

THE DRAGON'S ALLIANCE  
THE CHRONICLES OF ARIANTHEM V

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*Also from Samantha Sabian*

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# Chapter 1

The marble terrace was a wonder of architecture, beautifully constructed so that it encircled the Queen's chambers and those of her staff, situated so that it overlooked the palace grounds and the skyline of the Ha'kan capital itself. The terrace was equally shared by the Queen, the High Priestess, the First General, the First Scholar, and any they chose to invite or entertain. For that reason alone, most Ha'kan would glance upward from time to time, hoping for a glimpse of their beloved royal staff.

But these days, many would glance up because more often than not, there was an enormous, fiery red dragon perched upon the parapet there, its gleaming golden eyes staring off into the distance, a terrifying protector of the Ha'kan and all within their territory. And sometimes a much smaller figure would join the dragon, one outwardly less imposing, but one as dangerous and equally effective in protecting the Ha'kan. And inevitably, when this second figure would appear, the dragon would disappear into a brilliant flash of yellow light, replaced by an elegant, silver-haired woman in fiery red armor that appeared in her place and then would take her young lover in her arms.

The morning air was cool and Raine welcomed the warmth of Weynild's embrace. Although Raine wore a silky, full-length robe in the Ha'kan fashion, Weynild could feel the coolness of Raine's skin through the fabric.

"You are still cold."

“Yes,” Raine replied, “It’s frustrating how slow my energy returns.”

As she said this, Raine turned to look out over the Ha’kan capital and beyond. Weynild settled in behind her, pressing her full length against her and wrapping her arms about her once more. Raine enjoyed the sensation and heat. Her dragon lover was a skilled shape-shifter. Although she could transform herself into almost any form, Weynild chose a human version that was consistent with her dragon form, older in appearance than most with such an ability would have picked. But Raine had been attracted to the dragon on first sight, and when she transformed into the older, regal beauty of her human form, Raine was lost to her.

“Most would not have survived Hel’s touch, yet you chide yourself because you have not healed in a week.”

And it had been only a week. A week since Skye, the young ruler of the Tavinter and beloved friend and ally of the Ha’kan had been attacked by monstrosities from the Underworld. A week since the most powerful of the Ha’kan, including the Princess, the First General, and the First Scholar had sprung to Skye’s aid, unfortunately to little avail. A week since Raine had appeared seemingly out of nowhere to do battle with the creatures, warned by the dreams of a powerful mage.

Weynild’s golden eyes narrowed and she unconsciously held Raine tighter. A week since Hel had manifested within the Membrane and put her hands and lips upon her lover.

Raine made a small noise and Weynild loosened her grip. “Sorry, my love.”

Raine grinned and Weynild was pleased to see her usual irrepressible good humor returning. “You are not hurting me,” she said, “but you know I find your strength arousing and that is probably the one thing I am still incapable of.”

Weynild buried her face in Raine’s hair. She possessed the strength of a dragon even in human form, so she was one of the few in all of Arianthem who was stronger than Raine. She also possessed the legendary lust of the dragons in her human form so their couplings were brutally passionate. Although Weynild had no doubt Raine would survive such passion at the moment, it would most likely delay her recovery.

“That has been the worst of all of this,” Raine said, tongue-in-cheek, “that I have had to lay next to you and behave.”

“Trust me,” Weynild said in that low, throaty tone that Raine so loved. “It has been just as torturous for me. Although I confess, I’m enjoying our time together.”

Raine silently agreed. Lately, they had been apart far too much and far too long for her liking. It was wonderful just to spend the days together in the beauty of the Ha’kan palace, even with so much darkness looming on the horizon.

A stunning woman dressed in the raiment of the Priestess caste approached them on the terrace. She moved with the mesmerizing grace and sensuality befitting the High Priestess of the Ha’kan.

“Astrid,” Raine said in greeting, and Astrid smiled warmly.

“Good morning, Raine, Talan.”

Weynild nodded at the formal recognition. Her true name was Talan’alaith’illaria, Queen of all Dragons, and most in Arianthem used the title as a form of reverence. “And how are you feeling this morning?” Astrid asked, addressing Raine.

“I grow stronger every day,” Raine replied, “thank you. The stiffness in my limbs is lessening.”

“Senta has made a suggestion regarding your recovery,” Astrid said. Senta was the imposing First General of the Ha’kan, a strong, handsome woman known for her bravery and skill in battle, and a valued member of Queen Halla’s inner circle.

“I welcome Senta’s advice,” Raine said.

Astrid paused delicately. “Well, it might be something the two of you wish to do together.”

This caught Weynild’s attention and she turned her glowing amber eyes upon the High Priestess.

“The Ha’kan baths are known for their rejuvenating effect.”

Raine’s eyes lit up. “The Ha’kan baths!” she exclaimed. “I’ve heard of this fabled place.”

Weynild looked wryly upon her mischievous lover. The Ha’kan were a race made up solely of females, non-monogamous and highly sexual by nature. Their culture was built upon sexual relationships and although love was always accompanied by sex, the reverse was only occasionally true. Sex was a soothing, binding, pleasurable experience that permeated the entire society. It was so deeply ingrained within their culture that Astrid’s respon-

sibility as High Priestess was to head the Ministry, a branch of their government devoted to the sexual development and well-being of her people.

Needless to say, the stories of the Ha'kan baths were indeed legendary.

Raine was teasing Weynild, but she noticed a look in those golden eyes, a reminiscence, a very fond remembrance.

"You," Raine said knowingly, "have been to the baths before."

"Yes," Weynild said, a smile tugging at her mouth, "I have been to the Ha'kan baths before."

Astrid's surprise showed on her face.

"It was long before your time," Weynild explained, "and long before even your great-grandmother's time. But as a young dragon, I was known to avail myself of the hospitality of the Ha'kan."

Astrid smiled warmly at the thought.

"And just how much 'hospitality' did you avail yourself of?" Raine asked in mock accusation, her tone still teasing.

"I assure you," Weynild said, "all of it."

Raine grinned at the thought, and Weynild once again felt her love for the youngster nearly overwhelm her. The "youngster" was centuries older than the High Priestess next to her, but Weynild's age stretched past a millennium, so Raine was indeed young to her. But Raine had such a careless confidence about her it made her nearly incapable of jealousy, which was a good thing as dragons were a lusty lot and the number of Weynild's former lovers rivaled the number of stars in the sky.

Raine, however, had experienced only one lover and the dragon was not quite as careless when it came to her possession. Raine did so little to stoke the fires of jealousy, though, it was an emotion that Weynild rarely felt. And the Ha'kan, as sexual as they were, by the very openness of their nature did not engender that response.

"And would you deny me the hospitality you yourself enjoyed?" Raine asked, teasingly.

"Of course not," Weynild responded. "You may enjoy the hospitality of the Ha'kan."

"All of it?"

Golden eyes glowered at her. "No," Weynild said emphatically. "Not all of it."

Raine simply laughed and the two walked off hand-in-hand under

Astrid's smiling gaze.

Raine wore another robe, this one white and made of soft cotton. It was the Ha'kan garb generally worn to the baths, although once there, many women draped towels about themselves, and some wore nothing at all. Weynild also wore the luxurious robe associated with bathing and it gave her a distinctly different look than the fiery red armor she normally manifested. Manifested, rather than wore, was the proper description because the armor was actually a part of her. But she could remove it with a mental shrug, and often did so to lie skin-to-skin with Raine.

The robe did not, Raine thought with a sideways glance, make her look any less regal or terrifying.

"What?" Weynild asked, her golden eyes coming around with great precision.

"Oh, nothing," Raine said. "Just thinking that you look so marvelous in that robe, this will be difficult."

"Hmm," said Weynild noncommittally. The truth of it was that it would be torture, and really, she could not guarantee her continued abstinence from her love much longer.

The baths were as much a marvel of architecture as the great terrace outside, and perhaps even more so. It was said the ancient dwarves had created the mechanical steam contraptions deep in the earth as repayment for a favor from the ancient Ha'kan. As a result of these mechanical wonders, the room was warm, steamy, and smelled of lavender, juniper, and many other wonderful fragrances. The various pools were different shapes and sizes, some designed for a communal experience, others much smaller and designed for a more intimate experience. Steps flowed down into the water so that the participants could sit on the edge, be partially submerged or relax with the water up to their necks. As always, there were alcoves for various flirtations but most of the intricately tiled room was open. It was lightly attended this morning as most Ha'kan had gone about their daily business.

A lovely woman in that wondrous Ha'kan space of mature adulthood flowed toward them. Weynild surmised she was from the Priestess

caste based upon the warmth and sensuality that emanated from her like warmth and light emanated from the sun.

“My name is Ima,” the Priestess said. “I am Senta’s personal therapist. She has said you might benefit from some healing work.”

“That would be wonderful,” Raine said. “If you can work the kinks out of the First General, I am certain you will work magic with me.”

Ima bowed gracefully in acknowledgement and led them to a space designated for such a purpose. It was a tiled, sunken square with steps leading down to some cushioned tables. The square was bordered by wide, marble ledges with cushions strewn about where Weynild settled comfortably. Bodily shame was a foreign concept to the Ha’kan and their appreciation of the female form bordered on worship, so it was highly consistent that such an area would not be hidden in a back room but rather set in open theater. Raine followed Ima to one of the tables.

“You may wear the robe if you like, although generally the massage is conducted without clothing.”

Raine shrugged. “When in Haldis,” she said, referring to the Ha’kan capital, and dropped her robe.

Ima, surrounded with beauty from birth and trained from a young age to be a model of tact and self-control, struggled to maintain her composure. Weynild could not help but notice that the woman strumming the lute in the corner missed several notes as the instrument emitted a discordant mess until it got back on key. And her lover, who stood like a god carved from marble, was as oblivious as always as she went face down on the table in a lithe movement that made the muscles in her arms and back bunch, then relax in glorious repose.

Ima stood for a moment, gathered herself, then went to work. It took all of her willpower to concentrate upon the task at hand because the muscles were like steel but the skin was silky smooth, a heady combination. The shoulders were broad but not manly, the back tapering to slim hips and strong legs. Every muscle was developed and defined, and had Raine any extra flesh on her she might have been large. But she had none and instead was a perfect specimen of physicality, a body that had been blessed by the gods at birth, then trained through constant, strenuous activity over centuries.

Weynild glanced up at a figure at her side.

“I’ll not stand up there peering around the columns like some school girl,” Astrid said, settling in beside Weynild. “I’ll come down here and get a front row seat.”

Weynild shifted, making room for the High Priestess next to her, welcoming her company. The appreciation of the Ha’kan did not inspire any ire in her. Paradoxically, she found it enjoyable, although it did significantly increase the odds that Raine’s recovery would be delayed as there was little doubt she would be pinning that little exhibitionist to her bed before long.

Another figure approached Weynild and she turned as Queen Halla settled in on her other side, also dressed in a white robe. Astrid leaned forward to address the Queen.

“Bathing a bit late this morning?”

Halla paused, then decided equivocation was unnecessary. “No, no,” she said without a trace of self-recrimination, “I came for the show.”

Weynild smiled at the openness of the two gorgeous women flanking her. It was of infinite enjoyment to sit between the loveliness of the Queen and High Priestess of the Ha’kan while watching her lover murmur with pleasure as the hands moved skillfully over her body. She leaned forward and blew out a breath of hot air that whispered over the surface of Raine’s skin. The sensation was so pleasurable to Raine she could not control the response and muttered a mild imprecation which she muffled by pressing her face into the sheets.

It did have the desired result, however, and the intricate blue and gold markings that Raine normally kept hidden rose to the surface of her skin. Halla gasped in astonishment. The pattern was beautiful, spread over Raine’s back, traveling up over her shoulders, then down her arms and forearms. Ima could not resist and traced the markings with her fingers which elicited another anguished sound from Raine as the markings were actually scars that to this day were hypersensitive. The touch made every part of her alive and she had to keep from squirming in her very pleasant and pronounced discomfort. She had buried her face in the cushions of the table when the heat had flowed over her skin, but now she turned to Weynild.

“If you don’t stop this,” Raine said through gritted teeth, “the Ha’kan will get to see far more than my markings.”

“But then you will be flat on your back,” Weynild said, her tone even

drier, “and they will not get to see your pretty little markings at all.”

Raine relented. “I would argue,” she said off-handedly to Ima, “but ‘tis true.”

“By the gods, her eyes are beautiful,” Astrid murmured as Ima regained her composure and continued her work.

Raine’s eyes had turned a deep violet when she looked upon Weynild, another characteristic she kept hidden for very different reasons. Raine was half Scinterian and half Arlanian, two mythic races that had passed into extinction. The Scinterians were once the greatest warriors in all of Ari-anthem, first dragon slayers, then fiercely loyal allies to them. Scinterian children acquired the markings in a ceremony designed to inflict such agonizing pain they would never experience worse, and therefore would not fear it.

The Arlanians, on the other hand, were as different from the Scinterians as the earth was from the sky. A gentle race, dark haired and violet eyed, not fully male or female until adulthood, they were skilled artists and musicians, but had no fighting ability whatsoever. And they were blessed with an intense sexual desirability that became a curse when their race was discovered and they were raped into extinction. Wars were fought over the last of them, and they considered it a gift that they could not reproduce outside their race and embraced extinction rather than the degradation of sexual slavery.

And Raine was the improbable, no, impossible progeny from the union of those two races, and the sole survivor of each. Both races were long-lived, and so she had found her perfect mate in the immortal dragon, Talan’alaith’illaria, because it took an Arlanian to satisfy the mythical beast, and a Scinterian to survive the act.

“Mmm, yes they are,” Weynild agreed in a tone of distraction, one that caused the two Ha’kan women to smile. The dragon was very absorbed at the moment.

“Ima, I think the massage is over,” Astrid gently suggested.

Ima glanced up, saw the look upon Talan’s face, and smiled her agreement.

Raine started to protest. “That seemed a bit short...” She then caught sight of those glowing golden eyes.

“Oh, I see.”

The last bit of pleasure was wrung from Raine as she collapsed backward into the soft pillows of her bed. Weynild sat atop her, straddling her, her long limbs pinning Raine's hands above her head, her firm breasts proudly erect, having offered Raine such an astonishing view in their just-finished acrobatics.

"And who is the dragon rider now?" Weynild said, leaning down to kiss Raine's neck, enjoying the saltiness of her skin.

The pun was not lost on Raine. "Yes, yes, I submit that the dragon has ridden me very hard."

"Not too hard, I hope," Weynild murmured, still kissing Raine's neck, no contrition in her tone at all.

"Your concern for my well-being is noted," Raine said wryly.

"It's your fault for being so indestructible," Weynild said, now kissing the other side of her neck. The feel of Weynild's breasts pressing against her skin was wondrous to Raine.

"At least I'm not cold anymore. Perhaps we should have done that a week ago."

"Mmm," Weynild responded. No, Raine's skin was definitely not cold any longer. She at last released her captive and rolled onto her side, disengaging herself from the Ha'kan contraption Raine wore. Raine released the clasp on the belt and set the device to the side.

"The Ha'kan do make the most marvelous sexual toys," Weynild said. "I shall have to thank the High Priestess for her suggestion."

Raine examined the harness from her prone position. "Skye told me that there is an entire guild devoted to the development and manufacture of such devices, a collaboration between the Priestesses and Scholars. Can you imagine being the test subject for these experiments?" Raine then frowned a little. "It did please you, did it not? I was a little distracted with my own pleasure."

Weynild looked upon her lover with fond exasperation. She had been the one on top, taking her pleasure at will and riding her companion so hard it was fortunate she didn't grind her into dust. "I climaxed at least three times," Weynild said, "and that was before that."

Raine turned to where Weynild was nodding. The chair next to the bed had been charred and was now little more than chair-shaped ash. "Ah," Raine said, "a release in more ways than one."

“It’s a good thing that most of the Ha’kan palace is stone and tile, otherwise we might burn it to the ground.” Weynild propped herself up on her elbow. “I do think you should rest for a while.”

“While you do what?” Raine asked, suspicious of her tone.

“I’m going to fly out to the border, see where the Alfar and imperials are to gauge the timing of their arrival.”

“They can’t be too close because the Tavinter would have reported it.”

This was true. Skye’s people were forest nomads and excellent scouts. They acted as rangers for the Ha’kan, both in peace and war, and it was an alliance that complemented the strengths of both races. No one would cross into Ha’kan territory without the Tavinter knowing it.

“I could go with you,” Raine suggested.

There was an impish quality to the suggestion and Weynild turned her glowing eyes upon the lithe creature in her bed. “I imagine the Alfar would be here before we even reached the edge of the forest.”

Dragons were intensely proud and few mortals ever had the honor of riding aback one. Raine was the exception, not only because she was Weynild’s lover but because she was Scinterian, the ancient allies the few in history who were accorded such an honor. But riding aloft Weynild in dragon form, the sinuous neck between her legs paired with the rhythmic beating of her powerful wings, almost always drove Raine mad with desire. And Weynild, who lived to satisfy her Arlanian, would dive toward the earth to sate that need. Unless urgency demanded, dragon flight with Raine was not always a faster alternative than walking.

“I could try and exhibit some self-control,” Raine said doubtfully. “Maybe.” She paused once more. “Okay, not at all.”

Weynild gathered her into her arms. “I want you to go to sleep. I may be back before you awake.”

It was evident Raine was not completely recovered as she fell asleep within minutes. She moved fitfully when Weynild gently disentangled herself, but Weynild wrapped the goose-down comforter about her and stoked the embers in the fireplace to life with merely a breath.

A short time later, the gigantic, magical creature appeared on the parapet of the royal palace. The mighty legs flexed, tendons contracted, and the dragon leaped skyward, the great wings unfurling like the mainsail of a ship. All Ha’kan below stopped what they were doing to watch the mag-

nificent, iridescent drake glide over their capital, then with a great thrust of wings, swoop powerfully toward the open sky.

Raine slept for a few hours and was disappointed to find that Weynild had not returned to her bed. She was not really surprised, however, as the Ha'kan lands were extensive and their border was hundreds of miles away. She did not think the Alfar would be here for weeks. She washed herself in the cool water from a nearby porcelain bowl, then pulled on a pair of breeches, a loose shirt, and yet another elegant robe that had been provided by her hosts.

She pushed through the wood-framed, stained glass doors that bordered the terrace and saw that Queen Halla and her staff were seated about a table under some fronds shaped into an umbrella. It was spring in the Ha'kan capital, and although the mornings still held a chill, the afternoons were warm. The High Priestess waved to her to join them.

“And how was your massage?” Senta asked as Raine approached.

“Most excellent, First General, thank you for your recommendation,” Raine replied, taking the seat that was offered her.

Queen Halla dabbed at the corner of her mouth with a napkin. It was not Ima who was responsible for the look of contentment on Raine's face.

Gimle, the lovely, willowy First Scholar, spoke up. “I was disappointed that I missed it. I would have liked to see your markings.”

Astrid turned her knowing, heated gaze upon the First Scholar. “And everything else, of course,” Gimle said without hesitation. “But I am fascinated by the markings.”

Senta laughed as she raised her favored black tea to her lips. She herself had been disappointed to hear she had missed the show.

“You may see them at any time,” Raine offered. She extended her forearm to Gimle and pulled up her sleeve. “They are always there, I merely control whether or not they can be seen.”

As she said this, she clenched her fist and the beautiful blue and gold pattern rose to the surface. All of the Ha'kan leaned forward with interest.

“May I touch it?” Gimle asked.

“Of course,” Raine said, then caught her breath as Gimle brushed

her fingers across the surface of her skin. “They are scars,” Raine explained, “but somehow they are still sensitive after all these years. Not in a bad way,” she added, “not painful.”

“How is that you’re able to hide them?” Gimle asked. “And your eyes as well?”

“I’m not completely sure,” Raine said. “I knew only one Arlanian, my mother, because her people were almost extinct by the time I was born. And I knew few Scinterians because they were not numerous and almost all were killed in the Great War. But as far as I know, none of them could hide their markings or their eyes.” Raine was thoughtful for a moment. “It’s something that most of the time requires little effort. When I wish to hide my eyes, I concentrate on being Scinterian, and when I wish to hide my markings, I think about being Arlanian.”

The conversation was growing a little somber so Astrid sought to lighten it. “Except when you are looking at Talan.”

This brought the smile back to Raine’s face. “The color of my eyes displays with deep emotion, so yes, I cannot hide them from her at all.”

Servers brought out trays filled with soft and hard cheeses, fruit, crusty bread and pastries. Consistent with the communal nature of the Ha’kan, the women serving them were not “servants,” rather this was simply their job and the Queen graciously thanked them for their efforts. Astrid, Gimle, and the Queen ate sparingly, but Raine’s appetite was exceeded only by Senta’s.

“Thank the gods you’re here, Senta,” Raine said, “or I should look like one of the pigs from the forest.”

“From what I understand,” Senta replied, “you had more of a workout this morning than I did.”

This was particularly funny as Senta had spent the morning on the training fields in strenuous physical exercise, and it brought smiles all around, including one from Raine.

“You are correct,” Raine said, helping herself to seconds.

The women finished their very enjoyable lunch, then rested just a moment in the warm sun as the dishes were cleared from the table. A figure on the adjacent terrace caught their eyes. It was Skye, leaning on the railing of the terrace that surrounded the chambers of the Ha’kan heir and her staff. The chambers of the Princess mirrored those of the Queen, and the terraces

were connected by a walkway. The attitude of the figure was one of preoccupation, the posture one of dejection.

“Has she been like that all week?” Raine asked.

“Yes,” Astrid responded. “Lifa has said that Skye is not really herself at the moment.”

Lifa was Astrid’s successor, the future High Priestess, and it was one of her duties to monitor and report on the well-being of the future royal staff.

Senta put her linen napkin on the table and started to rise. “I will speak with her.”

Raine’s hand on her arm stopped her.

“I know Skye is a member of your staff,” she said. “But perhaps I could speak with her?”

“I would welcome that,” Senta said, and sat back down.

Raine excused herself and crossed the walkway to the adjacent terrace. Skye was indeed lost in thought as she did not notice Raine until she was nearly on top of her, and the Tavinter noticed everything.

“Hello Raine,” Skye said. She might have been a bit morose, but the smile was still warm for her idol.

“And what is this?” Raine said. “You’re normally the sun in the summer sky, and today you’re the moon on a cloudy night.”

Her friends had tried to elicit conversation from her all week, and she had wanted to talk but just couldn’t get the words out. But now, the prompting from the one she adored beyond all others loosened the lump in her throat.

“I just feel terrible that I’ve endangered everyone. And you keep having to save me.”

“Okay,” Raine said, “the first time I didn’t save just you, I saved Dal-lan, Rika, and some other students as well. And that was purely by accident because I was hunting the Hyr’rok’kin.” She and Weynild had come to the aid of the girls when they were still at the Academy, slaughtering well over a hundred of the monstrosities, including a Marrow Shard. “That was great fun,” she said, recalling the event fondly.

Skye had to smile a little at the remembrance, also. It had been terrifying, but it was the first time she had met Raine and the dragon.

“And the second time, I didn’t really ‘save’ you, I was just helping Isleif because you were sick. He was really the one who saved you.”

Skye did not know how true that was because Raine had created a filament of a connection with Skye to keep her from passing into the Underworld while Isleif removed the poison from her body and soul. And the mention of the wizard's name clouded her expression once more.

"And the third time," Raine said, trying to remember the progression of events, "I 'saved' you from the danger that I put you in, because you were helping me retrieve that enchanted stone."

That was true, Skye thought. She had been helping Raine when the sorceress Ingrid had briefly captured her.

"And this last time," Raine's voice drifted off. This last time she had battled an army of Reaper Shards, the wraithlike demons that lived half in the mortal world, half in the Underworld, possibly the most dangerous of all the Hyr'rok'kin. "Okay, this last time, I did save you, but I also saved Senta, Gimle, Dallan, and Rika."

"Yes, but they were defending me! Those things wouldn't have come were it not for me!"

That was true, also, Raine thought. "So you've been told about Isleif."

"Yes, Talan told me last week."

It was a shock for Skye to learn that the powerful wizard she had revered her entire life was her great-grandfather. Isleif had hoped to shield her from the fate of her mother, who was poisoned by the evil of the Reaper Shards when they discovered her enormous magical power. Everyone believed Skye harbored the same power, although Skye could hardly believe that because her abilities as a mage were middling at best.

"I half think the Reaper Shards came on rumor alone," Skye muttered, disparaging said abilities.

"It doesn't work that way," Raine chided her.

"But that's just it. I'm mediocre as a mage and supposed to possess this great power. And this power that I can't even use has put everyone in danger. The sorceress comes because of me. The Reaper Shards come because of me...."

"And Hel came because of me," Raine said abruptly, cutting her off. "It's my fault that the Goddess of the Underworld now threatens all of Arianthem simply because I am Arlanian."

"What?" Skye exclaimed, "That's not true! It's not your fault..." The implications of her own words sank in. "Oh."

“Skye, none of us can change what we are. I learned that a long time ago, when I wanted to bury the part of me that is Arlanian, thinking it was weak. But I wouldn’t be who I am without it.” Raine was thoughtful. “Destiny can be a great burden, but I have always believed that destiny is what you make it.” She placed her hand on the younger woman’s shoulder. “And believe it or not, there will come a day when you will save me.”

“Really?” Skye said in disbelief. That did not seem possible, any part of it. It did not seem she was capable of saving Raine, or that Raine would ever need saving. But Raine was insistent.

“Yes. This has been foreseen. Which is why you must concentrate and practice to develop the gift that is in you.”

Skye frowned again. She much preferred being on the training field with Dallan and Rika, using her sword and bow.

“Such a face!” Raine said, laughing at her expression. “There are a few fringe benefits to this training, you know.”

“What benefits?” Skye said skeptically.

“Do you see that woman down there?”

Skye followed her gesture. No, she hadn’t seen her, but she hardly knew how that could be.

There was a woman with long, raven-black hair sauntering up the steps of the palace, and she definitely was not Ha’kan. Long dark eyelashes flicked to acknowledge the admiring looks from the guards. She wore robes that clung to her curves and a neckline that plunged to her naval, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of full breast with every step. Heat seemed to rise off her, leaving a shimmering trail in her wake, equal parts magic and raw sexuality. The smoldering gaze flicked upward, and the woman laughingly blew a kiss to Raine.

“By the gods,” Skye murmured, “who is that?”

“That,” Raine said with emphasis, “is your new mentor.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in. “What?” Skye exclaimed.

“That is Idonea, Talan’s daughter. She is the one who is to help you develop your skills.”

“By the gods,” Skye said again.

“Yes, you two will have to spend a great deal of time together. I hope that’s acceptable.”

Skye’s eyes fairly glowed with excitement, her demeanor having

changed completely.

“Yes,” she agreed, “I do have a lot of work to do.”

Raine could hardly keep up with Skye as she sprinted down the circular stairway and both arrived at the palace entrance as Idonea stepped through the wrought-iron gate. Skye had an attack of shyness at the last second, however, and Raine strode past her, taking the voluptuous mage in her arms in a light but warm hug. Idonea returned the affection, giving Raine a fond peck of a kiss on her cheek.

“Idonea,” Raine said, “thank you for coming. And thank you for your warning.”

It had been Idonea who had dreamed that Skye was in danger and given Raine enough warning to save her from the Reaper Shards.

“I see she is still in one piece,” Idonea said, her laughing dark eyes flicking up and down Skye, “so the warning was in time.”

“It was perfectly timed.”

Skye did not like the fact they were speaking about her like she was not there, as if she were a child. She stepped forward and bowed in a manner worthy of the ruler of the Tavinter. “I am Skye,” she said ceremoniously, “welcome to the Ha’kan palace.”

“Oh, you are precious,” Idonea said, and Skye blushed to the roots of her hair. Any attempt at dignity wilted under the scorching amusement of the raven-haired mage.

Queen Halla and her staff had observed the change in Skye’s demeanor and witnessed her enthusiastic departure from the terrace. Curiosity had brought them, too, to the palace entrance. Raine remembered her etiquette as the four approached.

“Your Majesty,” she said formally, “this is Idonea, Talan’s daughter and Isleif’s successor.”

Queen Halla took Idonea’s hand and pressed it between her own. “Thank you so much for coming,” she said warmly.

Idonea examined the lovely, graceful woman. The beauty of the Ha’kan was not exaggerated. All four women, although distinctly different, were gorgeous. The Queen was dark-haired, curvaceous, elegant and stun-

ning. The woman to her left had long, light hair, a slender, willowy figure, and fine features that were complimented by the spectacles she wore, and Idonea thought that this might be the First Scholar. The very large woman to her left, handsome and imposing, was undoubtedly the First General, her brown eyes sparkling with good humor. And the woman to the Queen's right could be none other than the High Priestess, her exquisite beauty and sensuality as regal as that of her Queen's.

"I have no idea how you stay faithful to my mother," Idonea said, addressing Raine.

Raine cleared her throat. Idonea never was one for ceremony. But the Ha'kan seemed only entertained by the irreverence, fascinated by the mystical creature in front of them.

"I imagine your journey was long. There are numerous rooms within the palace," Queen Halla said, "and you may choose any you wish. Skye?"

Skye stepped forward. "Yes, your Majesty?"

Astrid hid a smile at Skye's excessive formality, as did Raine.

"Why don't you show Idonea the guest room that is available in Dallan's forum? It is probably the most comfortable and I don't think Dallan would mind."

Skye's eyes glowed at the prospect. Dallan most definitely would not mind. She bowed to Idonea. "If you would follow me."

Idonea ran her fingers through Skye's hair fondly, and Skye once again blushed crimson. The women watched the two leave, and Senta noted that Skye's step was far lighter than she had seen it in days.

"Well, that can only be good for the girl," Senta commented.

"She's got a bit of her mother in her, doesn't she?" Gimle murmured, speaking of Idonea.

"She grows more like her every day," Raine replied, shaking her head. "The Divine help us all."

Skye led Idonea to Dallan's forum, the circular living chambers a duplicate of the Queen's. Unlike most of Arianthem, it was traditional for the Ha'kan to undergo a very benign succession. At some point, Queen Halla would simply relinquish her throne to her daughter, and she and her

entire staff would become cherished advisors. Although Halla's mother had passed some years earlier, the former First Scholar still lived within the palace. The former High Priestess maintained a suite there, but chose to spend most of her time in the town of her birth where she was fairly worshipped.

To ease that transition, the younger generation of Ha'kan held positions that paralleled their predecessors. Skye explained the living arrangements as they entered the forum.

"That is Dallan's room," she said, pointing across the community area, "and next to her is Lifa's room, the future High Priestess."

Idonea examined the stately but comfortable room. It had a large, stone fire pit in the center surrounded by couches. "Although most of the time, Lifa stays at the Ministry Building," Skye continued. "And really, everyone spends most of their time there, and many nights."

"And why is that?" Idonea asked innocently.

Skye colored a bit. "Well, there are three castes in Ha'kan society, Warriors, Scholars, and Priestesses. And the Ministry houses the Priestesses."

"And?"

Skye cleared her throat. "Well, you know. The Priestesses provide pleasure for all who want or need it."

"Sexual pleasure?" Idonea said, sounding shocked, and Skye realized she was teasing her.

"Yes," Skye said primly, "sexual pleasure."

Idonea was pleased to see the girl begin to stand up to her.

"Kara is the future First Scholar," Skye said, resuming her role as tour guide, "and her room is there. And Rika is Senta's successor, and her chambers are there. And then this is my room. It's the one difference between the Queen's forum and Dallan's, since my position is new for the Ha'kan."

"Well, shouldn't you actually be in the Queen's forum? Since you are the head of the Tavinter Rangers?"

"By the gods, no!" Skye exclaimed, eliciting a low, throaty chuckle from Idonea that reminded Skye very much of Talan. Technically that was true, but Skye had attended the Academy with Dallan and her cohort, and so remained with them. She could barely handle the distracting sexuality of the young Ha'kan, and being in the presence of the Royal Staff was overwhelming. Although she did occasionally share the bed of the First

General, Skye usually scurried through the Queen's forum, praying that she would not run into the sultry elegance of the High Priestess or Queen. Even working with Gimle was a trial in concentration.

"And this will be your room," Skye said, pushing through the door. It was laid out as the others, with a front room lavishly furnished and designed for entertaining guests, then a back bedroom with closets, bookshelves, and an enormous bed also designed for entertaining guests. Several robes had been laid out on the blanket, and a basket of fruit and various sundries, soap, lotion and the like, on the nightstand. Skye nodded toward a table and chairs that could serve multiple purposes.

"You're welcome to eat here if you wish, but the Ha'kan always eat together. In fact," Skye corrected herself, "they do everything together. And it's my experience that they will welcome you to every part of it."

"Every part of it?" Idonea said with a slight lift of her eyebrow, and for once Skye did not blush at the innuendo. She examined the voluptuous mage in front of her. "Oh yes," she said, "without a doubt."

The Ha'kan, although resembling human females, were an entirely separate race. Their reproduction was independent of sexual activity and attributed to the mother alone via parthenogenesis. This quirk of reproduction greatly shaped and influenced their society and culture. The Ha'kan rarely experimented sexually outside of their own race, though, simply because it was so very dissatisfying. And generally speaking, they were not attracted to non-Ha'kan. Skye had proven an unusual exception and was fully embraced by the insular people. She thought the Ha'kan would likely make an exception for Idonea as well.

"Well, now there's something to look forward to," Idonea mused, "although I have likely complicated things, which I imagine will become apparent when the imperials arrive."

The comment was curious, but Skye would not pry.

"Is there anything else you need?" Skye asked. "I believe Talan is out patrolling but should return any time. I'm not scheduled for lessons with Gimle until tomorrow, and it's already late in the afternoon. Perhaps you would like to rest before evening meal?"

Idonea tousled Skye's hair again, eliciting the color Skye thought she had successfully banished from her cheeks.

"That would be fine, my little Tavinter."