

THE SHADOW GAMES
THE CHRONICLES OF ARIANTHEM VI

by Samantha Sabian

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Chapter 1

The dragon skimmed low over the tops of the trees, leathery wings brushing the tips of the thick foliage. The creature was enormous, its scales a dark fiery red tipped with iridescent yellow and orange, giving it the illusion of being on fire. So powerful was the illusion, it seemed anomalous that the forest below did not burst into flames.

Flocks of startled birds leaped into flight, a foolish response given the predatory nature of this creature, and panicked wildlife scattered as the immense shadow passed over them. But the dragon was unmindful of the chaos she caused, intent on the destination ahead. She was navigating by the Meridians, the lines of power that crisscrossed the world below, invisible to most but clear as day to her. And she was drawn forward by a beacon even brighter than the Meridians: one of her own kind.

The landscape below began to climb and so did she. As the mountains grew steeper, the air grew colder, but it was insignificant to a creature like her. Snow began to blanket the world and the structures of civilization, whether inhabited or in ruins, grew fewer and farther between. Soon, even the trees began to thin as the landscape grew harsher. Jagged rocks poked through the snow and cliffs erupted from the surface, the eonic work of glaciers.

Snow swirled in the frigid air, but any that landed upon the red scales melted. The melted snow flowed down the body in rivulets, then backward into the dragon's wake where it froze once more. If anyone had looked up, it would appear as if the dragon were a slow-moving comet. But there was

no one in this harsh land; none could survive the conditions.

And still the dragon went up, her wings beating rhythmically, her powerful heart straining not at all, although the physical exertion to make the climb was extraordinary. The air thinned and there was less to breathe, but that was counter-balanced by the lessening of wind resistance and the wings moved powerfully forward. Finally, the endless steepness of the mountainside gave way to pale blue sky as it flattened at its peak.

And there, impossibly, on the peak of this mountain, was a castle. And it was evident this was no ordinary castle for the dimensions were other-worldly, built for inhabitants very different than the small two-legged mortals that occupied Arianthem below. The hallways and doorways were gigantic, the parapets colossal, so wide they easily accommodated the dragons that were perched upon them. And the dragons, perhaps a dozen in number, all colors and sizes but none so large as that which approached, all sat waiting patiently for her. That was expected because she was expected, not because she had announced her coming but because the one she was looking for could sense her as easily as she could sense them.

She whirled about, making her approach in a tight, smooth turn, hovered briefly above the stone courtyard, then alighted in a graceful maneuver that only slightly shook the castle walls. The blue dragon that awaited her in the center of the courtyard smiled, revealing rows upon rows of sharp teeth. She, also, was enormous, much larger than the others and only slightly smaller than the fiery red creature that had just landed. In form she was opposite the red dragon, her light blue scales tipped with silver and white so that her scales appeared to be made of ice, so beautiful they looked like diamonds. She, too, had an iridescent quality about her, but where the red dragon appeared to be engulfed in flame, the blue dragon twinkled as if covered in stars. And then, with a flash of yellow and white light, the two dragons transformed and two gorgeous, regal women stood facing one another. One was encased in a gown made of blue the same color as her scales, her dark hair streaked with flattering silver that matched the gleaming embroidery of her gown, her light blue eyes the color of ice, yet heated in expression. The other was encased in fiery armor that fit her curves perfectly, her amber eyes flecked with red, her silver hair perfect for her elegant and aristocratic features. And all of the dragons bowed their long necks down low while the woman in the blue gown gave a slight

curtsy, her eyes lingering on the flawless swell of breasts framed by the wicked looking armor.

“My Queen,” the blue dragon said in greeting, “here to take your castle back?”

“Kylan,” Talan replied. “Of course not. I gave this to you years ago and it’s yours to keep. Besides, it’s a bit cold to my liking.”

The eyes made another shameless circumnavigation. “My dear, you could melt the snow at the top of Mount Alfheim.”

The exchange was multi-layered: two confident, ancient creatures, both powerful, both highly sexual creatures that could seduce anything that moved, including each other. And it was evident to the other dragons present that such a mutual seduction had occurred in the past given the playfully suggestive tone of Kylan, their mistress.

“I heard you had a new toy. I’m disappointed you didn’t bring her.”

“You keep well-informed considering you’ve been so isolated for centuries. It seems my love is attracted to women a thousand years her senior who are also dragons. And since you are the only other who fits that description, I thought it unwise to bring her.”

Kylan’s laughter spilled forth. “Probably a good decision, if what I’ve heard about her is correct. But you forget Volva also fits that description.”

Talan’s expression darkened. “Yes. We must discuss Volva.”

The blue dragon had expected this as well. “Then come into my palace, Queen of all Dragons.”

Raine eyed the tavern thoughtfully. It was in a very isolated location far from most trade routes and villages, set off from a little-traveled road. The establishment was poorly placed for any type of commerce, its only customers likely to be wanderers or travelers completely lost. And indeed, rumors swirled about these woods, tales of those gone missing without a trace. It was those rumors that had brought her here.

“What do you think?” she asked the dwarf at her side.

“The place gives me the creeps,” Lorifal replied.

“Indeed,” Feyden agreed.

Raine nodded, satisfied. “Me too. Then I will go in.”

“Going to use yourself as bait again?” Feyden asked. The taciturn elf’s tone was sardonic as always.

Raine examined her companions. A heavily armed and armored dwarf and a lethal looking elf would be too intimidating. Accompanied by them, it was unlikely she would get any information from the occupants of this tavern. She started removing her weapons and handed them to her friends.

“I’ll go in alone and do my best not to look threatening.”

Feyden snorted. Raine was by far the deadliest of the three of them, and even the sole dagger she kept on her person was all she needed to wipe out the nest of vipers that was likely within. Still, her striking beauty often gave her an advantage because it was distracting and caused almost all to underestimate her.

“We will be a short distance away, in the woods. You have only to call out if you need us,” Feyden said, his tone communicating how unlikely that scenario was.

“Thank you, my friend. This should be fun.”

The owner of the tavern looked up, surprised. Not only because visitors were extremely rare, but because she usually sensed their presence long before their arrival. This one, however, strode in unannounced and unanticipated.

Her eyes narrowed and she felt a staggering surge of lust. This woman was spectacular, fair hair, refined features, a slender, muscular build, and dark blue eyes that looked about the tavern innocently, with perhaps a trace of naiveté. She wore leather armor but did not bear any weapons and had only a small pack over her shoulder. After the quick, careless glance about the room, the stranger walked right up to the counter, a look of consternation on those stunning features.

“Pardon me. I seem to be very lost. Do you know how far it is to Elder’s Run?”

The tavern keeper assessed the visitor. It was her practice to either send visitors packing immediately or to delay them indefinitely. She had already determined this one was not leaving.

“I’m sorry, dearie. Elder’s Run is at least a day away and the sun is go-

ing down. ‘Tis far too dangerous to make that journey tonight. You should stay here until morning. We have plenty of rooms to rent.”

Raine frowned, appearing indecisive. “I knew I had gotten way off track. Very well, I will stay the night.”

“You can take that room, there,” the tavern keeper said, pointing to an open door off the main hall. “And we’ll have some dinner out here at the main table in just a while.”

“Great. Thank you.”

Raine closed the door behind her, then began removing her armor. It was as she suspected, four of the creatures were here. The tavern keeper was clearly the head of this covey, one of minor power and age but likely compelling to her followers. Two of the followers, a male and female, were full-blood, turned to darkness by the bite and blood of their mistress, and one, another female, was simply a thrall, turned only by her bite.

Raine’s assessment of the room had been far from careless. For not only were there four of the creatures, there was a woman and two children present as well. And Raine’s anger burned, for the woman scurried about fearfully, the cuts on her arms and her pale, wan face giving hint to why she was kept there. And her children played uneasily in the corner, hostage to a terrible situation. This small family complicated things.

Raine pulled on a simple, long-sleeve cotton shirt and a pair of comfortable breeches. She appraised her outfit, satisfied that she now looked even less of a threat.

When she re-entered the main room, a great deal of furious whispering came to an abrupt halt. The male and female sat at a table against the wall, watching the pale woman closely as she brought a tankard of mead to Raine. The woman’s hand was shaking and she sloshed a little on the table.

“I beg your pardon,” she said, her voice trembling.

“’Tis no matter,” Raine said politely. It was clear the woman wanted to say more, but she merely set the tankard down and hurried back into the kitchen to fetch dinner. The tavern keeper wiped the bar down slowly with a cloth, her eyes never leaving Raine.

Raine examined the other occupants of the room. The two children

avoided eye contact, playing with some sticks in a forced, mechanical fashion. The thrall sat staring dumbly at the wall, numb to the world. The male and female stared at Raine with an intensity that bordered on hunger.

The barmaid scuttled back into the room with a platter that she set before Raine.

“And what do we have here?” Raine prompted.

“Some beef stew and fresh bread,” the woman stammered. “I hope it is to your liking.”

The woman adjusted the place setting, and a slip of paper beneath the bowl caught Raine’s eye. It had six hastily scribbled words. “Danger! Don’t eat! You must leave!” Raine shifted the bowl so that it fully covered the warning. She glanced up at the woman serenely.

“I’m sure everything will be just fine.”

The woman took a step back, uncertain, then fled back into the kitchen. She had tried.

The tavern keeper sat down across from Raine and Raine noticed she had changed into a far more attractive blouse than she had on when Raine arrived. This dark maroon ensemble flattered her pale coloring and blood red lips, and it pushed her large breasts upward so that they nearly spilled out of the low-cut neckline. Raine could not help but glance at the two mounds, so perilously close to exposure. The tavern keeper was pleased at the attention. Perhaps this one could be seduced rather than forced.

The male and female watched with mixed emotions, jealousy, envy, and lust chief among them. This potential addition was gorgeous, but she could upset their little hierarchy. They both hoped the mistress would make her a thrall so they could do with her as they willed, but that appeared unlikely given the look on their mistress’ face.

“Do you mind if I join you?” the tavern keeper asked.

“It would be my pleasure,” Raine said, stirring her bowl of stew. “But you don’t have anything to eat.”

“I’ll have something in a little while,” the keeper said.

Raine took a spoonful of broth and pretended to savor it. There was a little something extra in the mix, not poison but some type of herb, a sedative no doubt. It would only mildly affect her as her tolerance for potions and tinctures was very high. Still, she would not consume too much.

“Come here, girl.”

The rough command drew Raine's attention and she stiffened as she watched the girl in the corner freeze. The little one looked up pleadingly at her and Raine struggled to maintain her composure. There was a terrible dynamic here, a look of lust in the man's eyes and terror in the little girl's. She did not know how far this mistreatment had advanced, but it was evident it would advance further with time.

"Not tonight," the keeper said sharply. She had seen the stranger's attention drawn to that potentially sordid scene, and she wanted no distractions. The male stiffened, obeying against his will, then settled to sulk in his glass of wine.

Raine felt a little dizzy, a result of the drug in the stew, and she exaggerated her response, swaying forward then nearly falling backward. Instantly, the tavern keeper was at her side to steady her.

"You are ill!" she exclaimed.

"I'm sure it's nothing," Raine said. "If you fear contagion, I can leave."

The tavern keeper helped her to her feet. "Nonsense. Let's get you to bed where you can rest. You're probably just exhausted from your journey."

Raine did not resist as the woman led her into her rented room, noting that she closed the door behind them. She guided Raine to the bed and Raine was groggily compliant, sitting on the edge as the woman removed her boots, then lifted the long-sleeve shirt over her head.

"By the Dark Divine," the woman murmured. The stranger now wore only a short shift, revealing muscular, well-defined arms and a chiseled torso. As strong as she appeared, however, she did not resist when the keeper guided her to a prone position on the bunk, then climbed on top of her, straddling her. The keeper's excitement was at a pitch, but she determined to prolong this act and removed her own blouse.

Raine was a little startled when those great breasts came tumbling towards her. This was not unfolding exactly as planned. She had thought to "discover" the keeper's vampyrisms, then ask some naïve questions about the Shadow Guild to test her for any knowledge. But these creatures could be unpredictable and impulsively sexual. Although most just wanted to feed off her, every once in a while it could descend into something more.

And that wasn't going to happen. Raine lifted the woman with enormous strength and flipped her so their positions were reversed. She pinned her hands above her head.

“I know that you are vampyr” Raine said quietly. “And you’re going to answer my questions or I will destroy your covey.”

“I will do no such thing,” the keeper said, nearly spitting in her fury. She did not see how this woman could be so strong. Very few could match the strength of a vampyr, and this one did so effortlessly.

Raine ignored her words. “I am looking for the Shadow Guild.”

This produced no reaction whatsoever, telling Raine all she needed to know. Few knew of the guild-within-a-guild, the very upper echelon of the Assassin’s Guild. Those that did were terrified to speak of it and generally had a marked reaction. The name meant nothing to this woman, however, who just began to struggle and continued to spit in her fury. Her fangs were beginning to show.

“I thought to transform you, to give you our gift, but now I’m just going to suck you dry.”

“Well that’s not very attractive,” Raine said, enraging the woman further. Try as she might, though, the innkeeper could not get loose from the iron grip of the stranger, so she began screaming.

“Oh, wonderful,” Raine said, sighing.

The man came slamming through the door and in an instant, Raine was on her feet, her dagger out. He rushed her with the overconfidence of someone used to physical dominance, and he paid dearly for that misjudgment. Although there was much folklore on elaborate methods required to dispatch the undead, none of that was true. Killing them just required inflicting a massive amount of damage in a short time, enough to overcome their rapid healing abilities. And Raine delivered that massive damage by stabbing him in the heart, then cutting off his head, not because these acts were necessary for killing the creature, but because they were sufficient. The man disappeared into a cloud of black ash that fluttered into a pile on the floor.

Raine spun about as the innkeeper charged her, breasts heaving in fury. She stopped the stampede of body parts with a strength that was again supernatural, slamming the woman against the wall. She pinned her with an arm to the throat, but somehow the keeper was able to struggle free just enough to sink her teeth into Raine’s forearm.

The tavern keeper gazed at the stranger in triumph. The effect of a vampyr bite was near-instantaneous, injecting poison upon the first break

in the skin. It quickly immobilized, paralyzing prey much like a spider. And the vampyr, like the spider, could then feed at leisure. The creature could sate its bloodlust, then transform or kill its hapless victim.

But the vampyr's bite seemed to have no effect at all on the woman pinning the innkeeper. She had not even flinched at the painful attack but rather had secured her grip so she could not be bitten again. And as time ticked by and the vampyr waited for her to weaken, such a thing did not happen. And the taste that was in the vampyr's mouth, the blood that she licked from her own lips, was something extraordinary.

"What are you?" the keeper muttered.

"Something far more dangerous than a vampyr, I assure you."

Raine struck the woman with her free forearm, such a massive blow it would have crushed a normal skull. But this was not a normal creature, and although the blow rendered her unconscious, it did not kill her. Raine released the innkeeper and she fell to the floor, sprawling in an ungainly position. Screams from the main hall pierced the air, and Raine rushed through the door.

The female vampyr held the little girl clutched to her chest. The cry of pain of her male companion had warned her that, impossibly, things were not going well in the bedroom, so she chose a most cowardly defense. Raine stopped in her tracks, afraid for the little girl. The woman was clenching her small frame so tightly the girl was turning blue.

"Help me!" the creature cried to the thrall, who dumbly began to get to her feet.

Judging by the insane fury in the creature's eyes, Raine knew there was no negotiating with the vampyr. So she flipped the dagger in her hand then hurled it with tremendous force so that it pierced the woman in the throat and pinned her to the wall. Simultaneously, an arrow pierced the right arm, then another the left, so that the little girl scrambled free and ran to her mother. Then two more arrows struck down the thrall. Raine glanced to the doorway where Feyden stood, having already notched a third arrow, poised should it be needed.

It was not. The vampyr struggled and gurgled, but could not free herself from the impaled objects. Lorifal strode over to the creature, his great axe resting on his shoulder.

"Is this your 'messenger?'"

Raine shook her head. "No, there's another in the bedroom."

"Good," Lorifal said, and with a tremendous swing of his axe, he decapitated the creature. The head screamed as it fell to the ground, smoked, then turned to a small heap of black ash. The body emitted black smoke, then it, too, turned to ash which fell to the floor. There was the shape of a headless body outlined in black on the wall.

"And this one?" Lorifal asked.

"That's just a thrall. Put her out of her misery." And the great axe did so, creating another pile of black ash. Feyden retrieved the arrows impaled in the wall, checked them for their integrity, then slid them back into his quiver.

Raine turned to the serving woman who was clutching both children to her.

"Are there any more of them?"

"No," the woman said, trembling.

"Are any of you bitten?" Raine asked, glancing meaningfully to the little girl.

"No," the woman said, shaking her head. "I checked her. And she shows no signs." The woman looked fearfully at Raine's forearm, where the reddened, swollen wound was clearly visible. "But you were."

Raine glanced at the wound, dismissing it. "They cannot harm me," she said, then corrected herself. "Well, they can harm me as that did hurt. But they cannot turn me."

"How is that possible?" the woman asked. Although there were enchantments that could ward off the vampyrism, and poultices that could stop the spread if applied quickly enough, she did not know of anyone who could ignore a vampyr's bite without consequence.

"The gods watch over me," Raine said, but there was a trace of sarcasm in her voice. One god in particular watched over her, but that malevolent attention was not protective in nature.

"How long have you been here?" Feyden asked.

"I—, I'm not sure," the woman said. "I think it has been several months. Those foul creatures took us, and they cut me..." She held out her arms for inspection, revealing numerous small slices across the veins, "and they..."

She trailed off again, unable to continue, but Raine understood. The

vampyres had kept her alive and captive to feed off her.

“Did they harm your children?”

“No, but that seemed only a matter of time.”

Raine was relieved. By the look in that man’s eyes, that time was almost upon that little girl.

“We’ll get you to safety. Gather your things.”

The woman and children went into a small room off to the side, returning a short time later with a pitiful amount of belongings, barely a bundle. Raine took one last look in on the unconscious innkeeper, and Feyden peered over her shoulder.

“Should I ask why that one is naked?”

“I have to use whatever tactics present themselves,” Raine replied, a trace of color in her cheeks. “You know how unpredictable these creatures are.”

Raine donned her armor, dragged the innkeeper out of the tavern, then burned the building to the ground. Feyden and Lorifal both carried a child and Raine half-carried the woman. They reached a small village by morning, delivering the family to safety. Raine tossed the woman a bag of coin that would feed her children for ten years, and waved off her gratitude, simply warning her to remain silent about what she had seen. She did not want the woman to be one of her “messengers” who would not survive once they told their story. When out of sight of the village, they set up a small campsite to rest and eat. Raine began to dress the wound from the vampyr’s bite.

“Let me help you,” Feyden said. He applied the ointment that Elyara had provided them. Elyara was a wood elf whereas Feyden was of the Alfar, the high elves that lived on Mount Alfheim. Feyden’s skills were of the deadly variety, lethal with a bow and sword, whereas Elyara was a talented mage and healer. She knew they would be dealing with the undead and had provided a poultice that would deal with their bite.

“Do you think this would help Lorifal or me if we were bitten?” Feyden asked.

“To be honest, I’m not sure. Vampirism is half-disease, half-magic.

Elyara said this ointment deals with the physical disease. The enchantments she provided you two,” she said, nodding at the gold necklaces that each wore, “will ward off the magical curse. But she was not certain that either would work with a very powerful vampyr, which hopefully we will find at the end of this.”

And they most certainly would find such a creature, Feyden thought, if Raine continued to leave her messengers behind. She planted seeds of information so that the survivors would spread tales of a reckless stranger who was looking for the Shadow Guild. And there was no danger in letting those vampyres live because the moment the Shadow Guild found them, they would be killed for mentioning their name, even if they had no idea what that name meant.

“And they seem to like my blood,” Raine said, examining the bandage with admiration.

“Is that part of your trap? More bait?” Feyden asked. There was no doubt in his mind that Raine had let the vampyr bite her, knowing that she could easily have prevented the injury.

“Yes,” Raine said. “A little intrigue to the stories. Someone looking for the Shadow Guild, who somehow is immune to the vampyr bite, and who—,” she paused looking for an adequate description, then laughed.

“And someone who tastes really good.”

Chapter 2

The imperial guards watched the two hooded figures closely. They were milling about the outer courtyard of the palace, and although the courtyard was not necessarily a restricted area, these two seemed suspicious and out-of-place. First off, they were completely cloaked with no distinguishing characteristics visible. Secondly, they were extremely tall, standing nearly head-and-shoulders over everyone in the vicinity. Thirdly, the outline of their cloaks revealed they were carrying swords, again, not illegal but a cause for heightened scrutiny given the two previous factors. Finally, they moved with a dangerous grace, the kind of athleticism that was born on the battlefield, not in recreational activities.

The chief guard finally had enough. There were constant rumors of assassination attempts directed at the Emperor, and he was not going to see those rumors come true on his watch. He waved for several guards to accompany him, then walked over and confronted the two.

“What is your business here in the capital?” he demanded coldly.

“We are meeting with an imperial knight.”

The chief was surprised the voice was female, given the size of the person. Still he was not taking any chances. “You will remove your cloaks and identify yourselves.”

The demand was not unreasonable, but the tone was unnecessarily harsh. And the fact that the chief guard grabbed the arm of the woman roughly was a mistake. The second, taller of the two figures removed her cloak with a flourish and drew her sword at the same time, the maneuvers

performed so swiftly the sword materialized beneath the chief's chin before he could react.

"You will take your hands from her now."

The chief stared up at the woman as the guards accompanying him drew their swords in alarm. She was striking, fine patrician features tensed with intensity, full lips pursed in a frown, brown eyes dark with warning. She wore full armor, gold and red with a gleaming raised eagle on her chest. The other woman, the one who had spoken first, put her hand on her companion's forearm.

"Calm yourself, Rika."

The chief released his grip and stepped back as she, too, removed her cloak. He was flabbergasted. She was just as stunning as the first, with flashing dark eyes, shoulder-length dark hair, and chiseled features. She, too, wore the gold and red armor and although he could not place the emblem, the quality of the workmanship was astonishing.

"What is going on here?"

The chief guard was greatly relieved to see the Knight Commander striding towards them. She was a formidable person and would somewhat offset the overpowering presence of these two strangers. Her next words, however, chilled him to the bone.

"Why are you accosting the Royal Princess of the Ha'kan?" she demanded angrily.

The man turned bright red and began to sputter, but Dallan saved him.

"It's our fault, Nerthus. We sought to travel in obscurity and did not announce ourselves. He was simply doing his job."

The pale skin of the Knight Commander was ruddy with anger. "Not very well," she said with a contemptuous stare. "And you will keep the identity of these travelers secret." The man shifted in confused embarrassment. Fortunately, in this instance, the Knight Commander's anger was as quick to dissipate as it was to rise, for otherwise her temper was legendary. She relented and waved him off. "You are dismissed."

The men did not move, however, and just stood staring at the two women. None had ever seen the Ha'kan before. They rarely left their own land, although with the re-opening of the Garmlain trade routes, sightings had been more frequent. But rumors of the beautiful, all-female race

abounded. They were said to be highly sexual, non-monogamous creatures who considered talent in the bedroom as important as any other talent in their society. Their culture thrived on the interlocking sexual relationships of their people. And this was the Princess of the Ha'kan, the living embodiment of all of those rumors. The men stood with their mouths open.

"You are dismissed," Nerthus repeated, this time more loudly.

"Oh," the chief said, turning bright red. "I beg your pardon, your Highness." He bowed, tripped, stumbled, then turned around and ran headlong into his men who were also disassembling in various awkward ways. The throng lurched away in a tangled mess.

Dallan grinned, a dazzling smile that seemed to brighten the courtyard. She grasped forearms with the Knight Commander, an informal greeting that the chief did not miss as he glanced back over his shoulder. Nerthus was a stickler for formality and thrived on protocol, so the greeting was extraordinary on many levels. The Knight Commander turned to Rika, who placed her hand on Nerthus' shoulder.

"Future First General," Nerthus said with a respect she showed few. These women were much younger than her but they had impressed her.

"Knight Commander," Rika said, also grinning. "It's good to see you."

"Is Raine with you?" Nerthus asked.

"No," Dallan replied. "Not yet. From what I understand, she's out killing the undead. But I think she will be here on the morrow. And Idonea will be here soon as well."

This caused a mild flush in the Knight Commander's pale cheeks, and Dallan carefully controlled her expression. Idonea was a wild one and the Knight Commander had a substantial crush on her. Dallan's countenance sobered a little when she thought of her next words. "We are to have a strategy meeting at Fireside tomorrow night. You will come?"

Nerthus nodded. "Of course. In the meantime, do you wish to be presented to the Emperor? Do you need accommodations?"

"We are not here in any formal capacity," Dallan said, "so I would prefer to lie low if possible."

"My men are loyal," Nerthus said, glancing to the pack that was still stealing glances at the Ha'kan while pretending to ignore them. "So I think they will keep their mouths shut. If word of your presence gets out, however, the Emperor will expect to receive you with honors."

“Understood,” Dallan said. “And we do not need lodging because we’ll be staying at Fireside.”

“I don’t blame you,” Nerthus said. Fireside was the most luxurious private residence in all of the Empire, rivaled only by that of the imperial palace. The owner was a mystery to most, and Nerthus had been shocked to learn that Raine, whom she thought was a mercenary adventurer, owned it outright. Once she got to know Raine, however, the ownership and its anonymity made perfect sense.

Chapter 3

Signe, my love, where are you?” The young woman looked up. She was getting used to the name, although she still had no specific memory of it. Things were growing more familiar to her, but it was the familiarity of a few weeks, not that of a lifetime. Apparently she had taken a nasty spill from a horse and hit her head. When she awoke, she could not remember anything. “I’m here,” she called out.

A lovely woman entered the room. She had fine, white hair that framed youthful features, and a pink blush in her cheeks that matched her pink lips. Her stylish gown flattered her curvaceous, supple figure. The younger woman looked at her in admiration as she settled onto the settee next to her, pressing against her.

“And how is your memory today?” the woman asked as she brushed light blonde hair from hazel eyes. “Is anything returning?”

The younger woman paused a little as the other held her breath. “No,” she confessed, “not really.” The words then came tumbling out. “I feel terrible. I should know you. You are so kind and so wonderful, and clearly we have been—”

“Shhh,” the woman said, placing her finger to the girl’s lips. “Do not struggle so. In fact,” she said brightly, “I have come to a decision.”

“What decision is that?”

“I think that you and I should start anew. The doctor said your memory may never return, so instead of forcing you to remember all the happi-

ness that we have had, I think we should just make a new happiness.”

The younger woman smiled a little shyly. “I think I would like that.”

The older woman’s deep blue eyes darkened with intensity. “Really?”
“Yes.”

The woman leaned forward and gently kissed the girl, and the younger woman hesitantly returned the kiss. This felt right, felt familiar, and the hesitant kiss grew more confident while the older woman’s grew bolder. They turned to one another and the girl’s hands went tentatively to the woman’s waist while the woman’s hand slowly undid the buttons of the girl’s shirt. The hand went inside the shirt and caressed the breast, causing the girl to start.

The woman withdrew slightly from the lips but not the shirt. “Is this okay?” she asked with kind concern.

“Yes,” the girl said, then with growing assurance. “This is fine.”

“Good,” the woman said, then leaned forward and kissed her again. This time the tongue parted her lips and gently probed her mouth as the hand caressed her breast. The hand slowly moved down the slender torso, the well-defined muscles of the stomach, then gently worked their way into the top of the silken breeches. The fingers brushed the sensitivity between the girl’s legs and she again started, but this time the woman did not pull away but kissed her deeper, eliciting a moan in the girl’s throat as her fingers entangled themselves in the long, white hair. The woman pushed her backward onto the couch as the fingers began to work their magic between her legs. She responded from instinct rather than memory, and the hips moved beneath the skilled stroking of the fingers. It seemed her body had a mind of its own as it obeyed the tongue and caresses of the woman on top of her. And finally, there was an explosion of sensation that rippled outward from her center as the circular strokes brought her to a forceful climax while the woman held onto her.

The girl’s breathing came in short gasps until it steadied, then began to slow. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest. That felt very familiar.

“Are you all right?” the woman asked, pleased. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Oh no,” the young woman responded, “that was wonderful. Thank you.”

The woman laughed and brushed her hair out of her eyes. “You don’t have to thank me, you silly thing. You are my lover. And my—, our bed has missed you.”

The thought warmed the girl as the woman settled down beside her, her arm draped over her stomach. They were quiet for a moment, peaceful in the sunbeam that fell upon the couch from the window. The room was full of fine furnishings, a kind, beautiful woman embraced her, and colorful flowers were visible through the window pane. She felt lucky beyond belief.

“How is your strength, my love? I don’t want to exhaust you. Your injury was severe and as much as I’ve missed you, I don’t want to delay your recovery.”

“I think,” the girl said uncertainly, then with growing surety, “I think I feel fine.”

“Good,” the woman said, outwardly pleased.

Inwardly, the sorceress made a note to herself. She would have to double the strength of the “elixir” she was giving to the girl. She said it would heal the young woman while in reality it was mildly poisoning her to keep her in a constant state of weakness.