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THE CHRONICLES OF ARIANTHEM VII

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*Also from Samantha Sabian*

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# Chapter 1

The women standing at the top of the steps of the Ha'kan palace were all similar, yet a study in contrast. Their similarity was an uncommon size and beauty; their dissimilarity was the manner in which that beauty was manifested. Astrid, the High Priestess of the Ha'kan, the woman responsible for the ultimate sexual well-being of her people, was a vision of elegant and sensual grace, the robes of her vocation hugging the curves of her body. Gimle, the First Scholar, the head of the Scholar's caste, was slender and lovely, her scholar's robes giving hint to the mysteries that lie beneath. Senta, the First General, was the largest in height and size, her gleaming armor adding to her size, her handsome features and confident demeanor adding to her allure.

And then there was the Queen. Halla was resplendent in her royal robes, a perfect mixture of the castes of her society, possessing the sensuality of a priestess, the wisdom of a scholar, and the strength of a warrior. She was both the leader and epitome of the Ha'kan, the all-female race that rivaled the empire in military might and influence. And today she waited with great expectation and a trace of unease for the return of those dearest to her.

"I think I see them," Senta commented, shielding her eyes. "The Tavinter scouts said they were close."

Halla's heart gave a little flutter as she, too, saw the dust from the horses. Her daughter was more than capable on her own, a fearless warrior and a respected military leader. Still, it had been difficult to let her go, even

though she was accompanied by the Tavinter and her own, future First General. Rika was growing as formidable as her mentor and she would lay down her life for Dallan without hesitation.

The clatter of hoof beats on the cobblestone streets of the Ha'kan capital grew louder and many cheered as the Princess and her entourage passed at breathtaking speed. It had been a long journey, but the horses sensed their riders' enthusiasm and rallied for the last stretch. They flew across the bridge to the castle and entered the courtyard where the panting beasts were corralled by the royal ostlers. Dallan tossed the reins to the nearest as she slid from the horse's back, patting his twitching flanks in appreciation. Rika, too, dismounted, a huge grin on her face. It was good to be home.

One fair-haired rider sat on her horse, glancing about her with a bemused expression on her face. This felt very familiar, but in an odd way. It was as if the world about her were blurry and slowly returning to focus. Or rather it was not the world that was blurry, but her memories of it, which were slowly gaining in clarity. She slid to the ground as she was greeted enthusiastically by all near.

"Are you okay, Skye?" Torsten asked. He was Tavinter, like Skye, and her second-in-command. He had also been her friend since childhood.

"Yes," Skye said with growing certainty. "I'm fine."

"Then let me take your horse, the Queen will want to see you."

Dallan stood at the base of the stairs. "Torsten's right, Skye. My mother will want to see you. Come now."

Skye continued to glance around as she joined Dallan and Rika and started up the steps, and more things came into focus. This was the Ha'kan capital where she lived. Her quarters would be in Dallan's chambers, the circular area where the future Royal Staff lived, the one that was opposite and adjacent to the Queen's chambers. This thought brought her wandering eyes to the terrace above, the one where four gorgeous women stood. Her musings had slowed her pace and Dallan and Rika were already at the top of the steps, showered with embraces and motherly assessments of their well-being. She slowed even further and the last step was taken almost tentatively as she stood examining the four before her one-by-one. She smiled shyly, for she remembered them all.

"Your Majesty," Skye said, then bowed in the formal Tavinter custom.

"Oh, Skye," Halla said, abandoning all royal protocol. She stepped

forward and clutched the young woman to her breast, causing Skye all sorts of pleasant consternation and profuse blushing. And the fact that the Queen held her for so long, perhaps even longer than she had held her daughter, caused Dallan to grin. Skye did not speak of it, but she had long had a crush on the entire Royal Staff, and Dallan was pleased to see she remembered it.

Halla released her, but Skye was only briefly free as Astrid enveloped her in another, not-quite-maternal embrace that, if possible, made her blush even more. The Queen and High Priestess had occupied her dreams for years, and right now, she could remember the fantasies more than the realities. The sensuality of the two together was overwhelming.

And then there was Senta, a different kind of overwhelming, but one no less powerful. The stern general looked gently down on her young charge, and a flood of memories returned to Skye. Of Senta at the Academy, kissing the First General mischievously on a training exercise, of the First General waiting years to repay that playful action. Skye's fantasies of the First General were just as vivid as those of the Queen and Astrid, the only difference being that many of them had come true.

"First General," Skye said formally.

Senta placed her hands on Skye's shoulders, examining the little Tavinter beauty who was so different from the Ha'kan. Although the Ha'kan varied widely in features, they tended towards darker hair and fair skin. Skye's olive skin, her fair hair, and hazel eyes were exotic to the once-secluded people and they had welcomed her as they had few others.

"First Ranger," Senta said, just as formally.

Skye cocked her head to the side, and Senta continued. "That is the title we decided upon in your absence."

The corner of Skye's mouth curled upward, creating the slightest dimple in her cheek, and Senta could remain formal no longer. She pulled the young woman to her and hugged her tightly. Skye could barely breathe, but it felt so wonderful and safe to be held by the First General.

"Oh great," Rika muttered, "that means she outranks us both."

Dallan chuckled, for strictly speaking, that was true. Skye had attended the Academy with them as part of an innovative exchange program and therefore had always been a part of Dallan's cohort and her staff. But in theory, Dallan was the future Queen and Rika was the future First General,

whereas Skye was now the current First Ranger. Not that Skye would lord it over them, for she was unassuming to a fault and preferred the company of the younger Ha'kan. The younger were playfully sexual, but the elder Ha'kan possessed a sensuality that was monumentally distracting.

"That means you will be earth far more than you are used to," Dallan teased, for the Ha'kan used the terms "earth" and "sky" to refer to how dominant a woman was in bed.

"Fine by me," Rika said, "I've missed her so."

This caused a cloud to pass over Dallan's features. She, too, longed for Skye with a passion that was nearly uncontrollable. The Ha'kan did not value monogamy and serial sexual partners were not only the norm but expected, for sex was a soothing, pleasurable experience that permeated the fabric of their society. Skill in the bedroom was as crucial for success as any other skill within Ha'kan culture. Friendships, contracts, and alliances were formed in bed, and even conflicts were resolved through sexual interaction. Love did not always accompany sex, but sex always accompanied love, and Dallan loved Skye dearly.

But Dallan had not approached Skye since her rescue, nor had Rika. Their return had been pell-mell, a headlong race through imperial territory in their haste to get home. They had hardly rested the entire journey, and most in the troupe fell into an exhausted sleep the minute they stopped. She had held Skye as she slept, as had Rika, but neither had done more than kissed her.

Dallan's expression darkened. She had to admit, that was not the whole reason for her hesitation. They had been in a band of soldiers and rangers, and there had been little opportunity to speak with Skye alone. Dallan did not know what had happened to Skye, what the sorceress had done to her in her captivity. She did know that Skye's memory had been taken from her and she had lived with her enemy for months as her lover. But Skye had said little on the way home and had been lost in thought, a perplexed and faraway look in her eye.

There was no such look in her eye as the First General released Skye and she moved on to the First Scholar. Lately, Skye's memories would return with such rapidity it would make her head hurt, but right now, the memories brought her nothing but pleasure. Gimle took Skye's hands in her own as the young woman spoke.

“You saved us all, you know.”

“And how did I do that?” the willowy scholar asked, her cool refinement as beguiling as Astrid’s heated elegance.

“Just when all seemed lost, I recalled our lesson on the invisibility spell and was able to use it.”

Gimle smiled as she recalled the lesson as well. She had taken the young woman to her bed and forbidden her to touch her until she turned herself invisible. Skye was able to do so and remain in that state for an extended period of time, during which she was allowed to do anything she wished and the First Scholar had benefited from her comprehensive exploration.

“Once you’re settled, we shall have to renew your lessons,” Gimle said, releasing her.

“I would like that,” Skye said happily, and all Ha’kan breathed a quiet sigh of relief, for that was a wonderful sign. It was also an opportunity for Astrid to segue into the next reunion.

“Speaking of which,” the High Priestess said, “there is one who has waited anxiously for your return.”

Skye turned at Astrid’s gesture and saw an exquisite young woman standing at the edge of terrace. She was radiant, exuding warmth and love, and she gazed at Skye expectantly.

“Lifa,” Skye breathed out, and moved to her. Her eyes traveled over the beloved features, the full lips, the lovely cheek bones, the auburn hair. Lifa took her hands in hers and engaged in her own examination, but one far more penetrating. Although her eyes lingered on Skye’s lips, they focused most intently on those hazel eyes, weighing, assessing, determining. And based upon what she saw, the future High Priestess of the Ha’kan leaned forward and kissed Skye fully on the mouth, deeply, passionately, withholding nothing. And Skye returned the kiss, also without restraint.

At last, Lifa drew back, took Skye by the hand, and led her from the terrace.

“Let us go walk in the garden.”

Astrid watched her future successor leave with pride. It was appropriate that Lifa be the one to assess Skye’s well-being and ease the transition of her return. Lifa would not have pressed Skye in any way had she sensed unease, but Skye’s ardent response indicated Lifa had judged her mood

well. And the fact that Skye had left the terrace under Lifa's spell without a backward glance was an excellent sign. The Queen expressed Astrid's thoughts aloud.

"Thank the Divine," Halla said, sighing. She turned to her daughter. "I was so worried what that sorceress might have done to her."

"I'm not sure what happened," Dallan said, "we didn't really have the chance to talk about it yet. I'm hoping that Lifa can work her magic."

"I should have sent a Priestess with you," Astrid said, a trace of self-recrimination in her voice, "there are many that are trained for battlefield situations."

"If Skye were Ha'kan," Rika said, "I think she would be fine. From what Syn said, it sounded as if the sorceress convinced her they were lovers. Unlike before, I don't believe she was forced or tortured."

"And from what I remember of her from her visit to the Academy," Gimle murmured, "I'm sure the sorceress is excellent in bed."

"Agreed," Rika said. "If it were me, I would be angry at the lies and abduction when my memory returned, but everything before that really wouldn't have bothered me."

"Well," the Queen said, "let us hope Skye will take this like a Ha'kan."

Lifa and Skye walked hand-in-hand through the royal garden. There were a few women about enjoying the fresh air and flowers, and they enjoyed the sight of the future High Priestess and lovely little Tavinter even more. Lifa waved greetings to them as they passed, but Skye saw only Lifa.

"Thank you," Skye said shyly.

"For what?" Lifa asked, swinging Skye's hand.

"For kissing me like that. I've felt like I'm contaminated or something with Dallan and Rika nervously jumping around me."

Lifa stopped abruptly and pulled Skye to her, wrapping her hands about her waist and pressing her full body against her. The feel of Lifa's breasts against her was wonderful and Skye's eyes went to the cleavage that had deepened upon the contact. When she looked up, Lifa again kissed her, a lengthy, searing kiss that took Skye's breath away. Lifa pressed her forehead to Skye's forehead.

“I can tell by the look on their faces they do not think you contaminated. Dallan looks to be in agony.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes,” Lifa said, “and the only reason they have hesitated is to make certain that you are all right.”

“Why wouldn’t I be all right?” Skye asked, her brow furrowing.

Lifa laughed. “You have no idea how good it is to hear you ask that question.” She took Skye’s hand and they began walking again.

“None of us really knows what happened with you and the sorceress. The last time she took you, she hurt you.”

Skye paled a little. She had forgotten all about that and Lifa wished she had not reminded her. But Skye pushed the memory away.

“It was not like that this time. I woke up months ago without knowing where I was or who I was. Eydis, or rather Ingrid, told me that we were lovers and I had nothing to convince me otherwise. At first, she was actually very kind to me, although a little possessive.”

“And later?” Lifa asked carefully.

Skye was thoughtful. “In the beginning, she convinced me that I was a delicate little flower that had fallen off a horse and hit my head.”

Lifa muffled laughter, for she could think of nothing so out-of-character for Skye.

“I think she did that on purpose,” Skye said, “giving me a background so at odds with my real self. There was nothing to trigger any of my memories. But later, I killed a Hell Hound that wandered into the fields, and I think she realized my mind was beginning to return.”

“And then what happened?” Lifa asked, watching Skye closely.

Skye had a faraway look in her eye, reassessing events she had lived through under a haze. It was difficult to analyze them, to chronicle them in a coherent order. Eydis had changed, become harder, more watchful, gradually dropping the charade as parts of Skye returned. But that hadn’t been all bad.

Lifa saw the mischievous look on Skye’s face, that twinkle in her eye that she adored.

“What?”

“There was a time when my memory first began to return, and the sorceress also began to act like herself, but I still didn’t know who she was.

I just thought that ‘Eydis’ had begun to act strange.”

“And?”

“It was very—,” Skye said, then paused. “Enjoyable.”

“Ah,” Lifa said. “Angry sex can be very passionate.”

“Yes,” Skye agreed. “Yes it can.”

Lifa stopped before a door, and Skye was surprised to find that they had walked all the way through the garden and were now at the tiered entry to the Royal Staff quarters occupied by the younger Ha’kan. She glanced to the doors along the circular structure. If she remembered correctly, her chambers were over there. The door they stood in front of bore the symbols of the Priestess caste.

“Would you like to join me in my chambers?”

Skye’s shy smile returned. “You so rarely stay in your own room. You’re not going to the Ministry?”

“If you wish, we could go there. But I thought you might enjoy a bath after your journey.”

Skye’s eyes lit up at the thought, and Lifa took her hand. “Come along now.”

Lifa’s chambers were exactly as Skye remembered them, and she catalogued the contents as each memory took hold. The tiled bath, gently sloped and easily large enough for two, was full of soapy water that carried hints of lavender on tendrils of steam that drifted upward. Leya and Freya, two of Lifa’s inner circle, were present. The Priestesses greeted Skye warmly, but quickly dismissed themselves, leaving Skye and Lifa alone.

“Now, off with those dusty clothes.”

Skye had often marveled at the Ha’kan skill in disrobing women, and none could rival the skill of the Priestess caste, let alone the future High Priestess. As if by magic, her shirt was over her head, her boots set aside, and her pants dropped to the floor. The undergarments were whisked away and she stood naked on the warm tile floor.

Lifa’s appreciation showed in her eyes. If Skye had spent the last few months in a pampered existence, it certainly didn’t show. She was as lean and muscled as ever, and if anything, a trifle thin. Lifa took her by the hand.

“Come now, into the bath.”

Skye stepped down into the marble pool. The hot water was luxurious

and Skye settled in up to her waist. Although she had taken many enjoyable baths in captivity, there was nothing quite like the beauty and safety of the Ha'kan palace.

And then there was Lifa, who was now disrobing, an action that absorbed all of Skye's attention. It did not seem possible, but Lifa was even more beautiful than she remembered. Her breasts were fuller, her skin was radiant, and she glowed with the inner light that had always illuminated her and everyone around her. But now that light was brighter than the sun. She slipped in behind Skye, reaching forward for the scented soap, pressing her breasts against Skye's back.

Skye relaxed against Lifa as the High Priestess spread lather over her body. Although Lifa's actions were not overtly sexual, they were so casually sensual they had an even more pronounced effect. The ministrations were both tender and gentle, yet even the most hardened Ha'kan warrior freely admitted that the Priestess caste were the most dominant members of their society. Skye could not help herself and turned to kiss Lifa, a bruising, longing kiss filled with desperation. And Lifa returned the kiss, her passion igniting. The breasts pressed hard against the muscular back and one lathered hand went to a firm breast while the other dipped beneath the water to work its magic. Skye twisted and turned beneath the skilled hands while Lifa held her tight, still stealing her breath with a kiss. It was not long before Skye's body released, never breaking the kiss of her lover.

Lifa at last released Skye from the bondage of that kiss and leaned back, Skye still comfortably in her arms. The two rested for a while, Lifa still languorously washing Skye, when Skye turned to Lifa with an impish look in her eye.

"Are you tired?"

"Of course not," Lifa replied. "Did you forget the stamina required of a Priestess?"

"I could never forget that," Skye said, "which is why I would like to move to the bed. I could never hold my breath long enough to do what I want to do here, and your stamina would surely cause me to drown."

Lifa laughed and took her by the hand. "Then by all means, let us move. I don't wish to be the cause of your demise."

They both took up soft towels, drying the other, and that act alone was enough to send them back into another embrace. They made it to the

bed, the soft, lovely haven large enough for several participants, and collapsed into the deep cushions. Skye was on top and began kissing Lifa everywhere, her eyes, her lips her throat, her breasts, her stomach, and finally down to the softness between her legs where she settled for an extended length of time. And Lifa cradled that beloved head in her hands, marveling at the skill of those lips and that tongue, thinking for the thousandth time what an excellent Priestess Skye would have made had she chosen that vocation. When her body released, it was with an abandon the High Priestess exhibited with few.

Skye pushed Lifa until she was certain she was fully satisfied, then pulled herself up next to her and lie with her head upon her shoulder. Lifa toyed with her hair, kissing the fair strands still damp from the bath. Sometimes Skye would doze off in the gentle afterglow, but today, although feeling a pleasant lethargy, she was nowhere near sleep.

Lifa sensed this, and quietly took advantage of the opportunity.

“You’ve returned at a perfect time. I am still responsible for your sexual development, and very soon you will have to learn something new.”

Skye raised her head, concerned. “Do you find me wanting?”

Lifa’s laughter bubbled over. “By the gods, no. Tell me you’re more aware than that.”

“Well, yes. I just wanted to make certain.”

“No, this is something entirely new that you just haven’t had the chance to experience.”

Now Skye was very curious. Her time with the Ha’kan had been a non-stop cornucopia of sexual experience, so she couldn’t imagine what she had missed.

“You’re going to have to learn how to safely make love to a pregnant woman,” Lifa said.

Skye felt a surge of excitement. This was a boundless honor. Pregnancy was a rare and revered event in Ha’kan culture. Despite their advanced medical and scientific knowledge, no one was quite certain how reproduction occurred. It was entirely independent of sex and rested solely with the mother through parthenogenesis. This quirk of evolution greatly shaped their culture and society, leading many scholars to propose that their sexual freedom was a direct result of this unique procreation, for neither the reproductive process nor the overt sexuality existed in any other

race in Arianthem.

Although pregnancy was to some extent rare, Ha'kan children were fiercely protected and few were ever lost. Most women had only one or two children, but some were prolific and had several. The race was long-lived and dominant in battle, and with all of these factors together, the population continued to gradually grow.

"That's wonderful!" Skye exclaimed. "Who will be—"

Skye stopped, for Lifa was looking at her expectantly. Skye's eyes drifted down to where Lifa rested her hand on her still-flat stomach.

"You?" Skye said with wonder. "You are with child?"

"I am," Lifa said proudly, and Skye now understood Lifa's newly acquired luminance.

Skye fairly pounced on her, hugging her tightly, then drew back, concerned.

"Did I hurt you? I'm so sorry."

"And this will be lesson number one," Lifa said. "You may not treat me like a porcelain doll. Ha'kan women are very resilient when pregnant."

Skye grinned. "I'm sure they are."

A quiet knock on the door somehow communicated a circumspect intensity.

"I am guessing that Astrid has told the others. Come in," she said, slightly louder.

Dallan and Rika strode in, having themselves cleaned and changed clothes. They could hardly contain their joy, rushing to the bed.

"Is it true?" Dallan asked.

"It is," Lifa said, the pride still in her voice.

Dallan fairly lifted Lifa from the bed, hugging her tightly. Rika then took her turn at nearly squeezing Lifa to death, then set her gently back down on the pile of pillows. Dallan sat down next to her, and Rika sprawled at the foot of the bed. Lifa took Skye back into her arms and pulled the sheet up around them, not out of modesty but because there was a slight chill in the air.

"I was just telling Skye she would have a new opportunity for development."

Rika grinned. "That's right. She has not had the pleasure, yet."

"You have?" Skye asked.

“Of course,” Rika said, “we learned the theory of it our third year at the Academy.”

“You learned more than theory,” Dallan reminded her.

“Ah, that’s right,” Rika said, relishing the memory. “As did you.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Skye said. Both Dallan and Rika were so charming, even at a young age, it was likely they received far more “training” than the average Ha’kan.

Lifa ran her fingers through Skye’s hair. Once again, the Tavinter did not recognize that her own charm put her on level with both the Princess and future First General, and the only reason she had not yet received the training was due to the numerous absences that fate had brought her way.

“You’re in for a treat,” Rika said.

“What do you mean?” Skye asked. She had thought the training would revolve around making certain the pregnant woman was comfortable and the child uninjured.

Both Dallan and Rika deferred to Lifa on the subject.

“The sexual drive of the Ha’kan woman peaks at two times during her life,” Lifa explained. “One is when she reaches her fourth or fifth decade, and then that lasts for a very long time. The second is when she is with child.”

“Really?” Skye asked, her eyes wide.

“Yes,” Lifa said, “we can be insatiable.”

“I can’t imagine,” Skye said, mulling over this seemingly impossible fact.

“Kara is already hovering about me,” Lifa said to Dallan. “She has determined to assist with every birth in the capital to prepare for mine.”

“That sounds like her.”

“She wanted to be here for your return, but there’s a woman giving birth in the market quarter, so she is with the midwife and those closest to the mother.”

This caused another little tug of a grin on Dallan’s face.

“What?” Skye asked.

“It’s one more good reason why you’ve returned to us now.”

“It’s widely believed,” Lifa explained, “that the child bonds to the mother’s lovers while still in the womb. That the strength of that bond is a direct result of the sexual intensity between the mother and lovers during

pregnancy.”

“Oh,” Skye said slowly. That explained a lot. No wonder Astrid, Gimle, and Senta were as much Dallan’s parents as was the Queen. Ha’kan reproduction was so physically different from other races they did not have traditional families. But they had formed something just as strong, if not stronger. Rika had once revealed that her own mother, a trusted member of Senta’s staff, had been killed when she was very young, but that the Queen had treated her just like a daughter.

“So,” Dallan said, “my mother has ordered celebrations. Although the Ha’kan need little excuse to rejoice, Skye’s safe return and the pregnancy of the future High Priestess are events worth celebrating. There will be parties, contests, and guests from all over the country. And that will get you warmed up for an even bigger event.”

“What’s that?” Skye asked as Dallan removed an official looking scroll from inside her tunic. Dallan handed her the scroll. Skye unrolled the parchment and slowly read the graceful scrawl.

“This is an invitation to the Alfar Ceremony of Assumption,” Skye said in wonder.

“You are the leader of the Tavinter,” Dallan reminded her, “as well as First Ranger of the Ha’kan. It is only proper that you attend.”

“Are all of you going?” Skye asked.

“No,” Dallan said, shaking her head. “My mother must attend because it’s her royal duty, and I must stay behind because it’s mine.”

There was a trace of disappointment in Dallan’s voice, but it was eclipsed by her delight. “I get to run the country while my mother is gone.”

“Really?” Skye asked, her eyes glowing at the thought. “And you will be in charge of the military?” she asked, turning to Rika.

“I will,” Rika said with pride. “Senta will leave behind her Second-in-Command, of course, just in case. But the forces will be mine in her absence.”

“And Kara will head the Scholar’s caste, and the Ministry will be mine,” Lifa said. “The Queen thought this was a very good opportunity for us to ‘practice,’ if you will.”

“And ‘tis safest,” Dallan commented, “just in case.” Her countenance darkened at the thought. “Although I’m sure nothing will happen to my mother as long as Senta is with her.”

“And don’t forget Raine,” Rika said, nudging her friend. “It’s certain she’ll be there, and there’s no safer place than at her side.”

“That’s true,” Dallan said, breathing a little easier. “And it’s only for a fortnight.”

“Perhaps I should stay,” Skye said doubtfully. Both options sounded wonderful.

“You are a head of state,” Dallan reminded her, “and a member of my mother’s staff, so it is appropriate for you to go. Although I admit,” Dallan said, ruffling her hair, “I would not let you go if the trip were any longer. You just got back.”

“That parting is still months off,” Lifa said, “so let’s enjoy our time together.”