and settled around the middle to cradle her elbow. His thumb traced back and forth across the sensitive skin where her arm naturally bent. “Hessa. It’s a pretty name.” He smiled ever so slowly, but the expression soon vanished. His fingers traveled higher, past her sleeve and ran over her shoulder beneath the fabric of her dress. His was a gentle touch, but full of desire and lust all the same.

She breathed out a sigh. Her nipples hardened beneath her dress, longing for his fingers to reach for them. Hessa glanced at his broad chest, then her eyes searched lower, across his muscular abdomen and halted at the loincloth—which had tightened over the treasure hidden beneath.

“I’m Gunnar Cathwe from Chalois.” He leaned closer, his face a hair’s breadth from the bars, his brown eyes razing her. “Will you help me get home?”

The water bearer’s shoes clopped against the stairs. Hessa forced herself to look over her shoulder at her helper. It wasn’t easy to draw her attention from the man before her. She wanted him, wanted to be in that cell with him. It was no secret why he was in the lower reaches and what would soon be expected of him. She could only imagine what it would be like to have him

tear away her clothes and force her down onto the pallet in his cell. *If the rest of him is as big as his body...*

He took the bread she offered.

Hessa returned her attention to Gunnar and held out the cheese.

He licked his full upper lip when he took the apportioned offering and backed away from her. “Hessa,” he said softly, as if memorizing her name as his eyes inspected her shape.

She had not answered his question. How could she help him escape? She was a prisoner as much as he was. There was nowhere in Bisura she could go without the leave of her masters, unless she was sold to another—which had been her hope all along. The mark of the Omi was upon her body, burned into her skin when she came of age, and the marks that scarred her face kept any man from truly taking interest in her—until now. But if she worked hard, perhaps a farmer might notice and purchase her to labor in the fields on the outskirts of Bisura.

She watched as Gunnar held out a bowl to catch the single ladleful of water the bearer offered. He brought it to his lips and drank, his eyes set on Hessa.

She nibbled at her cheek, nervous. “Sleep well,” she said, because she couldn’t think of anything else to say. “Breakfast comes at dawn.”

The water bearer started back up the steps, silent as always for she was mute. Hessa knew she should follow, but she didn’t want to leave him. She took one step and then another, until her breasts brushed against the bars. “You know why you’re in this part of the prison, right?”

He nodded. “I belong to no one. My body is my own, and they will not have what they want from me—just as they did not have my blood in their fighting pits.”

“They’ll kill you if you resist.”

He set the water bowl upon the pallet in his cell and returned to her. With one finger, he touched her cheek, caressing her scarred flesh and trailing his finger down to her chin. “I survived the pits just as you survived this wound. We are alike.” He leaned toward her, his mouth so close. “Help me, Hessa. Find a way to get me out.” His fingertip brushed her lips.

She stared at his mouth, thinking she would do anything he asked, anything at all if only he would kiss her. She imagined how commanding yet soft his large lips would feel crushing against hers. Would he taste good? Would he thread his fingers in her hair and pull her closer? Would he push his tongue into her mouth? A blush crept up her neck, heating her skin.

She swallowed hard and reached past the bars to set her fingers on his mouth. His lips parted. The soft wetness of the tip of his tongue met her skin before she pulled away, startled at what she had done. She shouldn’t be with him, shouldn’t let him touch her, and if she were caught tracing his lips, she faced a harsh punishment.

“Help me. I’ll do anything you ask of me, if you help me get home.”

“Home,” she repeated. “Where is Chalois? I’ve never heard of it.”

Her words seemed to disappoint him, judging by the way his forehead crinkled. “An island. Far from this place. A beautiful island where men are not kept in cages unless they deserve to be there for committing crimes. I come from a place where there is order, not chaos like Bisura.”

She didn’t fully understand what he meant. To her, Bisura had order. There were guilds, tradesfolk, and the brothels. The castes were of the rich, the mid-class workers, and those born into or forced into slavery. But a place where men only stayed behind bars for committing crimes? *The entire assassin’s guild would be there.*

“Tell me more about Chalois...when I return in the morning. In truth, she was hungry for news of what lay in the outside world, not that she could ever leave, but it was nice to wonder, to dream.

“For a kiss I will tell you how I came to be here.” He grinned sideways.

Hessa leaned toward him once more, intrigued. “A deal then.”

His smile vanished, and his expression turned serious. Gunnar offered his mouth to her. She closed her eyes, worried that she would not do it right. Their lips touched, hot, soft, tender. It was not like the way the brothel women kissed. It was not like anything she had ever seen or experienced. Something about his closeness mesmerized her, as if he were made of dreams and magic. The kiss went on for some time—lips pressed to lips—and she hoped the other men could not see what she was doing.

When he pulled away, she whispered, “At dawn tomorrow you will tell me your story.”

“Come *before* dawn,” he said. “It’s a long story.”

She nodded then turned to leave. It was a strange encounter to say the least. As Hessa ascended the stairs out of the darkness, her mind raced. She had just kissed a man she felt attracted to. It wasn’t a kiss forced on her by some drunkard in the lounge by the pits where she often worked. It meant something, even if it was for the price of a story.

Hessa took her empty bags back to the kitchens. She tried to keep her thoughts on task, because there were still more chores to be done. Beds in the brothel needed to be turned down and the linens changed; privies needed to be freshened. But all the while as she went about her menial tasks, all she could think of was Gunnar’s fingers on her arm, or on her mouth. He looked like he could crush her if he wanted to, but his touch had been gentle.

When she finished her duties, it was well past the joining of the triple moons. Hessa trudged to the barracks where she slept at night. She washed her body with soap, tepid water, and a cloth, then crawled into her small cot and pulled the single blanket over her body. Sleep didn't claim her as it usually did, despite how tired she felt. Instead, she lay awake staring up at the ceiling. Her fingers ran across her lips, back and forth, as Gunnar had done. She imagined he was with her in the small room, and that his large body crushed down atop her. She sighed, content in her fantasies.

Waking dreams like this were futile. When the women were sent to Gunnar's cell, he would take them. All men did. She had seen enough of them go through the cells to know. Some were violent. Some were not. But all of them took that offering. His soft touch was probably all a façade to gain her trust.

She grazed her fingertips across her cheek, then down the side of her neck until her hand dipped beneath the blanket. Although she knew she should not want to be one of the brothel women, she wanted to be one, if only to be placed in Gunnar's cell for a night—a single night to be taken by him, or touched in the way he had caressed her. She turned to her side and closed her eyes, trying to sleep.

Outside the small window of her allotted room, the wind picked up, tapping a branch in the glass. She thought the sound was like a tiny heart beat, a rhythm steady and slow, and she soon fell into dreams. They were not the usual nightmares she suffered of her masters beating her when she didn't work fast enough, or the large, black bugs that hid in the privy. This night she dreamed of Gunnar's body, of setting her fingers in the bindings of his loincloth and untying the fabric. Her night vision had her pressed nude against his warm body, held close by his strong arms. She knew what he was—a warrior, a protector. And if anyone needed such a man, it was her.

Chapter Two

Well before dawn, Hessa opened her eyes and groaned. She didn't want to slip from the heated blanket. In its embrace she imagined she was still in her dream, safe, loved, precious to someone. But rise she did. She washed the sleep from her eyes and pulled on fresh clothes—a simple dress of unbleached cloth, and underbreeches. She slipped on her leather shoes. In the cracked looking glass she examined the scars on the side of her face as she combed through her black hair. Her skin was darker than most from spending midday in the sun, raking up the animal dung behind the pits. Her teeth were bright and white when she smiled. Hessa tied off the braid in her hair and took a deep breath, hopeful at what this morning would bring.

She went to the kitchen stores to fill her bags of food for the prisoners. The cooks were busy preparing for the day's festivities to feed the crowd that always came to watch the fights. Men against men, men against monsters, it was whatever appeased the bloodthirsty populace of Bisura, and already being murderers, that task proved a daily challenge.

The sun rested just beyond the horizon when she stepped into the hall of cells. She passed out her food and hurried down into the darkness. All of the men there were still asleep—save one. Her warrior rose from his pallet and came to stand at the bars to greet her.

“Hessa,” he whispered, a smile parting his lips. He reached out his hand to her, and she set the bread in his palm. His other hand shot through the bars to cup her cheek. “Did you dream last night?”

She nodded.

“Of me?” he asked, his voice devilish.

She blushed and pulled out the cheese. He took that as well and set both provisions on the small table in his cell. When he returned to her, Gunnar reached through the bars that parted them and

threaded the fingers of his left hand with hers. Heat spread through her from his touch, radiating in her body, and waking her completely to his presence. She breathed deep and smelled his scent, warm and musky.

“I will tell you how I came to this place as we agreed. I was fishing off the coast of Chalois when my ship was taken by thieves. The day was windy, and a fog had settled in. Sunlight spilled through the haze in rays.” His thumb played across the side of her hand. “I remember thinking I could take them all, that I could bludgeon them and toss them over the ship’s side into the sea.” He frowned, his eyes distant for a moment. “But I was wrong. There were so many of them. At least thirty men.”

His free hand curled around her waist. For a moment, she panicked. He could hurt her if he wanted to—even imprisoned as he was. She sucked in a tight breath. Gunnar urged her closer until her body pressed against the cell bars. His hand massaged her lower back while he kept spinning his tale. Each circle warmed her more than before.

“I fought hard and well, and I did offer many to the water goddess, but they soon overcame me, and even with my magic, I couldn’t escape.”

Hessa frowned. “Magic?”

He nodded, his eyes fixating on her mouth. “Yes, magic. Old magic. Passed down by blood from my ancestors. I’m an air singer. That’s why they came for me. Omi House pays high for magical breeders...especially those that survive the pit fighting. High enough that they seek out others of my kind no matter how far they must travel or what they must face.”

She knew what he said was true. Many a priest from the neighboring city of Shan-Sei had been stolen or at the least, seduced in the hopes of a child with magical abilities to be raised in an assassin guild. But she had never heard of an air singer.

He went on, leaving her no time to ask what he meant. “They bound my hands in slip-rope so that I couldn’t escape. I was gagged so I couldn’t sing, and they hooded my face to keep me from knowing where I was. I remember listening to the gulls calling high above, the cold, damp feel of the deck beneath me, biting into my skin. The boat tossed and turned on the waves. They fed me little, much less than you offer.” His hand moved up her spine to the back of her neck. Those hot, rough fingers of his drew patterns on her skin beneath the thick braid of her hair.

“I arrived on the mainland and was kept in a cage along with other prisoners or animals from the far reaches of the world. For weeks the caravan traveled, and I lived in filth with little to eat and nothing to sustain my spirit. The winds answered me on the rare occasions I was left alone and able to call to them, but the guards soon silenced me with drugs or a blow to the back of my head.”

Hessa winced.

Gunnar nodded. “I survived. That’s all that matters. All things in life test our will. My time here is no exception.”

She reached past the bars to touch his chest, and reveled in the way he felt against her skin. Her dream of pressing her naked body to his was the closest she ever though it could be. Her fingertips brushed over one of his small, hard nipples. He exhaled, and his breath blew across her cheek. Down his side and along his abdomen, she explored his body. He had stopped telling his tale in order to watch her touch him. She circled his navel three times, imagining what it would have been like to have parents, to be cared for as a child rather than taught to work. She closed her eyes, her fingers dipping to the edge of his loincloth. Hessa imagined the scent of the sea and the fresh air of freedom. Her nostrils flared as she breathed in the vision.

“I wish I could set you free, but I’m just a servant here. What could I do?” His hand swept over her shoulder to brush one of her breasts. She sucked in a breath.

“Everyone has some sway.” His thumb rimmed her nipple, kept from her skin by her thin dress. He toyed with her until the flesh hardened. “Even a servant in the Omi House knows secrets.”

“Not me.” She struggled to hold still as he took her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, swirling both digits until her sensitive skin peaked even more. “I am no one of importance. I have no magic, no knowledge beyond that of my duties.”

“Can you find out who the woman is they will send to me?” His hand cradled her breast, thumb tapping at its center. “Surely, you can discover that much.”

Her head swam for a brief moment of bliss, brought on by his touch until what he asked settled in her mind. “Woman...” She frowned. He wanted to know what woman they would make him breed with? It seemed a strange request. If he wanted to escape, he ought to ask for keys or a weapon at least. “Why?”

Footsteps shuffled in the upstairs hall. A man spoke, his voice weary.

Hessa shook her head and backed away from the cell, sudden jealousy burning inside of her. She thrust her hand into her bag.

“Because if I can’t have my freedom, I want you to take that woman’s place,” Gunnar whispered. He gave her a stern look and then went to sit on his pallet.

She swallowed her jealousy and went about her work, dropping food in the cells or into the hands of the prisoners. She went up the steps, but not without a backward glance at her stolen warrior. Gunnar was watching her. He didn’t smile or nod, but she heard his voice softly humming.

When she reached the top of the stairs, the wind rattled the smeared glass high in the upper cells. *A storm must be coming*, she thought.

“You’re early.” The cell keeper eyed her with suspicion.

“Yes,” she bowed her head lest he take more notice of her. “I have more work than usual behind the tavern today. I wanted to get a head start.”

He snorted and patted her shoulder. “You always work like a horse, woman. If I had spare gold, I’d buy you myself. Keep you in my house.”

A spark of hope shimmered in Hessa’s heart. She raised her chin to look at him. He was old and worn, his body muscle bound. Gray and black hair framed his narrow face. He had small eyes and a large nose. He didn’t make her feel anything at all—unlike Gunnar, but he could be a way out. It was not freedom, but she had never really hoped for that much.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “You speak kindly.”

His smile revealed three missing teeth. He had lived a hard life. “I lost my wife three summers back,” he confessed. His eyes clouded over, and the cell keeper ambled away, his shoulders slouching. He didn’t say anything more to her. Hessa finished her chores just as the water bearer entered. They nodded at each other, and then Hessa left the cells to tend to the rest of her work.

She thought of her stolen warrior, of the fire he had ignited in her middle when he touched her breast. She wondered if she could find out who would be sent to him. Could she take that woman’s place? If she did, what would happen? Would he hurt her? Use her? Or something entirely impossible; would he make her fantasy come true?

On her way to clean in the brothel rooms, Hessa hoped for a night alone with Gunnar. She hoped for the chance at stealing a small time of happiness, of closeness. He couldn’t really care for her. She knew that and accepted it, but she wanted the chance all the same.

She set in on the first room, gathering up discarded clothing and piling it for the laundry. She pulled the linens from the soiled bed, the scent of sex heavy in the air. All that had happened in

the room during the night only made it worse for Hessa. She tried to stop thinking of Gunnar, but she couldn't.

She swept, mopped, and then she set the laundry in the baskets in the hall. After the floor dried, she made up the bed with fresh sheets and imagined herself sprawled there, her warrior waiting in the corner of the room wearing nothing at all.

Hessa groaned. She moved on to the next room and started cleaning in there. There was less mess than the first, as if the coupling that had happened hadn't been as violent or unorganized. The sheets were hardly rumpled and a few flowers had been placed on the table by the bed. The scent of them made the room feel fresh and innocent. Outside the window, clouds gathered in the sky. Hessa closed her eyes and thought she could hear her warrior's voice dancing in the air.

Chapter Three

Hessa was ready to go deliver the midday meals to the prisoners when the new women were brought through the brothel's back door. Some had been sold into slavery. Others had been raised in servitude and reached the age of maturity—an age that meant childhood services of cleaning, weaving, or grinding grain had come to an end. For the young women with no magical abilities, it meant service in the brothel to the men who paid. For women with a little magic, it either meant sale to a guild clan or bedding the men who had survived the pits in order to make babies that would fetch a high price when they grew to the age to show their powers. A few looked frightened, their eyes wide and their lips pursed. But one stood out among them.

She tossed her golden hair and glared at the master who led them through the hall and away. She looked dangerous. She looked deadly. And by the color of her fair skin, she had not come from Bisura. The woman glared at Hessa over her shoulder.

“They will not break me.”

At first, Hessa didn't understand where the voice had come from, but then she realized it was the gold haired woman. She was able to mind speak, something the Shan-Shei priests were known for, a talent that always startled Hessa. Surely, she would be sent to the dungeons and the pit fighters.

Hessa swallowed down her nervousness, and followed the women. She watched the master assign them each to their rooms. Pretending to dust a length of shelving that normally held clean linens, she waited until they had all been shut away.

They would soon be given assignments.

Hessa refolded a few sheets and set them onto the shelves. This might be her chance to be with Gunnar—her only chance. If she could discover which of the women would be sent to him, she might be able to convince her to trade places. But how?

She needed to get to the kitchens and fill her sack with bread and cheese. Sighing, she turned and started toward the next chore, toward an endless agenda of work and servitude. She trudged to the kitchen and went about her work, looking forward to the moment when she would walk down into the dark and feel his touch on her skin. It was a small thing to hope for, but she hoped nonetheless and envied the spirit of the woman with the golden hair.

That morning, a bull had been killed in the pits. It meant that in the evening, there would be better meat in her stew. She wondered if she could sneak into the dungeons and bring a bowl to Gunnar. As she walked along the hall and toward the building that housed the pit fighters, she memorized each place where she might hide, each cast of shadow or pile of straw. She thought she might be able to get down there if she was careful and planned ahead.

There were two guards at the door, but she knew they drank in the evenings, and often passed out from taking too much. She noted the bundles by their seats, provisions for a boring day, food and wine. Hessa nodded when she walked past. They said nothing for she was no one of concern to them.

She hurried along the line of imprisoned men, passing food into their hands. Soon after, the water girl followed to portion out the men's drink. Hessa could hardly breathe by the time she reached the steps. She took them slowly, waiting for a sound, the familiar grunt that meant he was watching her approach from his cell. She squinted at the pale shaft of light spilling down from the window high above. Her heart skipped inside her chest.

Gunnar was seated in the corner of his cell, his head bowed and pressed into his hands.

Hessa edged to the cells and passed out the food. She soon returned to Gunnar's. "Are you unwell?" she asked.

He lifted his face. His eyes lit with joy. “Hessa. Is it time again for you to be here?”

She nodded and held out his apportioned food. He rose and came to her, taking the bread and cheese, only to set them aside.

“I dreamed of you.”

“Of me? What did you dream?” She closed the bag and set it beside her.

“We were on the sea in my ship. The wind was strong, pushing your hair back from your face, and you smiled when I sang to you. I was taking you to Chalois.”

“That is a good dream.” She closed her eyes when he reached through the bars to caress her cheek. His rough fingers ran along her face, tracing her lips, her chin, then tickling down her throat to her chest. He circled her nipple, but not like before. This time, he tarried there only a small time before his fingers shimmied to the hem of her skirt. He slipped his hand down inside, tugging her against the bars.

With her body pressed so tight to the cool metal, she felt what it must be like to be imprisoned. His lips brushed hers in a teasing kiss. “Will you come to me? Will you be the one the guards bring to me?”

She sucked in a breath and kissed back. His lips warmed hers. Heat spread through her body. Her nerves fired off and sent a ripple of tingles through her which settled in her middle. She moaned when his mouth opened, and his tongue darted out to taste her. The wet heat slid over her lower lip, her upper. He pushed inside, and she raised her chin and allowed him entry. Below, his fingers curled at her mound, stroking her with slow, measured movements. Her legs went weak, and she started to shiver.

When she had trouble catching her breath, he lifted his mouth from hers. “Have you ever been with a man?”

“Never.”

“Do you want to be with me?”

The water bearer came down the steps, her footfalls interrupting them. Hessa stepped back from the cell, gathered up her bag, and tried to look innocent.

“Do you?” Gunnar pressed.

She nodded.

His expression became solemn. “At sea I have seen great creatures that travel through the waves. They are often alone, but they find each other. Somehow, despite the vastness of the oceans, they find each other and become mates.” Gunnar smiled. He fetched the bowl for the water bearer and waited as she meted out his portion. After the server left him, he spoke. “I feel that way now, that I have been searching, swimming through the darkness. The day you descended the stairs of this prison, I knew.”

She looked down at her feet. “You knew,” she repeated. “But you do not truly know me.”

“I want to know you. I have waited through my capture, the long travel to come to this place. I have survived the fighting pits, great beasts from the Gods alone know where that have been sent against me, men from other villages with powers strange to me. Swords, daggers, axes, none have defeated me there. I waited for my one reason for being to come to me. I prayed for it. Then you appeared at the steps to bring me food. I knew then, Hessa.”

“I am but a servant, born into this horrible place, destined to work here until the day I die.”

He touched her face, running his fingers over the scars on her cheek. “You are what you wish to be. If you wish to be more than this, you will be. All you must do is believe that anything is possible. And when the chance to become what you desire is offered, you must take it, no matter the cost.”

“I wish to be with you,” she said, her voice low. “I wish to have you hold me each night, and for you to take me away from here—to your island, your world. A place I can’t really grasp because it seems to be all a fantasy.”

He leaned his forehead against the bars and blew out a sigh. “It would seem that...and it is. Water bluer than the sky that stretches across the horizon. The slap of sails above and the crash of waves below. From there we can go anywhere.”

She shook her head, imagining such a place. “How can I free you? I see no way to do it.”

He closed his eyes, frowning. “You must find a way.”

She took her leave, toting her empty provision bag out. When she left the building, the guards stared at her before moving on to their drinks. The wind was whipping through the streets, gathering clouds higher above. She listened and heard Gunnar’s voice trailing through the air, caressing her face and tickling her skin. He was tied to the wind—an elemental of sorts. Rare indeed and very valuable to the Omi masters.

“How goes your work this evening?” A man’s voice asked from beside her.

She turned to see the cell keeper again, his face rosy from drinking, his hair combed back neatly. “All went well.”

He nodded and gripped his chin, rubbing as he thought. “I wonder, would you like to accompany me to the tavern this evening? I’ll buy you a meal and a drink.”

She took a step back, fearful of what else he might want from her. “I should get to my room. I have work to do.”

The cell keeper frowned. He looked away from her, his small eyes searching the darkness growing in the sky. “I’m sorry to hear that then.” He sighed and started away from her toward the road that led to the tavern. The keys at his belt jingled with every step he took.

Even a servant has some sway, she thought. Hessa tucked the lip of her bag into her belt and hurried after him. “Maybe I could come with you...for a little while. If you promise not to—”

“I only want the company.” He stopped and faced her, his eyes sad. “Nothing more. I swear it on the grave of my late wife.” He held out his arm to her. She slipped her hand through and let him lead her away. No one had ever paid much attention to her, not like this anyways. “My name’s Kadley. Friends call me Kad.”

“I’m Hessa.” She smiled up at him.

He looked away, keeping his eyes on the road ahead. “We can sit in the back room. It’s quieter there.”

She’d never been in that part of the tavern. They entered the building to the raucous greetings of surly men who’d been drinking for some time. Those of the assassin’s guilds sat near the bar, most wearing garb that shadowed their features. Hessa tried not to look at them. She didn’t want their kind of attention. Whores danced across a rickety stage at the other side of the room, their garb vibrant and eye-catching. Coins bounced at their feet, offered up from the appreciative men seated before the show. Hessa wanted to watch, but Kadley kept moving, bypassing it all as if it meant nothing to him.

He took her into a dimly lit back room with few patrons seated about. A fire burned in a large hearth, heating the space. This was more a place to eat than to drink and be merry. They sat by the fire at a small table, and a serving girl attended them. Soon bread, stew, and cheese were laid

out, as well as a decanter of wine. The cell keeper poured out the glasses of wine and sat back in his seat, sipping between words.

“Do you have a man you fancy, Hessa?”

Her wine went down the wrong way, causing her to cough. When she recovered, she shook her head, no. It was the safest answer.

“I imagine it must be difficult for you as a servant. The men of Omi House take what they want, and most aren’t honorable about it at all.”

She nodded and ate a spoonful of stew.

“My wife was from Omi House, born into it. She worked as a whore when she was young. But after my first night with her, I saved up my pay and bought her out.” He refilled his glass, offering her a smile. “She was my only happiness. And we so wanted children.”

Hessa leaned forward. “How did she pass?”

“Nedra was with child. We tried for years, but she always lost them. The last one stayed, but when she was close to birthing...” Tears welled up in his eyes. He brushed them away, unable to finish his sentence.

“I’m sorry.” She reached across the table to set her hand on his. “That’s terrible.”

He pursed his lips, but went on after a time, sharing with her the moments he and his wife had been happy. He told her stories of his lost love until he swayed in his chair from having drunk nearly all of the wine. He ordered another decanter. She watched and listened as he finished that too.

Hessa ate everything that was offered to her. She had not felt so full in a very long time. But when she tried to excuse herself to leave, Kadley stood and grasped her hand. "Let me take you back to your quarters. There are men of a bad sort about," he slurred. He wobbled when he walked, bumping into chairs and the edges of tables. At the door, he pulled her out and into the night. The wind had turned cold and chilled her skin as it passed through the thin cloth she wore.

Kadley wasn't leading her to the servant barracks. He was guiding her to the guard housing. She tried to break away from him, but he was strong and held her hand with a firm grip. "It's late," he explained. "We should get to bed. There's work in the morning."

"I have to go to my room," she tried to explain. "Have to feed the prisoners..."

"It's past dark. No one will miss you."

Her heart started to race. What would he do to her?

Kadley fumbled with his ring of keys when they reached a large home at the first line of the guard houses. He stabbed the key into the door lock and turned it. Hessa thought if she went into his room, she might never come out. She tried again to pull away. He snatched her other hand and dragged her inside.

"I've gone and had too much tonight," he mumbled. "You're a kind girl to listen to me as long as you did..." He pulled her along, although she resisted, and soon they were in his bedroom. Moonlight cast from the window bathed the space in blue-gray. "Be a kind girl and stay the night. I can't sleep well anymore...without her to hold onto..."

"No," she said, trying to sound forceful, but he only pulled her down against the bed. She smelled something sweet there, like dried flowers perfuming the sheets. Kadley's arms wrapped around her body and held her tight. She feared he would do more, but his breathing became steady until he started to snore.

Crickets sang outside the window. Wind rattled the thin layer of glass that barred its entry. Hessa concentrated as her fear slipped away. Besides the sweet smell, she breathed in the odor of wine and Kadley's own scent. He wasn't dirty like most men. He smelled of clean linens and soap. She waited until she thought he was so out he wouldn't keep hold of her, then she wriggled free of his arms and stood above his bed. The moonlight illuminated the round of keys at his belt. She would have to unbuckle it to get at them. Hessa didn't want him to wake with her doing that. He'd have the wrong idea for certain.

She backed out into the main room and paced. This was a chance at freedom, no matter how many ways she looked at it. The keys meant she could release Gunnar. And if he was true to what he had said, he would take her with him—far from this place.

She should have fed the prisoners by now. The water bearer had already come and gone no doubt. A loud tap sounded on the roof. Then another. Rain pattered down in loud droplets. Hessa fisted her hands and marched back to Kadley's room. She knelt on the bed and took hold of his belt, unbuckling and unlacing it from his trousers.

"Not that, little one. Ol' Kad is tired...too tired for a roll in the sheets." She closed her fingers over the key ring and slipped it off. The keys hit each other and tinkled, but the sound of thunder rolled across the sky, blotting out the small noise.

Hessa stumbled when she left the room, and at the open door, she stopped, frowning. Lightning flickered across the sky. It spilled into the main room of the small house, illuminating the far wall. There she saw a sword, a massive sheathed blade on display. She went back for it, and heaved the unwieldy weapon down from its hooks. It would be difficult to get it past the guards. She dragged it out, and shut the door behind her.

Rain drenched her clothes and hair. Wind blew angry through the streets, cutting past Hessa's wet clothes to make her skin prickle with goose bumps. She undid the empty provision bag from her belt and pushed it over the sword to disguise it. Half dragging the weapon through the muddy street, she made her way back to the prison.

The guards had moved under the shelter of the building. One sat in his chair, his eyes closed. The other tipped his bottle at Hessa and slurred out, “You’re late. The water girl already left.”

She nodded and moved on, hoping he wouldn’t notice that the bulge in her bag wasn’t quite right. Only a few of the prisoners were awake. One held his bloodied hand out to her, begging for food. But she had nothing to offer.

A low voice permeated the usually silent building. A voice that was singing in a rhythmic tone much like a lullaby. Hessa made her way to the end of the line of regular cells and took the steps into the lower reaches. She paused midway to stare at Gunnar. He stood in the midst of his cell, his hands pressed together, fingers touching his forehead. Air circled him in a whirlwind, drawing up pieces of straw and dust. His loincloth flapped. His hair moved. His voice stirred her body into a frenzied state of lust.

“Gunnar,” she said and ran down the rest of the way. The sword smacked against each step like a drummer tapping a beat.

He opened his eyes.

“Hessa.” With the halting of his song, the wind died. The straw and dust settled at his feet. “I was worried that something happened to you.” He pushed his hand through the bars to touch her face. “The water bearer came...”

His palm was warm against her wet cheek. She leaned into his touch and smiled. “I’ve come to set you free.”

She reached into her bag and found the keys. Hessa was cold and nervous. Her fingers quaked. The keys rattled and jingled as she held them out to him.

He breathed out slowly and took them. One by one, Gunnar stuck each key into the lock of his cell until the metal turned, and with a creak the gate opened. He stepped out of his cell and stood before her. She tilted her chin to look him in the eyes. He was so tall, a giant compared to her. His rough hands closed over her shoulders, then slid down her sides until he gripped her waist.

She squeaked when he lifted her body up and hugged her tight to his chest. His skin felt so hot. She circled his neck with her arms. Hessa had changed something—done something remarkable and dangerous. As his lips settled on her neck to kiss, she realized he was right. She could do anything she set her mind to. It was a frightening prospect. She could find her freedom, and quite possibly already had.

His tongue laved her shoulder between hot kisses. Beneath the thin layer of fabric that was his loincloth, she felt his cock hardening with desire. Hessa closed her eyes and breathed him in, thinking this moment was too good to be real.

Chapter Four

“What’s this,” he whispered, when he set her down. Gunnar was eyeing the handle of the massive blade she had stolen. It protruded from her bag.

“I found it in the cell warden’s house.”

He took the blade and partially drew it, shaking his head. “I thought it was lost at sea when they took me.” He ran his fingers along the handle before slipping it back into the sheath. “This sword belonged to my father. He fought in the three island war with this blade. He never lost a battle.”

“Neither did you in the pits.”

He set his arm around her shoulders, turning her to face the stairs. “But I needed no sword to win. We may yet need it to escape.” She felt his warm breath on her neck before he kissed her there once more. Then, he pushed her forth, and they started for the stairs.

“What about the rest of us?” a prisoner asked.

The keys jingled when they landed on the ground in the prisoner’s cell. “You be their hero and free them all,” Gunnar said. “Peace be with you and the men you send home.”

“The guards...” Hessa began when they reached the last step.

“Distract them.” He was sturdy when she leaned back and felt his body there, bracing her. His scent was like nothing she had ever known, exotic, manly, and wild. “The storm will hide us.”

“They’ve been drinking.” She felt hopeful. Maybe they could escape easily enough. As they started through the line of cells toward the door, she realized their mistake. The prisoners from the lower reaches were trampling up from behind.

Gunnar grabbed Hessa's shoulders and pulled her aside before they could be run over. One by one, the prisoner with the keys unlocked each cell, freeing more, until they became a mob of angry men ready to flee. As one the crowd moved to the door, some so badly wounded that they left trails of blood across the ground. Hessa wanted to melt against Gunnar, to hide in the safety of his arms which enclosed her and held her steady.

"We wait," he said against her ear, his voice low and calming. "They are our distraction."

As they stood in the shadows, the hoards of prisoners rushed the exit. The guards were little match for men who had been forced to fight man and beast in the pits. A scream rose over the din and was silenced soon after. The men ran out, leaving Hessa and Gunnar holding hands and waiting to be sure it was safe to make their way out.

The storm outside pounded the roof. Gunnar started forth, pulling Hessa at his side. She wanted to wait a little longer, but he left her no choice as he rushed forth. Rain slapped against them at the door. The two guards were prone on the muddied earth, their faces downturned and their necks at odd angles to their bodies. She shook her head and tried not to look back.

"Your room," he said. "Take me there first. It's best to let the others escape and then wait until they chase after them."

"My room," she repeated, thinking of the dreams she had of him, of how those torrid dreams had made her wake lusty and heated. She motioned him in the direction of the servant quarters. "This way."

They traveled along the edge of the cell building and ducked into the darkness of an alley. His long strides kept him close to her despite her trying to sprint along. At the end of the alley, he tugged her backwards and pulled her up into his arms. "No matter what happens," he whispered against her lips. "Thank you for this chance. A man is not a man unless he can be free."

Before she could respond, he kissed her hard, stealing her breath. Then they were on the move again, Hessa leading him to the modest room she had spent most of her uneventful life in. As she opened the door and stepped into the darkness, she wondered if this would be the last time she came to this place.

Gunnar had to duck his head to pass inside. Hessa looked back at him as she lit the tallow candle to illuminate her allotted space. He shut the door and set his sword across the two bars to lock it from the outside world.

Water dripped from his chin. Droplets clung to his face. “Are you sure we’ll be safe here?” she asked, her mind turning over the idea of what it would be like to lick every last tear of rain from his skin.

“I’m not sure, but that’s the way of life.” He shrugged and ran his hands through his wet hair. “Being stolen has taught me that everything is uncertain, that every moment must be seized for its full potential.” He licked his lips and wiped his hand across his face.

She backed to her tiny cot, reached behind her, and found her drying sheet on the bedside stand. Hessa offered it to him. Now that he was here in her small space, she realized just how gigantic he was. He took the fabric and unfolded it, hunger in his eyes.

“You are my lady now.” He came forward and wiped the moisture from her cheeks. “I will care for you for the rest of my days.” He dried her neck and tugged at the laces on her clothes. Her shift fell away. Gunnar patted her shoulders, following the cloth with his lips.

She closed her eyes. Every gentle stroke of fabric across her cool, moist skin brought her a feeling of peace and bliss. Each well placed kiss let her believe that someone could love her and want her. He dried her entire body, at some times brushing his bare cheek across her skin, but mostly kissing her until she stood naked and pleasantly warmed from his attentions. Only then did he strip away the loincloth he wore to reveal not only his arousal, but intricate tattoo work across his hips.

“The mark of my family,” he explained. Gunnar touched the brand on Hessa’s neck and traced it with his fingers. “If you want it, I can make my mark upon you as well. It will tell the world that you are of my clan, not of this Omi House that keeps slaves.”

She nodded. If the mark of the Omi was gone from her body or changed enough that no one could know she belonged to them, then she could be free. She could leave this place and go anywhere in Radaeh. “Will it hurt?”

“I will make it gently.” He smiled at her and ran the drying cloth over his body. “When we leave this city, I will mix the dyes and find a needle to change what they have done to you.”

She shivered with anticipation and hope. He took up the blanket from her cot and wrapped it around her. “Sleep in my arms for a time, Hessa. I’ve longed to hold you close to me.” He pulled her down onto the cot, curling his massive body against hers until she was enclosed in his strong arms and cradled by his heat and strength. His lips brushed her forehead. “When we reach Chalois I’ll take you to the islands, show you all the wonders of my homeland. The wind will know you are mine when I sing its name.”

She breathed in time with him until she slipped into dreams of water that spread across the horizon as far as she could see. There would be great monsters in the sea she rode upon. But his ship would keep her safe. He would protect her from anything that might do her harm.

* * * *

Gunnar’s warm fingers trailed across her skin when a hint of sunlight began to light up Hessa’s small room. She lay still and kept silent, curious to discover what he would do to her. He drew symbols over her abdomen, circled her navel, and dipped lower to curl his fingers into the hairs at the apex of her legs. He massaged her body with slow strokes and began to hum. His low voice was beside her ear, his lips soft against the lobe. She arched her back when his fingers

dipped lower to slip into her slit. Moisture pooled there, guiding his seduction. She moaned when his index finger brushed over her clit, firing off her nerves.

He groaned in her hair and stopped humming. His teeth nipped at her earlobe. Gunnar's tongue darted out to tease and tickle her skin. "It is a beautiful morning," he whispered. "To wake alongside your body."

Goose bumps prickled her skin. His words tickled even more than his tongue had. She shivered and smiled.

"My bed isn't so cold with you in it."

He laughed softly. "Nor does it have as much room now."

His fingers rubbed a little faster, slipping up and down over her hardening nub. She squirmed. He pressed against her ass, his cock demanding at her backside. He nibbled her neck, kissing and sucking until she closed her eyes and gave in to whatever he would do. Her body became tense, hot, as if she had a fever. Hessa did her best to hold still, to concentrate on the rush of sensations placating her womanhood. He pushed his other hand between their bodies, between her legs and tested her opening.

She whimpered.

He slid one finger into her tight wetness. She thought it felt so huge inside of her, motionless, filling her up as she had never been. His other hand continued to tease and torture her. With a shuddering cry that forced her to bite at her bottom lip, she felt everything inside of her implode. A wave of pulses shot off in her womb, ticklish to the point of being unbearable, but so pleasurable she lost herself in the bliss of it all.

The finger inside her pushed in even further, then tapped at her insides. Another wave of sensations swept through her. She clenched her teeth and held her breath. She knew she must be quiet. If anyone heard her, they might come to investigate. Then he would be discovered.

“That’s it,” he said. “Breathe, Hessa. Let it out.”

She took in a deep breath and exhaled, her body, her legs quaking from what he had done to her. His finger pulled out, leaving her empty. Then he positioned her body, turning her face to the grass stuffed mattress, bending her knees so that her backside faced him. The thick, round head of his cock slid up and down along her slit, once, twice, three times. He guided it down to her clitoris, already so sensitive from what he had done, then to her entry where he circled and pushed in a small amount. This part of him was bigger than his finger had been.

“Breathe,” he told her again. “Relax.”

She did as he commanded. His length pushed into her achingly slow, stretching her to accommodate his girth. And even that felt good. She scooted back to take more of him. He took hold of her hips and began a quick thrusting dance. Deep into her he pressed, then out, then in. His body slapped against hers. The cot creaked faster and faster.

She fisted the mattress hard and gasped. His hand swept beneath her body to her abdomen and he began to pound her pussy, burying himself deeper and deeper until she thought she might be torn in two.

He groaned behind her and grunted. She felt a flood of hot moisture erupt inside her body. Gunnar stilled, his cock still penetrating her. She was afraid to move when the orgasm hit her body. This one was not as strong as the first. Hessa felt exhausted. Sweat beaded her body. He thrust one final time, filling her. Then he withdrew from her body completely, leaving her to collapse on the cot. She lay there, struggling to catch her breath.

Hessa was vaguely aware of him moving through the small room, of the splash of water in her washbasin, of the sounds of fabric being pulled together. The cot strained and creaked before she felt the shock of a cold, moist cloth come between her legs.

“Your maiden’s blood,” he said in a soothing voice. “I shouldn’t have been so rough.” He lay down beside her and kissed her shoulder, gathering her backward against his body.

“That was...not as I expected it would be,” she whispered. “So powerful.”

She felt his cheek rise on her shoulder as he smiled. “But I should have waited. It was wrong of me to take you like that.”

She turned in his arms and looked up into his dark eyes. “Will it always be that way when you take me?”

He frowned for a moment, pondering her question. “First times are not always like this. I hope it will be something you look back on without regret. Did I hurt you?”

Her body did feel sore, but not in a bad way. Timidly, she dared to say, “You can hurt me this way again. As many times as you like.” He smiled at that. Heat rushed to her face. As much as she had longed to do this with him, she didn’t think it would make her feel this way. Her body was tingling; her mind was clear and free of worries. She felt at peace with herself, and a part of something other than Omi House.

“Rest a little while, Hessa, and when you are ready, we should leave this place before the sun is completely risen.”

“We should leave now then. There’s no time for rest. I would be dressing and soon heading to my duties at this time of the morning.”

He kissed her forehead. “Very well then.” Gunnar pushed up from the cot and began to gather her belongings. There was very little, but he placed each thing, her comb, her supply of worn clothes, and the few trinkets she had collected over the years into a pile and wrapped them into a bundle made from a bed linen. She stood to ready herself to leave, but her legs shivered so badly that Hessa fell forward.

Gunnar caught her and steadied her against his body. “Rest a little more,” he soothed. “Your body is tired. We have time to make our escape.” He set her back across the cot and draped the thin blanket atop her. “I’ll watch over you.”

She nodded and sighed. He looked like a guardian as he went to the small window and squinted at the outside world. But she knew there was cause to worry. If the cell keeper remembered anything of the night before, he would remember that he had taken her to his home, and he was bright enough to guess that she had stolen the keys to the prisoners.

Chapter Five

Hessa poked her head outside her room and stared at the line of guards that crossed the street. These were nothing more than paid assassins sent to recapture the men who had escaped. And if they killed them by accident, surely their fee would be less, but what mattered was that no one escaped. It would be bad for business. Omi House thrived on control, on a plentiful supply of whores to bed and men to fight in the pits—bawdy entertainment for the men and women of the assassin guilds that paid dearly for something to see or do that was out of the ordinary.

She waited until the guards passed before she stepped out into the street. Rain drizzled from the wan clouds clinging to the sky. The sun fought to shine down on the world. She started along the street, keeping close to the buildings. Gunnar soon followed, wearing a makeshift wrap about his body as if he were one of the harem girls from the east. All she could see were his eyes. His massive sword was disguised in the wrappings and tied at his back. She feared someone would stop them. He was so tall, a giant walking amidst people who were one or two heads shorter.

They passed the fighting pits, and even in the slight rain people had begun to gather for a show. Wild animals growled and roared from the lower pens where they were kept before they were set into the arena. She looked back and saw the emotions in her lover's eyes. No fear, but something sadder, more terrible, the look of a man who had seen death and suffering too many times. "We can take the trade road." She had never followed it before today, but she knew it led to other cities, to the forestlands, to countless places that exported goods to Bisura. The one thing Hessa didn't know was how far they would need to travel to be safe.

Gunnar's eyes softened. He hurried his pace with a few strides until they walked in time with one another. "Should something go wrong, run." He patted her shoulder. "You run away, and I will find you, Hessa."

She nodded.

They bypassed two taverns and a smaller building she knew to be where the children were housed. A play yard in the back offered sounds of laughter and sing-song games. She remembered her own time there with little fondness. It was there that the headmaster had punished her for stealing by lashing her back with the whip. And she had fought him then, only to have her spirit broken and her face cut with the man's dagger. She looked ahead, trying to bury that memory. "When we reach the outskirts, there will be farmland," she told him. "Then I think we will come to the forests."

"Anywhere is better than this Godsforsaken city. The first town we come to, I will find work. We can save up enough coins to buy a horse. Then travel the roads south to the sea." He squinted at the horizon.

Hessa followed his gaze, curious and thinking perhaps he knew the way to go better than she could guess. His fingers caught hold of hers to squeeze and offer comfort. She realized why. Ahead at the city gates were several guards, and these men did not look like they had been drinking the night away like the ones from the cells.

Gunnar's hand slipped away from hers. "Remember what I told you. Run. Don't look back. I will follow after you when I can. We are meant to be together. The Gods will give us that chance again if we part ways."

She fought the urge to turn and go back to her room. Freedom had never been this close. She knew the men ahead would not let them pass. Dread filled her. There was no escape, no way out. Life would go back to what it had always been—endless days of cleaning, working, lewd comments from drunk men that didn't see her as anything of value. She looked back the way they had come, at the children's building and the arena beyond. Then she remembered what that brothel woman had whispered in her mind. "They will not break me," Hessa whispered, repeating that woman's words. She curled her fingers into fists.

Gunnar stepped away from her as if to walk in another direction. He started to hum, his voice low and mesmerizing. Wind swept up from the valley beyond the city and pushed back her hair.

She marched forth, scared but determined. “They will not break me,” she repeated to steel her resolve.

The light drizzle became heavier. Droplets of rain pattered down all around her on the hard-packed dirt road. She kept setting one leather clad foot before the other until she was but a few steps from the line of dangerous men that waited to stop her.

“Where are you going, woman?” one asked with a sneer.

The man next to the first fingered the handle of his blade with meaning.

“My master has sent me to hire someone.” It was a vague answer, and she doubted it would gain her passage.

The one with the dagger laughed under his breath. “Which someone?”

She looked past them, past the sprawling fields of jindi and the date palms that swayed in the gathering wind. She knew few people outside of Omi House, but there was one name that she had heard of—the most feared assassin in all of Bisura. “Lord Brenin Drake.”

The man who had sneered at first grew pale. “What business does your master need of Lord Drake?”

“You know what business I speak of.” She placed her hands on her hips and scowled at them. “Now, let me pass and be on my way.”

The dagger bearer took a step toward her. Two others reached for the hilts of their swords. Her nerves were beginning to get the better of her. She thought maybe they could see through her ruse.

“You may pass,” one said. “Our worry is not over a woman.”

“That’s the one,” a guard said, his nonchalant nod pointing out Gunnar though he stood much farther away. “I remember his shape from the pits. They bypassed Hessa, and one man slapped her ass. “Be on your way, woman, before I have a mind to use you for myself. Stop this way when you’re done with your master’s business if that idea pleases you.”

She turned back, staring at Gunnar. He was alone against four men. With two fingers he pulled the fabric down that had hidden his nose and mouth. Run, he mouthed to her. She hesitated. What if she ran and he didn’t catch up? What if these guards overpowered him and he was sent back to the pits and the cell she had found him in?

The guards picked up their pace.

Gunnar held his ground.

Hessa turned her back on him and did as he had told her to do. She ran from the place of her birth, the sordid, whore-ridden city of Bisura, and she sprinted through the fields toward a black tower jutting up from the ground far in the distance.

Chapter Six

She was too frightened to look back. Hessa raced through the jindi fields, flat leaves slapping at her legs and tugging at her skirt. All the while she ran, she heard Gunnar's voice tempting the wind. She reached a brick road that wound its way to the tower's mouth. The entrance was ornate, with vines and a trellis, and even ornamental flowers at the border edges. But none of that mattered. She ran through and into the unknown, hopeful for sanctuary.

"Hold there," a woman's voice said. Garbed in a shroud and hidden by the fabric but for her dark eyes through its netting, a yeinei servant came forward. "What business do you have here?" She sounded angry, and her hand strayed to a dagger at her belt.

"Please, help us," Hessa begged. "My...man and I are journeying to the forestlands. But they want him for the pits."

The yeinei bypassed Hessa and set her hand across her forehead to peer at the scene unfolding near the city gates. "My master is no longer of the trade."

"What?"

The yeinei took a few more steps in the direction of the city, her attention set on the ensuing battle. "My master is no longer an assassin. He is not for hire, if that's the kind of help you need."

"We just want to leave the city." Her voice sounded meek, insignificant. "We want our freedom." Hessa stared in the direction of Bisura, but she had come too far to see anything of what had become of Gunnar. The city gates were hardly visible, and she listened, but couldn't hear his windsong.

“You desire freedom,” the yeinei said under her breath. “It is a noble cause, but to bring down the wrath of the guilds on my master’s house is not something I want to face up to. He would not forgive me for that. Your pit fighter must stay where they have charged him.”

“Freedom is not a popular right in Bisura.” This time a man spoke. He came up behind Hessa, his footsteps soundless, his face half scarred, much like hers. The yeinei gave him a short bow.

“What is your name, dark one?” he asked.

“Hessa.” She glanced at the belt of blades about his waist, and was well aware of the richness of his clothes. This man had the look of danger in his eyes and a serious expression on his battle worn face. He stared hard at her, awaiting the rest of her name.

When she did not answer, he stepped forward and touched the ruined side of her face. “We look of the same ilk,” he said, for his cheek seemed to match hers with its scars. He pushed down the neckline of her dress to expose the brand that had been burned into her skin as a child. “Hessa Omi,” he said and nodded in understanding. “How did you manage to come this far from the holdings of your masters?”

She wrung her hands together, frowning. “My lover...and I...”

One of his eyebrows arched in question. A muscle in his cheek tensed. “Yes?”

“We...escaped.” She knew he would be well within his rights to tie her up and drag her back to the city. Omi House would likely reward him for doing so.

“Mm.” The man bypassed Hessa and the yeinei. He paced a moment, his thumb and forefinger pinching at his chin. After a time, he whistled through his teeth, a shrill noise that echoed in the charmed wind. A horse nickered somewhere in the distance before it galloped toward the estate. When the black animal reached him, he climbed atop its bare back and nodded at Hessa. “Come with me. We will settle this matter.”

She took a step back, afraid. He would take her back to Omi House now. Gunnar would be punished if he had not managed to escape the guards, and so would she.

“Come,” he said again, and held out his hand.

She shot a worried look at the servant, but the yeinei only spoke to her master. “My Lord, see how the winds have changed. I can smell the magic of the seas in the very air. The islander from the pits must be fighting again.”

He nodded. “I will not hurt you, dark one.”

Hessa gave in and placed her hand and her life in the palm of the strange man. “Are you Lord Brenin?” She looked up into his eyes and saw a small white light there, glittery and mysterious.

“I am.” His fingers closed tight. He hoisted her up in front of him and braced her waist with one arm. “You will do well to hold your tongue about what happens this day. It is not something I do at all.”

She clenched her teeth, unsure what to think.

With a nudge, the horse started into a gallop, bringing her back the way she had come. Hessa shivered and kept thinking that at least she had been held by Gunnar, at least she had experienced a small moment of happiness, of passion and a connection she didn’t think possible. Their time together had made her attempted escape worth the risk.

The man at her back leaned forward, forcing her to lower herself closer to the horse. He clucked his tongue. The animal responded, increasing its pace. They tore through the jindi field. Clods of earth and ruined plant parts sprayed in their wake.

At the city gates, which were now partially closed, three of the four men who had confronted Hessa lay wounded on the ground. Gunnar had vanished. Blood stained the earth.

“Lord Brenin!” a man shouted. “One of the pit fighters has escaped. There’s a high price on his head should you see him.”

“The islander?”

“Yes, Lord.”

Brenin’s horse circled the guard. “I will keep an eye out for him. He shouldn’t be hard to miss. I’ve seen him fight many times over.”

Soon after, Brenin rode to the main servant quarters in the Omi holdings, and dismounted. He helped Hessa down and held her wrist as he led her through the main entrance of the building.

At the counter, the wrinkled man in charge raised his balding head to regard them. “Can I help you?”

“Omi Master, I wish to purchase this woman.” Brenin tugged Hessa up to the counter. He kept a tight grip on her so that she couldn’t run. But his words served to confuse her even more. She had expected to be turned in, not this. Why would he want to buy her? What could his motive be? He didn’t know her, didn’t have need of anything. He was Brenin Drake, the highest paid and mostly deadly assassin known to the city. But his yeinei had said he was no longer an assassin; that comment puzzled Hessa.

“Ah. Lord Brenin.” The old man smirked. “There are other, more attractive, women available. Are you certain this is the one you want?”

“Yes.” He sighed and offered a grim look of disdain. “I have a woman to warm my bed. This one will have other tasks. How much for her?”

The master reached across and touched Hessa's scarred cheek. "I know this girl. She has no guild traits. Not desirable as a brothel ward. Only good for hard labor." He pulled his hand away.

"Basic laborers are ten."

Brenin reached into his purse and counted out the coins. "I want the Omi mark burned out."

"Do you want your mark upon her?"

Brenin squeezed Hessa's arm before he released it. "Of course. She is mine and all my possessions bear my mark."

The man raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. After turning his back to them, he searched the bookshelf behind him for the tome that contained Hessa's records. He flipped through the pages until he came to the sad entry of her birth. Her mother's name was scrawled there in neat writing, marks that she couldn't understand made to represent a woman she had never met or known.

"Sign here to claim her. I will have her delivered to your home this evening."

Brenin drew his name across the parchment in a flourished font. Hessa stood there staring at the marks, wishing she could read, and astonished that she had been sold away to a new master as simply as that. Brenin stomped out before she could thank him.

"Get to the bathhouse," the man behind the counter said. "I'll have a woman clean you up and dress you better than those rags. It wouldn't do for you to come to the Lord's house in such a poor state. I don't know why he wants the likes of you." He frowned. "Unless he thinks you are his twin because of your scars. Could be that." He snorted out a sardonic laugh before he waved her away.

In a daze, Hessa walked out. She followed her feet to the rear of the main house and went into the bath rooms. Steam and scents of perfume drifted through the dim air. She stood at the entry until someone came to attend to her. Hessa let the other woman strip away her soiled shift and

wash her in a lukewarm bath. She closed her eyes as stiff fingers dug into her scalp and scrubbed. Bathing had never been as luxurious as this. It was usually a harried chore before bed or at daybreak with chilly water and harsh soaps. This was the bath house used by the whores. Although it didn't sit well with her, she knew she had moved up a notch in the status of life if she was here. Hessa was no longer an undesirable servant of the pits, but a servant who would work in the house of a wealthy assassin.

"Lord Brenin does not buy servants of Omi," the woman said as she set a drying sheet over Hessa's shoulders. "What have you done to draw his eye?"

Hessa chewed her lower lip, thinking. "Nothing."

The other woman snorted. "Indeed. I should take your place. I can clean better than you can. You're only fit for the pit fighters, an ugly thing for them to look upon before they die."

Hessa gritted her teeth, angry. She pushed away from the woman and scowled. "I am fit to do what I please. While I tend the manor of a high assassin, you will still be washing whores here in Omi House. Maybe he wants me because I'm not twisted and cruel like you are."

The woman huffed and walked out, leaving Hessa to find the clothes she had brought. She dressed herself in the new shift, a work of finer linen with no stains and golden embroidery at the hems. It tied at the back so that it could fit most wearers. She ran her fingers over the design and thought of Gunnar. Had he been returned to his cell, and allowed only the loincloth to wear? If so, no one would tend his wounds or offer him any kindness now.

She picked up the small bag of her belongings that he had so carefully packed for her. At that moment, the horn sounded in the pits, announcing a battle. The crowd cheered. They had gathered in the drizzling rain, their clothes sodden but their lust for blood insatiable. Nothing had changed much at all.

When Hessa stepped out into the weather, the jilted washwoman waved her hand to the burning house where Hessa would go to have the Omi mark removed and Lord Drake's mark burned into her skin. Walking with fortitude and without fear for herself for the first time in her life, she stepped inside. The small house stunk of coals and smoke.

The man there had one blind eye, and he had been expecting her. A hot brand stood by the hearth in the midst of the round house. It was in the shape of a winged serpent curling in on itself.

"I am the property of Lord Drake," she said.

"Come and bear his mark then." He smiled a crooked grin and beckoned to her with one hand.

She sat across from him and slipped down the neckline of her shift. Hessa closed her eyes and clenched her teeth, determined not to cry out. The fire popped. Metal grated against stone. The man warned her with a word, and then she felt the bite of heat press into her flesh.

Chapter Seven

Hessa Drake stood by the window in the dark tower that belonged to her master. He was a strange man, given to silence and brooding or long trips away. He hardly spoke two words to her at a time. Hessa spent her waking hours cleaning, though there was little sullied in the great black tower. She wandered throughout the mysterious hold, dusting shelves or statues that had no need of her attentions and pondering the turn her life had taken.

It was midday. She listened to the birds outside her mistress's open window and watched the hired workers far below come to the jindi fields to dig out the roots for market. In the distance, the sounds of Bisura's pits drifted on the wind to her, but she did not hear Gunnar's humming or his song. She longed for his voice, for the touch of his fingers on her face, but most of all she longed to know what had become of him.

"You are thinking of the warrior again." It was her mistress, Shenya, who came up behind Hessa and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Yes," she answered. "I would give anything to be with him again."

Shenya brushed her finger over the scar where the Omi mark had been burned away. In the days that followed her arrival at the hold, Shenya had cared for Hessa's brands with a numbing salve. Now the marks were healed, one a blank square and the other, the shape of the winged drake. "I have told Lord Brenin your feelings for the pit fighter. Perhaps you will be relieved to know that he is not fighting in the pits or in the breeding cells."

"What does he do now, Lady, if he is no longer an assassin?"

Shenya pursed her lips. She looked out the window at the fields for a long time before she answered. "My Lord is a bounty hunter of sorts. He brings back those who have been lost, and he brings them back alive."

“Who does he hunt for now?”

Shenya set her arms on the windowsill. “Omi House has a high price on your warrior’s head. Few survive the pits as long as he did. The crowds still call for him. Perhaps it would also please you to know that he hunts your pit fighter.”

Tears welled in Hessa’s eyes. “He’s hunting Gunnar?”

“It has been weeks since the escape. All but two of the pit fighters have been found. One is your Gunnar. Another, Omi House masters suspect, was too wounded to survive the forestlands. He likely succumbed to the predators there.”

“Lady, if there is anything I can do...anything to buy Gunnar’s freedom...”

“He is free now,” Shenya said, her eyes still studying the outside world. “My Lord never fails to find what he seeks.” She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “He was curious about your warrior. Not many have traveled as far as the sea, and there has never been a man here with the magic your warrior possesses. He is valuable indeed...but as something more than entertainment.”

Hessa narrowed her eyes on the strange dagger at her mistress’s belt. It was something precious, she judged, for its hilt was ornate and marked with the symbol for Othia, the sun god. Although her mistress had been nothing but kind to her, she wondered how easy it would be to take that dagger and run. Gunnar had wanted her to run. She shouldn’t have stopped here. She should have kept going the day they tried to leave the city.

Shenya faced her. “Men of power are often misunderstood and exploited.” She reached for her belt, and for a fleeting moment, Hessa thought her mistress would draw the dagger. Instead, she unhitched the coin purse there and held it out to Hessa. “Take this down to the headmaster in the fields and pay him for his work. I have no more need of you, Hessa.”

“No more need?” The heavy purse weighed down her palm. Hessa fastened it to her own belt.

“No more need. Remember that wherever you go in this life, you are not Hessa Omi, but Hessa Drake. My Lord’s mark has meaning both in Bisura and well beyond. Enough meaning to see you and your lover on a safe journey through the forestlands...should you happen upon him again.”

Hessa backed from the room. “You wish me to leave.”

Shenya nodded. “And never come back.”

“I will forever remember your kindness to me.” She reached the doorway and it took all of her resolve not to bolt through it and race down the stairs. She memorized the benevolent smile on Shenya’s face, every bead and bell sewn in to the other woman’s dress. They had something in common, maybe many things, but Shenya knew Hessa’s longing, and for some reason, she was offering her a way to find what she had lost.

“May Othia and Ishas watch over you for the rest of your days.” Shenya went back to the window to watch the workers below.

“And with you, Mistress.” Hessa did run then. She took the stairs two at a time, racing down and down until she reached the hewn door at the lower part of the tower. She didn’t go to her room to collect her belongings. She raced through the courtyard instead, anxious to sprint through the upturned fields to the headmaster.

The moment she left the ornate entry to the keep and stepped into the open air, she heard a familiar sound dancing in the wind. Her heart raced with the probability of the moment. From the west, she heard the horn sound in the pits. To the east, the sun glowed bright in the cloudless sky. Before her, the field of tilled jindi bordered the forestlands to the north. She slowed to walk toward the line of workers who were tossing root crops into carts.

The headmaster wore red, a fiery dyed swathe of fabric that reminded Hessa of the yeineis. He was tall, so much taller than the men who worked for him. At his back she noticed the hilt of a sword. When he faced her and grunted, she held her breath. His dark eyes shined when he looked down at her.

“My mistress sends payment for the harvest,” she finally said, and held out the purse to him.

He stepped toward her and took what she offered. With his free hand, he pulled the fabric away from his face and smiled. “Your mistress is most generous, Hessa Drake.” He nodded at the men still toiling. “As was your master. Each year these fields need to be worked, and each year at this time the jindi needs to be brought to market. Lord Drake wants it sold in Jondah.” He tied the purse at his waist belt and reached for her hand. “Would you come there with me?”

She nearly knocked him down when she embraced him. “I would follow you to the ends of Radaeh and over the edge.”

Gunnar lifted Hessa in his arms and spun her three times in a circle. “Our world never ends, love, and I will gladly take you wherever the wind bids me go.”

* * * *

The next morning, Hessa opened her eyes and stared up into Gunnar’s face. His hair was tied back in a knot. His dark eyes were clear and joyful. Gunnar’s thumb lingered on her lips. “Hessa,” he whispered. “The day is here and we are together again. I told you the Gods would favor us.” He lowered his mouth to hers and drew his thumb away. The kiss that he forced on her was hard and wet. His tongue slipped past her lips to roll with hers.

Hessa arched her back in response to his closeness. Deep in the wilds of the forestlands, she had found love at last. Although they lay in a tent, their bodies padded from the thick pine needles and lush earth by woolen blankets, Hessa was happy and hopeful. No one would force her to do

something she didn't want to do. She wouldn't have to rake manure or clean the privies. And if she got with child, no one would steal that baby from her and raise him or her into servitude.

Gunnar kissed the brand on her neck, taking her mind off such thoughts. His tongue ran down her chest as he tugged away her dress to expose her body to his hungry eyes and heated body. He sucked her nipple into his mouth, his fingers massaging away her awareness. His knee ran between her legs to coax her body into arousal, not that she needed much help at all.

His tongue circled her nipple, sending tingles through her. She reached down to stroke her fingers through his thick hair. "I want to take you this time," she told him.

He groaned and sat up. With a curious smile, he laid back against their blankets, his cock thick and hard. It stood at attention beneath the curly, black hairs. She shimmied the rest of the way out her clothes before she climbed atop his body. With tentative fingers, she explored his broad chest, grazing each of his perked nipples. Down her hands went, caressing the ripples of muscle across his abdomen. She grazed his pubic hairs. When her hands closed gently over his cock, he breathed out a laden sigh. She had never touched a man in this way. His erection was firm beneath velvet soft skin that slid when she shifted her hold. She thumbed the top of his length, learning the shape of the soft, moist head there and delighting in the way he flinched each time her skin brushed over the slit.

Never having been in control of anything in her life until she set the keys in his hands to escape, she looked upon Gunnar at that moment as true freedom, a freedom that she wanted to at least partially control.

Hessa edged closer to his cock and guided the tip to her entry. She closed her eyes, breathed out, and slowly forced him inside her body. His thickness filled her completely. She leaned back and down, enjoying the connection to another person, and the way in which he had yielded to her. His hands closed over her hips while she swayed. Their pace hastened to a frantic race. When her body tensed and she felt the cusp of the orgasm threatening to break through all her inhibitions, she bit her lip to keep from crying out, but this time it was not to alert the guards, it was to keep

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their lovemaking a secret from the men in her lover's employ. The road to Jondah would be long, but she didn't think it would be long enough to sate her lust for her stolen warrior.

Anastasia Rabiyah

About the Author

Anastasia Rabiyah writes erotic romance, paranormal erotic romance, and fantasy. She often crosses genres in order to follow her muses into the darkness where they seek out destiny in all its forms. She believes in fairies, demons, angels, magic, passion, chocolate, supportive friends, e-books and writing critique groups. Her deepest desire is to pursue her creative dreams and realize them. Every spare moment she devotes to writing for her haunting muses.

Visit her on the web at www.RabiyahBooks.com

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