

CHOICES  
MEANT  
FOR  
KINGS

A Novel By

Sandy  
Lender

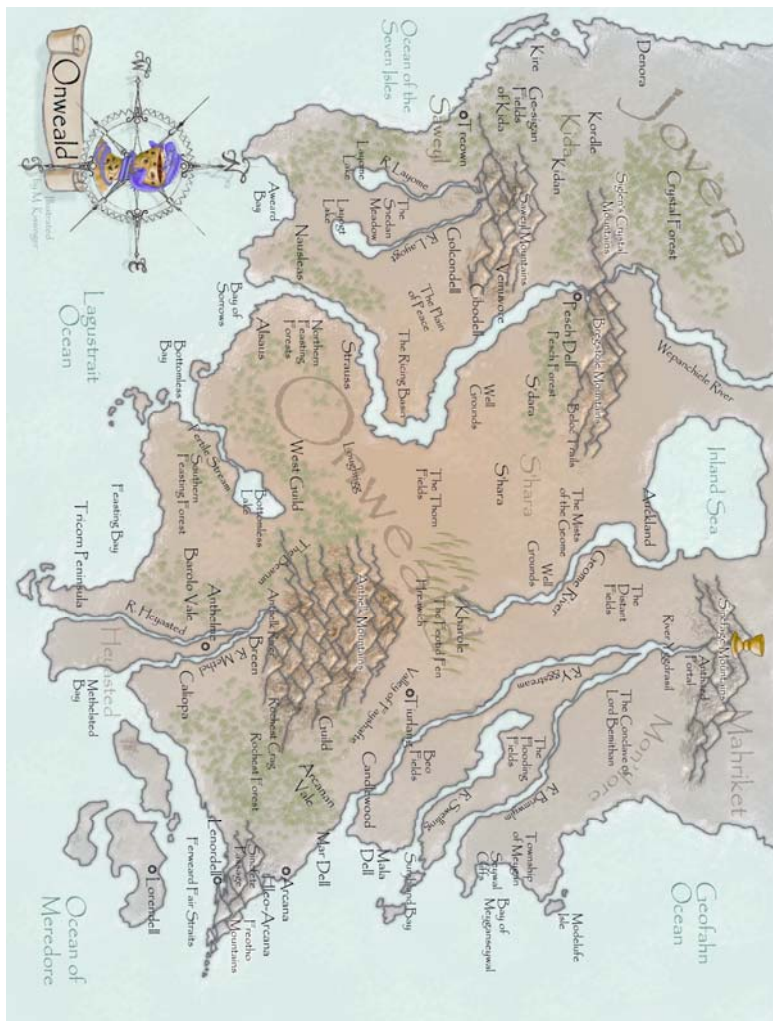
Book II of the Choices Trilogy

CHOICES MEANT  
FOR KINGS

BOOK II OF THE *CHOICES* TRILOGY

A Novel  
By

SANDY LENDER



ONWEALD

Illustrated by Award-winning Artist Megan Kissinger



**ArcheBooks Publishing**

# CHOICES MEANT FOR KINGS

BOOK II OF THE *CHOICES* TRILOGY

By

**SANDY LENDER**

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# DEDICATION

To Nigel Taiman

William James once said, “Faith is one of the forces by which  
men live;  
the total absence of it means collapse.”  
I ask you to just have faith.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have a litany of people to thank for making Book II of the *Choices* trilogy come to fruition. Standing out from the crowd is the artist, Megan Kissinger, who turned my scribbly sketch of Onweald into an amazing color map that brings the continent and its peripherals to life. I never get lost thanks to you, Megan.

To the people who made me think writing was okay: Grandma Lamkin, Aunt B, Mrs. Zeller, and Mr. T (the teacher in high school, not the guy on TV), thank you for clueing me in. I thank Terry Goodkind, Tim Powers, and Margaret Weis for their comments and kindness. You're right, Terry, nothing's ever easy, but it's worth every ounce of effort.

My test readers, Mags Poffenberger, Jenni Moore, Jamie-son (not the villain) Wolf, Laura Crawford, Kim my Roomie, and Officer Joe D. are members of a valued and trusted group. You guys don't know how much I appreciate you. All those thank-you cards and chocolate is just window dressing. Christina, Laura, and Kim, I don't think we'll turn me into a poet, but I sure do appreciate the Girl Scout try.

Next, I thank everyone who read Book I, *Choices Meant for Gods*. Those who left incredible reviews on Amazon and

Barnes & Noble and wrote to me demanding the sequel bolstered my spirits during bizarre days of marketing and promotion. I can't believe "fans" exist. Dawn, Robyn, and the Florida Duranies who sent e-mails requesting updates; to the folks who showed up at my presentations, book signings, and other events, I thank you for showing support. Mom & Dad, Chris & Quentin, The Trinity: Christine, Jim & Jennine, Marly, Mommy Willis, Crystal, Linda & Don, Zack & Becky, Larry & Joel, Kelly, Ursula, Marci, and folks I should have on speed dial, you guys don't know how your responses encourage a writer. Michelle, Tina, Steve, Bob, Henry, for every excited and positive thing you said in front of my publisher, I bow. DeNita at AuthorIsland, EM, Phil at NPC, Fantasy-BookSpot, and all the folks who hosted me during that two-month-long book tour in the summer of '07, your help with marketing and promotion showed me the range of support people in the publishing industry can give each other.

Bob Gelinas, where would I be if you hadn't granted me an audience? Thank you for your time, your energy, your advice, your wisdom, your patience, your cover designs, your ideas, your promotion workshops, oh, yeah, and your money to publish my books so the world can meet Nigel and Chariss.

Finally, and most of all, I have to thank my personal savior, Jesus Christ, for keeping me safe and mostly sound. Without Him, I'd fail. Through Him, I can do anything He gives me the strength to do.

Thank you,  
Sandy Lender

# ADVANCE PRAISE FOR CHOICES MEANT FOR KINGS

“*Choices Meant for Kings* is exactly what a sequel should be. Sandy Lender keeps up her fast paced writing style to send us even deeper into her fantasy realm. Fantasy/Suspense was starting to fall into a sleep spell, until Sandy woke it up. Sandy needs to be considered one of the top Fantasy/Suspense writers right now.”

— John Raab, *Suspense Magazine*

“*Choices Meant for Kings* is an absolutely amazing book. Not only is *Choices Meant for Kings* an incredible love story but it’s also one of the most amazing high fantasy novels that I have read in years.”

— Jamieson Wolf, *American Chronicle*

“*Choices Meant for Kings* is a stunning tale that will capture your attention and fuel your imagination. Filled with rich and robust characters, this page-turner will leave you mesmerized and ready to read the next book in this series. Sandy Lender has managed to create an utterly brilliant balance of action coupled with a timeless love story for the ages.”

— Angi Holmes, *Vivid Valentines*

“I very much enjoyed Amanda’s take-no-prisoners attitude....Thank you, Ms. Lender for making me such a fan.”

— Cheryl’s BookNook

“Ms. Lender, I curse you for this roller coaster ride...haven’t done that since my last Clive Barker book, or was it Dean Koontz? Damn, I love this epic! Breathless. Shocked. Can’t think. OMG. Well done, Ms. Lender. Extremely well done.”

— Chris Speakman, ChrisChat Reviews

“The sequel to *Choices Meant for Gods* is an exciting Machiavellian epic fantasy as everyone seems to have secret agendas in order to gain power. The story line stands alone as this reviewer did not read the previous tale, but had no problems diving into *Choices Meant for Kings*....Fans who relish complex action-packed fantasy thrillers in which no one is quite like they first appear will appreciate Sandy Lender’s superb tale.”

— Harriet Klausner, Amazon No.1 Reviewer

“Amanda Chariss is a strong charismatic heroine with integrity, grit, and a good sense of humor. Amid the dangerous turmoil of dragons, gods, wizards, wicked adversaries, and confusing prophecies, she makes difficult choices and takes decisive action – no matter the risk to her own life.”

— Virginia McMorrow, Fantasy Author of the *Mage Confusion* and *Firewing* series

“Sandy Lender has done it again! She’s cornered the ‘recipe’ for creating a reading experience that is equivalent to trying methamphetamine for the first time: It’s highly addictive and should come with a warning from the CDC.”

— **Laura Crawford, Crawford Writing and Marketing**

“I couldn’t put it down. *Choices Meant for Kings* is a winner. I now have to admit that Sandy Lender has become my favorite author.”

— **Mary Willis, World Traveler**

“Sandy Lender has outdone herself in *Choices Meant for Kings*. In true sequel form, her dynamic characters explode from the pages. If you read one book this year, you should read *Choices Meant for Kings!*”

— **Shane Moore, Fantasy Author of the *Abyss Walker* series**

“Lender creates a fantasy world with gods and goddesses, dragons and wizards, swords and daggers, love and betrayal, that feels incredibly real. The characters are multi-dimensional and quite interesting. Lender’s style makes it seem like you’re watching a movie rather than reading a book.”

— **Lisa Haselton, Reviewer**

## PRAISE FOR THE *CHOKES* SERIES

“Incredible! Exciting, intriguing, and compelling characters interact to propel a plot that bit by piece encompasses a fantastic world.”

— Camellia, Long and Short Reviews

“Her intricate blend of strength and sensitivity brings to mind echoes of Anne McCaffrey or Catherine Asaro.”

— EM Sky, *Wet Ink*

“The action and suspense continue in one easy flow. Congratulations to Lender. She has a winner.”

— Lea Docken, *FantasyToday*

“Robin Hobb meets David Eddings in this rousing tale.”

— Author Jack Hillman

“Through the use of interesting characters and clever dialogue...Lender weaves a spell of magic and fantasy.”

— Author Gary R. Hoffman

“This is a rare, and special tale, transporting the reader into a new realm of reality...where dragons still live.”

— Author Robin Edwards

“Are you sad because the Harry Potter series is done? Well, move over Harry!”

— Barnes & Noble Reviewer

“Sandy Lender is not going to stop until she has me reading the fantasy genre on a regular basis. Now she has me reading up on dragons and dwarfs...a great writer for any reader.”

— **Author Michael S. Witherspoon**

“I love that Chariss is both someone I can identify with and whom I can dream about becoming. . . it’s what fantasy is all about!”

— **Christina Nuttmann**

CHOICES MEANT  
FOR KINGS

BOOK II OF THE *CHOICES* TRILOGY

# CAST OF CHARACTERS

## Main

**Chariss**—Amanda Chariss; born with an amethyst up near the corner of her right eye that marks her as The Protector of The Master

**The Master Rothahn**—Rohne; highest active god from Mahriket; left the city of the gods to protect His daughter in the mortal world and to train Chariss for some important event

**Hrazon of Mon'dore**—greatest of the twelve wizards the gods created; Chariss's guardian and mentor since Drake killed her family sixteen-plus years before the story begins

**Nigel Taiman**—a son of the evil Juliette; raised by the former goddess Kora Rothahn Taiman; betrothed to Chariss; carries a secret nature; protects his foster mother and sister

**Lord Jamieson Drake**—an evil sorcerer in league with Juliette; leader of Dreorfahn Army; recently named king of Jovera; wishes to capture Chariss

**Juliette**—The Dragon, The Betrayer, The Devil; an ancient goddess and sorceress; wishes to destroy The Master and usurp His worshippers

## Support—in order of appearance, mention

- Nithi**—priestess of the Ungol who watch over the prophets and prophecies; Nulthi, her daughter, carries Rohne's child
- Jidaw**—a prophet whom Chariss met in the prophecy caves of Tiurlang
- Sorne Jeel**—a timid orphan boy Chariss rescued from execution
- King Vrel Wendan**—king of Lorendell on the south island
- Jake Taiman and Tiatha Wold**—the lovestruck teens whose marriage at Arcana set prophecy in motion
- Shadow**—Chariss's horse; named by little Kaylin Taiman
- Brendan Naegling**—a sergeant in Arcana's army; worships Chariss
- Darne Wold III**—recently named emperor of Onweald; Tiatha's father and Juliette's pawn
- Henry Bakerson**—Nigel's childhood friend and a gruff and boisterous sailor
- Dend Unheor**—a general in Arcana's army
- Kyle Adan**—once a member of the nobility in Mahriket, gave up that life to be a servant at Arcana when Kora chose to live there
- Mia**—a lesser goddess from Mahriket who came to the Taiman family's aid
- Loetha and Lahs**—devoted servants at Arcana; Loetha was once a member of the nobility in Mahriket but gave up that life to be a servant at Arcana when Kora chose

to live there

**Coln Breen, Jacob Cade**—guards at Arcana

**Brell Galend**—a soldier in Arcana's army

**Kora Rothahn Taiman**—a former goddess of Mahriket; current matriarch of Arcana; sacrificed her immortal life to raise another woman's child

**Jorin Taiman**—another of Kora Taiman's sons, age thirteen

**Kaylin Taiman**—Kora's daughter, age nine

**Mahsilette**—Rohne's older sister; a powerful goddess peeking in and out of self-imposed exile

**Abigail Farrier**—a lovesick woman who lived on the continent of Bellan with her father when Henry and Nigel bumped into her; courted by Horace Bendehl, one of Drake's workers

**Nicolas Lont**—a general in the Dreorfahn Army; made a pact with a demon prior to his first death

**Adelaide and Lydia**—prostitutes from Arcana City who offer information and friendship to Chariss

**The Ofersey'n** (o fer see en)—17 governors of Onweald; the ones who come to Arcana to support the war are Lords Hrell Baine (Chariss's former benefactor), Frenir Gint, Boris Fermson (a Geasa'n), Akelous Foresterson, Hadrad Smithson and Terold Wulfe (who antagonize one another)


**King Stephan Lenora**—king of Lenordell south of the Freotho Mountains

## ***You Are the Reason***

*You are the reason I will stand  
before the maw of the end of the world,  
and shake my fist in defiance,  
my last breath for all that is good.  
Because you are the reason I am.  
And you are the reason I fall.  
You are the reason I lift up the sword.  
You, alone, are worth it all.*

**—Amanda Chariss Rothahn**

## CHAPTER ONE

rcana lay in ruin. The drain of the geasa had eaten at the Taiman home until the pieces of the fortress not destroyed by The Dragon herself were disintegrated by prophecy. The mouth of the Freotho Mountain gaped as if in a scream, left in a state of perpetual terror at what it had seen.

The prophet Jidaw died in the caves of Tiurlang with this vision, whispering, “Sorner Jeel has seen this. He will foretell this.”


The priestess of the Ungol believed she understood Jidaw’s message. She cradled him, her braided hair providing him a sort of curtain to die behind as she leaned over to kiss his head.

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Her heart ached for the man, and she wanted to understand his last words. It sounded like Sorne Jeel would be his replacement. Sorne shared the prophet's final vision, or so Ni-thi translated for the guards. Sorne would be the next prophet they would bring to the underground world of Tiurlang to watch.

Her heart grieved, not just for the decayed man who died in her arms, but for the boy named Sorne whom she would have to collect from Arcana.

## CHAPTER TWO

ulette felt a gasp in her power like a panic attack. The walls of the king's hall closed in on her, narrowing her vision to a tunnel of dark. Armored guards and gaudy tapestries crushed toward her, folding in under the weight of the painted ceiling with its garish designs she'd yet to figure out.

Her heartbeat stalled, holding, skipping a beat, and then rushed to push her blood faster in compensation. She gripped the table before her and let her nails tear at the frilly covering the king had decorated it with to impress her.

Earlier, she had noted all his attempts to appease the goddess in his castle. She lauded them as signs that he would cave

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to her wishes. Now, she wanted nothing more than to rip the lace to pieces if it would lessen the pain searing through her gut.

Just as suddenly as the stabbing had begun, it eased. She sat in a stupor, breathing in the leathery stench of the hall's incense. When she rallied the strength to open her eyes, the smoke stung them and the faces of the company around her made her mad. The mortals had no idea what had just happened to the powerful woman in their midst, but they believed she'd suffered some sort of attack.

*Is this the prophecy?* she wondered. *Did Jake Taiman and Tiatha Wold just marry?*

She sat in a colorful banquet hall in King Vrel Wendan's palace in Lorendell on the island south of Onweald. She was there to convince the king to join Lord Jamieson Drake and his Dreorfahn Army in the conquest of the northern continent. It should have been easy to get this king to agree because she was the most powerful creature he'd ever set eyes on.

She was Julette. The Dragon. The Betrayer. A demon in human form. An ancient sorceress walking among mortals.

When in this form, she wore her power on a strong, ripe frame that she didn't see a particular need to hide beneath a lot of robes. Her skin was the color of fresh fruit, as taut and firm as the leather bustier hugging the breasts no man at that table dared let his eyes linger on. She wore her hair in dark tresses that fanned out from a harsh face. Her eyes were piercing, as one would expect a mad goddess's eyes to be, and her lips curved into a sneer as she glanced around the assembly.

The problem was that for as much as he stood in awe of

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the woman, Vrel Wendan also sat in fear of his corrupt people. He feared them rising against him if he asked them to risk their lives for anything beyond their conveniences. Going after power for someone else's gain was not in the Lorens' nature.

"My Lady," King Wendan spoke with what bravado he could. "May I assist you to one of the parlors? I could send for any doctor in my palace..."

His voice trailed under her glare. It wouldn't have made him any more comfortable to know the glare was tempered by good news. The knowledge that the sudden pulse in her power was due to a prophecy being set in motion—a piece of prophecy she'd been waiting years to experience—was very good news indeed.

"What makes you think any of your pathetic mortal doctors could help a goddess with anything?"

"I would offer you any service I could to assist."

She snarled at him. "I need neither your primitive services nor your assistance to a couch in your rustic little parlor. It's offensive to think you would consider these rooms adequate for a goddess." Pause. "I would hope it's apparent by now how much more powerful I am than a mere goddess."

Her mind tossed the implications of what she'd just felt. The marriage of the Taiman boy and Tiatha Wold was supposed to impart immeasurable power to her. All the Geasa'n should have felt their power drain; it should have come to her.

The king cleared his throat. "Well, ah, yes, ah—"


Julette locked eyes with him. "We have much to discuss. Let's skip the diplomacy and get down to real business. Take me to a private room."

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She wanted to get a promise out of the king so she could get back to the continent of Onweald with one of his subjects. While a mortal's promise meant nothing to her, she knew it carried great weight with the mortal in question. A king living in fear of breaking his promise to an ancient goddess made a useful ally. The same held true for his generals.

For the moment, she concentrated on King Wendan. Once finished with him, she could focus inward. The power coursing in her body felt the same as always. In fact, she could swear it ebbed. That wasn't a good sign. She needed to check on her pawn Drake and his power of sorcery. She needed to check on the progress of the Dreorfahn Army. She needed to check on her own power and test its new limits.

## CHAPTER THREE

manda Chariss stormed toward the Taiman estate's barn. The soldier and gentleman following her both strove to keep pace. As she passed the stables, her mare whinnied out to her on the cool evening air, but Chariss was on a mission and not stopping to greet friends. She went to interrogate the emperor who sat uncomfortably on a bale of straw in the pigpen.

Sergeant Brendan Naegling, rounding the doorway to the barn behind her, smiled once more at her orders to hold the emperor there. *She may be affected by this prophecy, but she still has a sense of humor*, he thought.

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“How did Juliette know your mother was in Jamieson Drake’s line?”

“No greeting?” Darne Wold quipped. The twenty-year-old girl who dared to flaunt what she seemed to think was her god-given authority offended him already. He even felt confident enough in his title of emperor to scowl as he spoke, wrinkling his nose at both her attitude and the unmistakable scent of piglets and day-old straw that the three newcomers stirred with their boots. He sat masked in animal scent and flickering shadow. “No salutation? Just skip the pleasantries and get down to business?”

“You’ve known me for two weeks,” Chariss said. “I’d think there’d be no surprise in us getting straight to the point. How did Juliette know your mother was in the line of Drake?”

“I don’t know,” he sassed.

Chariss sighed, looking as if she was about to scold a small child, and her violet eyes met his with impatience. “I may not have my geasa at the surface right now, so it’ll be more difficult to punish you for not cooperating, but there are methods of interrogating prisoners that require little effort on my part. For instance, Brendan, will you hand me that whip?”

This startled the sergeant. The gentleman off to his right shifted his weight, but still leaned against the stable wall. *Surely she won’t strike the emperor*, he thought.

She took the whip from Sergeant Naegling and cracked it against empty air. Even the hanging oil lamps seemed to jump.

“Did you know I won a contest in Kesa Dell with a whip?”

Emperor Wold gulped; this interrogation could get painful. He glared at the gem high up on her cheekbone, mad for the hundredth time since meeting her at the way the amethyst glistened. It spoke of mystery and beauty wrapped in the timelessness of prophecy. It grated on his nerves.

“During the summer festival there, I managed to knock nine out of ten wood blocks from a railing at ten paces. Wait. Was it eight paces?” She pretended to care about the detail. “I believe it was eight. No matter. I beat all the gentlemen in town who had entered the contest. And I did it without the use of my geasa. Just hand-eye coordination.” She paused. “Would you like to know how old I was at the time?”

He glowered at her.

“Eight. I was eight years old. I’d been in training with Hrazon for four years, yet I was able to best all those men. Lord Wold, I still have good hand-eye coordination, and I don’t think I’m standing eight paces from you right now.”

“Look, Chariss, I’m—”

“My Lady. If you find my title as Protector of The Master too cumbersome to use when addressing me, you could just say ‘My Lady’.”

“My Lady,” he growled. “I’m telling you, I don’t know *how* The Dragon knew anything about anyone in my family, all right? She just knew.”

“I see. Well, let’s act like that’s the truth for a moment. How did Juliette approach you? Did she just appear one evening in your chamber and tell you to marry your only daughter off to Jake Taiman?”

“No, of course not.”

“Well, if that’s not the way it happened, how did it hap-

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pen? Did she bring Drake?”

“No. I doubt Drake knows anything of this. It was Juliette’s plan alone.”

“Juliette’s plan alone? So help me, Wold, if you’re lying to me—”

“I’m telling you what I know. Drake has no interest in draining the geasa. He should have no idea what this wedding would mean, or that it would cause you any harm. Surely you know he wants to have you for himself. Juliette doesn’t care one way or the other about you. She wants The Master. She wants to destroy Him. Publicly. Loudly. This wedding was to harm Him. You’re just an added bonus that Drake will be pleased with when he catches you.”

She cracked the whip so suddenly it startled them all. It took a second for Wold to realize it had hit him. On the cheek. The blood pooled to the surface of the skin along the split beneath his eye.

“Don’t make me mad,” she suggested.

The gentleman watching shifted uncomfortably now. It didn’t seem like Chariss to be cruel.

“Does Drake know what this marriage would do?” she asked.

“No, no! I’ve told you, no!”

“Does he know you were bringing Tiatha here?”

“Yes. Everyone in Onweald knew I—”

“Then why does he think you brought her here?”

“To marry Nigel Taiman!” He nodded his head in the gentleman’s direction as if anyone should doubt who he spoke about. “Everyone thought she was coming here to marry Nigel.”

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“And what was to happen when she married Nigel?”

“The line of The Dragon and the line of Drake would unite.”

Sergeant Brendan Naegling saw nothing odd about that. As far as he knew, Nigel was Kora Taiman’s son, thus Nigel was in the line of The Dragon. Chariss thought differently, though, and wondered why Juliette would believe that Nigel was Kora’s offspring.

“Did Drake plan that?”

“No! Blast, he doesn’t know!”

“I’m sure he knows *something* is wrong in nature by now. Don’t you think a sorcerer would notice his power suddenly disappear this morning?”

Emperor Wold ground his teeth, but didn’t respond. His eyes darted away from her too quickly.

“Answer me!”

The whip cracked on his other cheek. This strike he imagined he felt, and, shortly, it started to sting as the first had.

“I don’t know what you’re asking,” he growled through teeth gritted against pain and anger.

“You’re trying my patience.” She tapped the handle of the whip against her left hand as she paced before him. “Don’t you think a sorcerer as powerful as he is would recognize his power suddenly disappearing?”

“No.”

“No? Are you insinuating he’s a fool?”

When the fallen emperor didn’t respond, she marched up to him and took his chin in her hand. It was no longer smoothly shaven as it had been that morning when his only daughter stood on a dais before all of Arcana to wed; it was

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scorched with graying stubble. “Then what are you insinuating?”

“He’s a sorcerer. His power doesn’t come from nature. He remains unaffected by today’s union.”

“As does The Dragon?” she asked, rallying every nerve in her body not to betray her horror at this news.

“Exactly.”

She released his face and turned away, abruptly, as if still angry, so she could hide the fear behind her lavender eyes. Nigel saw it, though. As did the sergeant. Here was a development they didn’t need. The balance of power had shifted more dramatically that day than they’d realized.

Still facing away from the emperor, she changed her line of questions. “When will Julette bring the Dreorfahn Army here?”

“Before the first snow.”

“Do you want to tell me when the first snow will come?”

“No one knows when the first snow will come,” he scoffed.

“So when will she come here?”

“I told you, before the first snow.”

As she turned back toward him, she flashed the whip across his chest. He yelped, and then complained as blood started forming against his ripped shirt. “Hey! I’m answering your questions.”

“Not well enough. Give me a better answer.”

“Look, she said they would take Hleo-Arcana and everyone in it before the first snow flies. Those were her words. I can only assume that means—”

“I don’t need your assumptions. Where is her army now?”

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“They’ll march from Treown.”

“Perhaps I should remind you that the point of this interrogation is to get information I *don’t* already know. We sent four messengers out from Arcana the week you arrived. Where did you really send those messengers? Did you send them to her?”

“We sent them where you told us to,” he snapped. “They went to the ofersey’n you wanted to bring back here to help you in your cause.”

“And you didn’t give any of them directions to Julette’s grasp?”

“No! I’m telling you, I don’t know where her army is. How am I supposed to know where they are now? They were supposed to leave Treown nearly a month ago. They should be close to Candlewood shortly.”

“Nearly a month ago? Close to Candlewood? Shortly? These are not good measurements. Do you mean to tell me Julette trusted you to sacrifice your daughter to her cause, but didn’t trust you enough to tell you where her army was?”

“Hmpf. She doesn’t trust anyone.”

“She let you come alone to Arcana with your daughter. Isn’t that trust?”

“She sent...aye...”

“Spit it out. And name every one of her spies among you.”

Nigel still leaned complacently in the shadows with his arms crossed against his chest, but he smiled at Chariss’s back, pleased with her. He sensed in the way she issued the command that she’d already guessed there would be spies, and had merely worked the conversation to the point that Wold would confess it on his own. *She’s amazing*, he thought. *Hopefully*

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*she'll never start questioning me.*

Emperor Wold was *not* so pleased. He knew there was no hiding the information from her and selected how much to disclose. “She sent two messengers with our party. One to report back when we arrived at Arcana. One to report back after the wedding.”

“Where is the spy now?”

“The first went back as planned. The second, I don’t know. I assume—”

“I told you I don’t want your assumptions. Give me his name.”

The emperor sighed. “I don’t want to.”

Her anger from the day exploded on him. Nigel couldn’t believe she erupted as she did, but neither he nor Sergeant Naegling would move close enough to stop her as she thrashed the man repeatedly. They both moved, but not in her direction.

“Whoa, Amanda.”

She wasn’t hearing any objections, from them or her wailing victim. Both members of her audience had assumed her raised voice, pacing of questions, anger, and choice of words had all been an act to get answers out of the high-society gentleman before her. Now they wondered if she hadn’t been on the verge of a temper tantrum all along.

The frustrations of the day fueled her arm and her tirade as she cracked the whip against Wold’s face, clothes, and the bleeding flesh his rent clothes left exposed. She raved at him as she flogged him with the leather; shouting out how stupid he’d been, how he’d endangered the very gods with his stupid political maneuverings, and how he’d get no reward out of

The Dragon for his trouble.

The emperor fell to the barn floor, rolling and writhing as if he could get away from her surprising onslaught. Her long auburn hair flipped about as she beat him, a sort of mockery of beauty reflecting moonlight and lantern light as she railed against what he'd done. With a last expulsion of "Fool!", she cracked the leather across his backside, and then stopped to breathe.

Nigel wanted to take the whip from her, but didn't dare move that close. If she wasn't past this outburst of anger yet, he didn't want to be in the way when her second wind kicked in.

"Give me his name," she panted, "or I'll have every one of your people flogged until I find him."

Of course she lied, but the fallen emperor didn't care one way or the other at that point. "Dreor," he moaned. "Denan Dreor."

She swallowed hard, already almost fully recovered. "How will I know him when I see him?"

"Black hair..." The man gasped for air through lungs that rattled with the labor. She had cut him deeply with the weapon, and he didn't doubt a few more strokes would kill him. "Short, black hair."

"Everyone in your entourage has short black hair."

"He wears." He stopped to pant. "A drawing of...The Dragon..."

She gave him a moment to pull in ragged breaths before she dropped to her knees in the straw next to him. He reeked now of fresh sweat and blood, and, for just a second, she felt remorse. "He wears a drawing of The Dragon," she prompted,

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and there was a kindness in her voice, almost as if she apologized for his condition.

“Upper arm.” Pant. “Near right shoulder.”

She stood and stepped away from him then and held the whip out for the sergeant to take. He didn’t hesitate. Smoothing her auburn hair back out of her face she said, “If he has already gone to Juliette, I will come back and put you out of your misery.”

Giving Nigel a look that said “*Please come with me,*” she turned and left the pigpen. The guards outside had heard the emperor yelling, and now bowed as she appeared. She breathed in the night air, fresh and cool. “You may take him water and dressings for his wounds, but none of his own entourage is to attend him and no one lets him escape. If he can. Understood?”

“Understood, My Lady.”

“I’ll be back. Soldier,” she pointed to a skinny young man. He looked useless, so she would give him the only worthy task of his life. “Get me a group of five men who can track, please. We may have to go after someone. Bring them here and wait for me.”

## CHAPTER FOUR



till worried over Wold's news, Chariss walked quickly toward the house. Nigel strode alongside to keep up.

"You surprise me, Mandy."

"I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"Righteous indignation?"

"I hope that's it. I'd hate to think I merely lost my temper." She gave him an odd glance. "Don't suppose you'll go trying my patience anytime soon, will you?"

He hoped she teased him. "I'll try not to. Although you look radiant when you're angry, even in the moonlight."

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“Radiant or no, I’m not happy that Juliette’s bringing Drake’s army to your family’s door.”

“You told Godric that would happen.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m happy to be right. We need to get all the armies that are on our side together northwest of here...away from your home.” She gestured with her arm as if she would embrace the Freotho Mountains behind the house. “These mountains are a huge barrier to block retreat. This army is pinned against your estate. Drake will walk up and impale them on its battlements.”

“Your faith in them isn’t inspiring.”

She chose not to respond, but flung open the door to the house. The ever-present scent of roses and mahogany rushed out to greet them, swirling as if to encompass them as they crossed the threshold. The house breathed them in as if welcoming them with her carpets and tapestries seeped in floral and woody scents. They belonged here, and their footsteps involuntarily fell into rhythm with the tick-tock of the great hall clock in the foyer.

Nigel’s friend Henry Bakerson watched her march past the parlor, and gave Nigel a questioning look. He jumped up to follow as they made their way to the former students’ quarters where the wedding guests had been relegated for the night.

It wasn’t Henry’s nature to sit around quietly reading from a book, but, since returning from Bellan a month before, the ruffian had taken an interest in the history of the people he was destined to meet while in the presence of Rohne and Chariss. He had unknowingly made a deal with their enemy, Lord Drake, when he signed a contract to sail the ofersey’n’s

weapons of war to Bellan. He considered it fortunate that the two were willing to forgive him and merely turn him against the sorcerer, rather than run him through with a sword and take over the project themselves.

After Henry heard the story of Drake hunting Chariss the past sixteen years of her life, he'd been ashamed of how easily he'd taken on the contract with the sorcerer. He had no intention of getting caught unaware again. He would learn the history of Onweald and have a better handle on who the major players were in the upcoming war so he could perhaps repair the situation his soul was in and be useful to the young lady his best friend intended to marry.

At the moment, the lady in question went from room to room in the students' quarters of Hleo-Arcana, first pounding on the door, and then entering with the look of someone not to be trifled with. It was effective. People answered her questions quickly, and then breathed sighs of relief as she slammed the doors behind her.

When she came to a room with a grim-looking man in it, she met his eyes with purpose. "Are you Denan Dreor?"

"Who?"

"Lift up the sleeve on your shirt."

He hesitated. The next thing he knew, the three people sharing his room had gasped and backed against the walls. Her sword rested against his throat. *How can she move that fast if the wedding has set prophecy in motion, if it's taken her geasa?*

"I'll give you one last chance to remain alive. Are you Denan Dreor?"

"Yes, My Lady. What can I do for you?"

"You, Sir, are a very lucky man. Would you like to know

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why?”


Despite the training he'd received as a guard for the emperor, despite the audience he'd endured with Julette herself, he felt his pulse quicken. He'd be ashamed to know how much information about that audience with Julette he'd give up to this woman in the barn tonight.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because Rohne once scolded me for killing a spy in cold blood. He told me it wasn't appropriate for me to go around killing His servants on a whim. So I won't slit your throat. Unless you provoke me.”

Without taking her eyes from him, she said, “Henry, be a dear and bind Mister Dreor's hands behind his back for me. And make sure that dagger at his belt is the only weapon you have to confiscate.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

he evening should have been complete. They had the spy and the emperor in custody.

Nigel walked back from the barn with Chariss at his side, telling her how impressed he was with her for remembering to thank the wimpy-looking soldier who had corralled the would-be search party as she'd ordered. Even though the task had turned out to be unnecessary, she'd praised the soldier for his efforts, and thanked the five men who had turned up for the job. All six soldiers had grown in stature under her notice of them.

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“I didn’t realize how much time you’d spent planning for Drake’s attack with the Arcanan Army,” Nigel said. “Or the emperor’s men. You were busy during the week I spent trying to get you out of my mind. Now I find the soldiers all view you as their leader. Their general.” He reached out to put his arm around her waist as they walked. “My troubadour.”

She smiled at the teasing lilt to his voice. It was good to hear after the week of reticence he referred to when he’d toyed with the idea that he couldn’t, as Rohne had tried to convince him, court someone as important as she’d become.

“Are you all right?” he asked seriously.

“Oh, I don’t know. I guess I am because I’m still alive, but I’m confused. And nervous. I’m not their general. Dend Unheor is on his way from Breen to take that job. And you were avoiding me again today, weren’t you?”

“No, actually, I’ve been trying to get a moment alone with you without one of these soldiers or Ungol guards in the room. I haven’t forgotten what I told you after we left the emperor’s ball last night.”

“Good. I was afraid you might be getting silly notions of denouncing me.”

“You shouldn’t be concerned any more. I’m done acting like a fool. And I’m going to say something that will irritate you now.”

She shot him a quizzical look. “All right. Let’s hear it.”

“I feel like a fool for depriving myself of gazing upon you for a week. Thank you for bringing me to my senses, if you can call the intoxicating effect you have on me—”

“Oh, please,” she whined. “You have to stop that now. Yes, you should feel very bad for avoiding me. And I think

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you should have to do something grand to make up for it.”

He flashed her one of those grins that she knew would be followed by something not repeatable. “Not a problem, but I get the feeling Hrazon would prefer you remain an innocent young lady until our wedding. What’s this? I can see you blush in the moonlight.”

“You shouldn’t say such things to me,” she practically whispered. “What if someone overheard you?”

“Out here?”

“There *is* an army off to our left...some guards up there at the door...a soldier coming toward us now.”

Nigel watched her transform from the blushing young lady beside him to someone who appeared slightly taller, certainly more confident and sure, in the space of a second as the officer who approached began speaking. “My Lady, we’ve posted guards around the perimeter of the house and one at each bedroom door. When you didn’t answer yours—”

“Yes, Soldier, I’m fine. Thank you. And thank you for taking care of the guards. I will sleep better because of your hard work.”

The man glowed. After saluting, he sauntered toward the camp.

“My Lady, you know how to handle an army well,” Nigel said.

She smiled up at her escort. “I’m completely out of my element.” As if her countenance betrayed her, a hint of the meek young lady peeked back through her eyes as she spoke.

It endeared her to him all the more. The angry woman who had whipped the emperor of their continent and interrogated Denan Dreor shrank within the compassionate woman

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who walked beside him. He wondered if she would be able to reconcile the two as he listened to her strategize out loud.

“I don’t even know how much of the army to trust right now. How many of the emperor’s entourage will side with the Arcanan Army and how many will think we’ve done something wrong by detaining him? And do you know that before I came to Arcana, I wasn’t comfortable in front of royalty or in front of a crowd, yet today I’ve not only interrogated a member of royalty, I’ve beaten him half to death and stripped him of his crown? The ofersey’n’s council will have to choose a new emperor.”

“Wulfe, Fermson, Smithson, Foresterson...You and Rohne sent for them a couple weeks ago, so I believe the likely candidates are coming to join your army.”

“My army,” she almost scoffed. “That’s more uncomfortable to hear than your physical innuendoes. But those ofersey’n were invited here to lend their aid in the impending war, not pose for candidacy. This is going to get ridiculous if they start vying for power.” She gave him a sidelong look then. “Have you any interest in being an ofersey’n?”

“Are you offering?”

She laughed, and the sound washed a music over him that he liked. “You think much of my title as Protector of The Master if you think I can name ofersey’n!”

“I’ve watched the way people around here react to you now that my grandfather has put you in charge of things. I don’t think anyone would object to you changing anyone’s rank.”

She let the idea that she could fix a few things in “her” army cross her mind, but her words stayed on topic. “Your

father was obsessed with the idea of being ofersey'n. No doubt he was interested in pursuing that avenue by joining the family to Wold's."

"I've no doubt on that either. As for my own ambitions, I can't be an ofersey'n from sea."

"From sea?"

"That's something I need to talk with you about. I'm sure this war won't last forever, and Henry's offered me a partnership in his shipping business."

"What about the school?"

"What about it?" he asked, slowing her to a stop at Arcana's front porch. He gestured for her to sit on the bench with him, wondering briefly how long it would take a gaggle of Ungol guards to find her now that she was no longer a moving target.

"Well, you can't run Hleo-Arcana from the sea, either," she said.

"Jake has the school, and, currently, there are no Geasa'n children in Onweald to teach."

"Ah, don't remind me. But I think Rohne tore up Godric's will the moment your father was in the tomb. Arcana's yours."

"But Jake will still live and work here. Whether I'm around or off at sea, Jake will always have a place to call home where he'll be provided for. I doubt he and his bride would be any good as merchants."

"True. So you're serious about going to sea?"

He shrugged. "I'm serious about going wherever you are. But I enjoy the ocean, and I think you would, too. The water can be very...calming. And I want to take you all over the

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world.”

“I’ve been all over the world. Well, all over this continent.”

“Hmpf. I intend to rid you of the lunatic that’s chasing you, My Dear. Then our travels can be a bit more leisurely. But this isn’t something we have to decide tonight. Henry hasn’t asked for a decision anytime soon. His ships continue working even as we speak, just without him aboard.”

“Have we heard what the response is to his losing the ship on the Meredore?”

“Drake’s people were plenty worried about their own necks, I can tell you that. Both on the east continent and here. But Henry’s a smooth talker. You’ve probably noticed?” She grinned at the teasing lilt to his question. “He handled it like a professional liar. Drake’s men don’t have any suspicions that we know of. In fact, his remaining ships carry loads of supplies across the Meredore now. Didn’t Rohne tell you? No? There’s nothing Henry could do about it. But he has friends on Bellan who plan to burn down the sheds where the cargo’s stored. If we’re lucky, they’ll get these loads and the loads from other ships Drake’s contracted with.”

“He’ll recognize sabotage if it keeps up.”

“Most likely. But Henry’s here, safe with us.”

She laughed.

“What? You’re surprised that I care for my friend’s welfare?”

“If you care for your friend’s welfare, you’ll get him away from me!”

“I believe I’ve mentioned before that I trust you above anyone else in the world—mortal, spirit, or otherwise—to

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protect any member of this family. I can't imagine any place Henry could be in better company."

She accepted his compliment. "You're kind to say so. But I fear what I bring to this family. Consider it, Nigel. This is the only place I've ever encountered the ryfel."

"And what's this look you're giving me?"

"The ryfel."

"Yes?" he prompted.

She already rose to her feet. "We should seal the training arena."

He nodded at the wisdom.

Julette used the school's training arena to loose a ryfel into their midst once before. She originally formed the beasts during the First War when she needed something large and poisonous to kill The Master's followers. The beasts she conjured had been wiped from existence after that night's war, but in the twenty-five hundred years since, the goddess had found a way to reverse the spell that destroyed her creation and sent one of the stinking, foul demons to the school. Luckily, Nigel and Chariss fenced in the room at the time, and Chariss stopped the beast before it could get up into the house. Learning that she was The Master's Protector in Tiurlang helped explain how Chariss could defeat the creatures.

Chariss walked with purpose again and passed the parlor where Henry looked up and said, "By the gods, what now?"

She thought of several other tasks that she didn't want to leave until morning that kept soldiers and guards busy with her deep into the night. Henry gave up to retire at one point, but Nigel stayed by her side, content to keep working if it meant he could be near her, could watch her strategizing

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mind at work. It amazed him. When she sat down in the floor of Arcana's parlor and scooted up close to a low table, he sat on the couch and watched her speak to one of the Ungol in the being's native tongue. A guard came in with blank parchment and feather and ink that she'd requested, and she thanked the man.

"You're very efficient so late at night," she said to him, and he beamed under the compliment. "Please get some rest, Soldier."

He saluted and marched out of the parlor as if going to bed was an important order. Nigel marveled at how she could have that effect on them. Rohne, as the highest active god in Mahriket, had been an authority when he put her in charge after Jake and Tiatha's wedding, but these warriors seemed to have been already in her command. He watched her sketch out a diagram of what looked like the ground floor of Hleo-Arcana and remembered his little sister Kaylin once saying to Hrazon something along the lines of, "*I don't think Chariss can draw very well, can she?*"

He chuckled to himself, and received a wan glance from her. He thought her eyes lingered across his frame a bit longer than necessary before she looked back to her task, and wondered how he could suggest that she stop for the night and get some sleep. She was obviously exhausted.

She got her point across to the Ungol, who seemed content to take the makeshift map of Nigel's house off to whatever person she'd created it for.

"You know, you got the rooms all reversed on that map you just drew."

"I know," she yawned. She looked over at him and won-

dered if it was the candlelight or the moonlight filtering in the windows that made his eyes look so dark in this room of soft, cool colors. The blues and grays of the carpet and upholstery reflected silvery light onto his body of dark fabrics as he smiled at her, teasing her, she knew. He wore his customary black suede trousers, but traded his white gauze shirt for a dark-hued one—something deep blue and dark enough that it brought out the dark brown strands of his hair that curved easily about his ears and neck. The lighter strands kissed by the suns of summer work wove delicately amid the curls and curves, almost hiding softly like a youth's tresses would. But Nigel was a twenty-eight-year-old man who carried the weight of his family's estate on his well-formed shoulders.

"The kitchen doesn't have a door where you drew it." His deep voice shook her from her reverie.

"I know."

He leaned forward on the couch and rested his elbows on his knees. "And you completely left off Loetha and Lahs's room."

She merely grinned, laying her head down on her hands on the table. When he leaned forward as he did now, his dark hair fell to frame his face and made a lovely painting to stare at. She liked the way his high cheekbones sloped down gently toward a clean-shaven, squared chin. He looked the part of a strong gentleman, yet one who'd already seen enough trouble to recognize it when it came knocking again.

"So what good exactly is a map that's drawn so poorly?"

"Well," she said, trying to clear her mind to respond. "That map is going to be left strategically close to the barn, and Denan Dreor is going to escape tonight."

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He blinked. “You’re letting him escape?”

“That’s what I told the Ungol guard to let happen.”

He stared at her incredulously. “Isn’t that what Julette wants?”

Her grin turned mischievous then, and she shifted herself so she could move the short space to him. Smiling up into his eyes, she leaned up to take him completely by surprise with a simple kiss on his mouth. It caused her stomach to tighten in a way that surprised and pleased her. “Sometimes, you have to give people what they want,” she said.

He laughed lightly. “Nice. You’re trying to distract me, aren’t you?”


“Yes.”

“Well, it’s working beautifully, but I still want to know why you’d send a spy off to Julette when that spy can tell her everything she wants to know.”

Chariss thought about his question for a moment, but found herself thinking more about his lips, which seemed odd to her. She furrowed her brow. “I’m sorry, could you ask that again?”

He chuckled and reached down to lift her onto the couch.

## CHAPTER SIX

enry stood in the doorway with Hrazon at his side and rubbed his eyes as if to clear some faerie vision from them. *No, not a vision*, he decided. There slept his best friend, who was probably about to die under a wizard's sword, leaned back with The Master's Protector snuggled up on his chest.

*She looks pretty peaceful for what the Ungol keep calling the goddess of war*, Henry thought. He tilted his head as if to ascertain whether her hand was in Nigel's shirt or just holding onto the strings at the V in the neck. The man held her protectively, one hand on her head, the other on her shoulder, and slept with one foot on the floor, as if ready to jump up and fight

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anyone coming in to threaten her.

Henry glanced to the wizard at his side to see if Hrazon was noticing such things, or if he was just turning red with rage. The latter was true.

Typically, Hrazon looked the part of a sensible, grandfatherly man. He wore a long, well-kept, gray beard over a kind mouth that, more often than not, and despite the trials he'd endured the past fifty or so years, was formed into a smile. His gray-blue eyes often shone with pleasure over some shared joke between him and his ward. His no-nonsense clothing hung loosely on a tone-but-thick frame. And, right now, the chest of that frame heaved as if the old wizard prepared to spew fire into the room before him. He posed a stark contrast to the sun burnt, grizzly ruffian next to him.

Henry stood taller, but thicker. No one would doubt his lack of discipline, but might mistake him for useful in a fight. His scraggly, dark beard wiggled as he screwed up his lips at the scene before him. He instinctively reached out to take Hrazon by the shoulders, turning him back toward the hall, whispering, "Now, now, I'm sure there's some reasonable explanation."

Hrazon spoke in a low voice as well, but it was a low voice churned out of the depths of some cavern Henry never wanted to visit. "Close the doors."

For lack of any better course of action, Henry stepped into the parlor behind the old wizard and closed the double doors with just enough "boom" to jar the two awake. Chariss jumped for a sword on the table before her.

"Oh, Hrazon, thank the gods it's just you. I thought some spy had gotten into my chamber."

“So you’re used to cuddling up to Nigel in your chamber, are you?” Henry teased, hoping he could lighten the mood Hrazon had descended into.

“You can relax, Henry, I’m not going to kill your friend. Chariss, Child, don’t look so concerned.” Hrazon took a deep breath, as if rallying his courage for the moment. “My anger is not because the two of you fell asleep in the same room. I’m angry because you must be cautious. There are those in the army, in the emperor’s entourage, in the Ungol guard, who would have stumbled upon this scene and reacted quite...erratically. Chariss, you’re The Master’s Protector. Name one Ungol warrior who wouldn’t have slit Nigel’s throat for what I saw here. We must keep these soldiers in your camp, Child. We must be careful. Both of you.” He raised a finger to point it at Nigel. “And if I ever doubt your honor with my girl, I’ll slit your throat myself.”

None of them questioned it.

“Now then,” he clasped his hands together. “I’m starved. Breakfast, Child?”

He held his arm out to her, obviously intending to take her out of the room.

“That’s it?” Henry guffawed.

Chariss smiled wanly at the sailor. “What did you expect? It’s not like Mister Taiman did anything naughty. You’re the one we have to watch out for around here now that we’ve gotten Jake married off.”

“Hmpf. I’m a good lad.”

Nigel chuckled. “Liar. Look, I for one am relieved I don’t have a sword in my gut. Hrazon, I can assure you your ward is safe with me. But you bring up a good point. Warriors are

## Choices Meant for Kings

crawling all over this estate from the Arcanan Army, the emperor's entourage, the Ungol group that came back with Rohne and Amanda; what exactly are we going to do with them when the students return for winter classes?"

Impressed with his friend's suave change of subject, Henry nodded.

Chariss took Hrazon's arm and frowned. "It would be unwise to allow any children back to Arcana."

"Agreed," Hrazon said.

"How do we stop them?" Nigel asked. "Some families will naturally send them back when they finish harvest."

The doors to the parlor opened then and Rohne entered, nearly knocking Henry over in the process. His ice-blue eyes fell on Chariss.

"I've been looking for you. The soldiers already fear we'll have their heads this morning. The emperor's half dead and someone named Denan Dreor has escaped in the night. You mind telling me what that's all about?"

## CHAPTER SEVEN



Shortly after Nigel and Henry had left the east continent of Bellan for their return to Arcana, a lady they'd run into, and then left behind, started her plans to reunite herself with the love of her life. Abigail Farrier had received a gift from Mister Nigel Taiman in the form of a small purse full of coin he'd won while on her continent. It was something to help her and her father. It was a kindness. Nothing more. But Abigail lived in a fantasy world in which Nigel Taiman had the lead role for nine years while her father moved her from city to city, trying, as he believed, to keep her away from the Geasa'n's influence. Abigail looked upon the gift as a summons to come to him. She sent him a letter of

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acceptance.

Now Abigail planned how to get to Arcana before travel on the Ocean of Meredore became dangerous in the winter season. She'd been sneaking personal items out of the room she shared with her father for more than a week. One chilly Bellan night, he missed one of those items. "I can't find your gloves. Did you leave 'em at the inn?"

Her heart skipped a beat. She finished ladling out a bowl of stew and turned from the fire to the table, her Arcanan brown eyes taking him in with a look mixed of fear and uncertainty. "I don't know that I've worn 'em to work. Are you sure you've looked in my trunk?" She felt weak in the knees; the moment had come when she'd have to lie to her father.

"There ain't much in your trunk these days...save that coin purse you keep stuffin' your wages in. You need to take some coin and buy you new gloves before winter sets full in."

"Yes, perhaps I should."

She believed his eyes bore into her and saw her designs as she lowered herself into the chair across from him. No doubt he already figured out her plan and merely used the missing gloves as an introduction to the topic. Surely he'd noticed more than her gloves missing from their room. As paranoid as he was, surely he guessed she planned to run away.

"This is a fine stew. You'll make Mister Bendehl a good wife."

She glanced up at him to see his playful wink.

"I'm...I'm sure I will," she stammered.

"Come now, there's no need bein' embarrassed. It's no secret the man wants to propose."

She gasped, and he chuckled at her wringing her hands.

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What he mistook as nervous pleasure at the idea of her beau finally stating his intentions was really distress over fleeing before the beau could act. She planned to be tucked secretly aboard the Hrunting before the first moon rose that night and safely on her way to Onweald before either her father or her beau knew she was gone. All the plans were in order and no one but the ship's captain knew what she intended to do.

"Abigail, I asked if you was eatin'."

She started back to the reality before her. "I...I don't know that I'm very hungry."

"Well, don't mess around and get late for work. That's a fine job you have and there's no sense losing it."

She nodded, staring at the empty bowl before her. She hadn't had much of an appetite since the night she had given herself to the soldier in the city. It was the only way she knew to trap Mister Taiman. If he truly had a woman he loved back home, as it sounded when he and his friend Henry spoke of the girl Amanda Chariss, then she'd have to convince people that he had fathered a child with her. That's how Hattie Jenkins got a husband all those years ago back in Arcana City. That's how countless women had gotten the beau of their choice. But the soldier who'd been willing to accommodate her without being paid and without telling anyone had been strange. He'd been unworldly. What had his name been? Nicolas something. He said he was going to give her a child that would change history.

She wasn't interested in changing history. She just wanted to convince people that Nigel Taiman had to marry her. And would it be so hard to believe he'd wanted her all along? She was a pretty lady with a sensible figure. Her cheeks were typi-

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cally rosy, her eyes set prettily in her face, and her lips full and pink, all the way she heard people say men liked a woman's features to be. Her hair was a plain brown that hung straight and sensibly to her shoulders. She knew it could be lovely if she paid the fashionable ladies to curl it and pile it on her head the way she'd seen the wealthy women wear theirs, but she wouldn't waste her money on such a style until she was in Nigel's presence.

She was sure she could convince everyone that Nigel was not just a kindly gentleman who viewed her as an old friend from Arcana, but a lover who had given her the child she carried. He would do the right thing by marrying her, but it would take a boatload of courage to get to him.

"You deserve to be happy, and Mister Bendehl will make you happy. He's a good man with a good job."

When they looked at each other Abigail forced a smile.

"He's a kind man," he said.

She thought of Nigel. "That he is."

"And he seems he got plenty a money saved away."

She thought of the Taiman estate. "That he does."

"Will you be happy with him?"

"Of course. Oh, of course. He's everything a lady could hope for in a husband. I find that I can't stop thinking about him and how wonderful it will be to finally be married to him."

"It's about time," her father sighed. "I'm glad you finally got that blasted Taiman boy outta your head. I feared the spell he cast on you would never lift. Blast those 'jicked people for meddling with good peoples' lives."

Abigail stared at her father in shock, her lower jaw sag-

ging. *How could he say such a thing?*

“What is it?” he asked. “You look at me like I just grew another head.”

“Do you think Nigel put a spell on me all those years ago?”

“Well a course! What else would explain you turnin’ crazy?”

“Love? I was in love with him the moment I laid eyes on him.”

He looked perplexed.

“Nigel Taiman didn’t even know who I was until I introduced myself. He didn’t care one way or the other about me until I wrote to him.”

Now he frowned in confusion.

“Nigel Taiman didn’t pursue me until I first pursued him.”

An uncomfortable silence filled the little room while he processed what she said and she calmed her breathing. Her heart raced within her, every nerve in her body tensed.

“By the gods,” he breathed. “By the gods, why didn’t you ever say so?”

“You never gave me the chance.”

“I moved us away from kin and away from the land your mother loved to protect you.”

It was her turn to be silent.

“I feared that man was after you and influencin’ you...I thought you were innocent.” The look of disgust on his face was sharper than a slap would have been.

“What? I was innocent. I merely—”

“You made me a fool.”

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His voice caught in his throat and the pressure of his breath choked him. “I moved this family to poverty to save you from that ’jicked man’s spells...and it was your doin all along?”

She had no response.

“Mister Bendehl is a cursed man if the likes of you is his prize.”

With his hateful statement hanging in the air, Abigail rose from her seat and left their room. She couldn’t find her voice to say goodbye.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**J**ulette stepped onto the ship in the harbor in Lorendell and the other passengers began making excuses to get off. She grabbed one by his collar and sneered, “Cooward. This will be the safest ship on the seas for the next week.”

King Wendan watched the reactions of the people with interest. Yes, siding with Julette in whatever war she had going on the continent to the north was a bad idea. His people weren’t going to stand for it. No doubt they were already making up their petitions to argue before him in his throne room. He dreaded sitting through their speeches. But he dreaded dying under this woman’s invisible power, too.

## Choices Meant for Kings

What was he to do? Being king was certainly easier when all you had to do was entertain courtiers and prostitutes. Why did some ancient evil goddess have to show up and screw up his decadent society?



Chariss hadn't always been self-assured. In fact, it wasn't until her arrival at Arcana and her constant altercations with the patriarch of the Taiman family, the late Mister Godric Alan Taiman, and her constant interactions with the highest active god in Mahriket, Master Rothahn, that she'd found her voice and learned to stand up for herself.

The newfound independence of spirit could be both liberating and uncomfortable. It was usually uncomfortable for her guardian, Hrazon of Mon'dore, who wanted nothing more than to keep her safe. It worried the four-hundred-and-twelve-year-old wizard to no end that she would use sassy language when speaking corporally to her god and master. So when she and Rohne, the nickname that regularly made Hrazon cringe, would argue, the wizard typically spent the argument wincing as if in pain.

That morning in the parlor had been no different. Chariss's explanation for why the spy Denan Dreor had been allowed to return to Julette with inaccurate information about the family's living quarters had not met with Rohne's approval. Chariss didn't care whether He approved or not.

"Look, your father gave this commission to me, not you. This is the decision I made."

"What? How dare you—"

## SANDY LENDER

“I dare because that’s what he’s told me to do. Now if you have a problem with his plans, you can go meditate about it. I have more plans to put in motion.”

“You can’t speak to me that way.”

“I’m sorry, is there someone you need to impress with your authority?”

Hrazon smacked his hand against his forehead while Nigel and Henry stood dumbfounded watching the two stare each other down. Chariss had been the one to yield. With a sigh she said, as if to herself, “All right. Rohne, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be unkind to you in front of others. But you have to believe I’m not doing these things on a whim. I’m not making this stuff up as I go.”

“Fine. Fine. You’ve sent a spy back to Julette. Don’t you think Nicolas Lont already told her the layout of this place? What makes you, or my father, think your screwed up map is going to do any good?”

“Nicolas Lont was a simpleton whom Julette probably doubted from the first time she set eyes on him. She’ll believe Denan’s map above what the general may or may not have told her in Arcana City. And Denan never saw the family’s rooms or the layout of anything beyond the ballroom and students’ quarters with his own eyes so he has no reason to question the thing.”

Rohne threw His hands up in exasperation. “Fine,” He repeated. “Why do you think Julette will have a use for this map? Why do you think she’s coming into the house?”

Chariss shrugged. “Perhaps the fact that we’re amassing an army on the front lawn like a magnet for the Dreorfahn Army she helps lead? Perhaps the fact that she came here to

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this city to capture me once already? Perhaps the fact that Wold told me so?”

By the time they got through breakfast, no one wanted to be in Rohne’s company, and the loss of his geasa made Hrazon long to go back to bed. Members of the Taiman household assisted in getting the students’ quarters emptied of the previous day’s wedding guests, who were now free to return to their homes. Members of the emperor’s entourage were given a carefully worded excuse for his sudden “illness” and the necessity of his incarceration in Arcana City’s jail, and the useless among them were sent back toward S’hara with an assembly of warriors for protection. A majority of his entourage stayed, though, to assist with what Rohne and Chariss assumed was an impending battle with the Dreorfahn Army.

It was enough activity to make Chariss’s head spin. She escaped her Ungol guards and sat in the corner on Arcana’s porch, watching and listening to the Arcanan Army on the expansive front lawn. The suns climbed overhead, making the shadows from the porch’s overhang a perfect hiding place if she sat quietly enough. She longed to join in their small groups of practicing warriors, wishing she could find a sparring partner or two to keep her fencing skills up to par. Little did she know then that there wasn’t a man in the army who could have matched her.

As if drawn to the motions of the individual packs of men within the army, she unlaced her arms from around her legs and went out to walk among them. The first few men to realize it were stunned.

“My Lady!” someone gasped.

“By the gods!” someone else said.

## SANDY LENDER

She frowned. “You don’t have to stop working. I just want to see what everyone’s doing.”

“My Lady, without an escort...” The warrior who addressed her hardly looked qualified to offer the advice he was about to give. “You shouldn’t wander among an army without a proper escort. Let me walk with you.”

She grinned, and the ruffian felt flustered by the expression. The men in the small group she had approached were too taken aback to tease him, and certainly wouldn’t have done so in her presence—not after the way The Master had announced that she’d be in charge from now on.

“Surely you don’t think I’d be in any danger among our own friends, Soldier?”

“I pray to the gods you wouldn’t, My Lady. Just to be sure, I’d like to be at your side.”

She bowed her head as if to his wisdom. “Thank you, Brell.”

“You know my name?”

She was surprised, too, and wondered why the voice in her mind felt the need to reveal it. “It’s your rank that I’ll never be able to remember.” She thought of Brendan Naegling, whom she’d promoted to captain that morning rather than train herself to call sergeant. “I have difficulty keeping the offices straight in my mind.”

Brell was too surprised to answer, and would realize later that she had wanted to know his station.

“Will you tell me what you gentlemen are working on here?” she asked.

“Gentlemen?” one of them asked.

“This is a slingshot,” Brell responded, kicking his fellow

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soldier's boot.

It was obvious she wanted to hold the weapon, so the soldier handed it up to her and began explaining how it worked. The three men in the group were impressed that she didn't react the way a young lady typically would to the knowledge that the weapon included a band of pig's bladder secured to a y-shaped branch. They showed her how to place a rock in the elastic band and send the rock sailing through the air toward a target.

"Ah, like a siege machine," she said.

They were taken aback again.

"Thank you, Gentlemen," she said, speaking the salutation slowly and purposefully, causing at least one of them to chuckle. Even Brell seemed to soften at the use of the word this time. "Brell, will you introduce me to those men who are sparring?" She pointed toward another group, one where the men had already noticed her among the army and had already gotten nervous. Seeing her select them in this manner did nothing to set them at ease.

From his window above, Sorne Jeel watched with sad eyes. "Don't kill her," he whispered.

Brell glanced at the sword at Chariss's waist and wondered if she intended to get herself hurt out here. He'd be hanged for sure. As they moved toward the group, he spoke, "Surely you know these are trained warriors practicing for battle?"

She glanced sideward at him. "Are you worried about my safety, Good Sir?"

He didn't hesitate: "Yes."

She laughed, and the sound carried around them like bells tolling in one of the temples for The Master. "At least you're

honest. You've nothing to worry about."

"That sounds like a challenge if ever I heard one," a ruffian said. "Aren't you The Master's Protector?"

She slowed her approach to the group and sized up the man who spoke. He looked at least twice her weight—a solid wall of muscle and leather.

"She's the Goddess of War," someone else said.

She rolled her eyes. "That's what the Ungol call me. I'll accept the other title, for now."

"She's our leader," Brell said, "in case you forgot The Master's decree from just a day ago."

The large warrior spat on the ground. "I'll take you on, Missy."

"Hey," Brell said. "I just told you—"

"I heard you, and I'll take you when I'm finished runnin' a sword through this one. I'm not part of this sissy army from Arcana—"

"I thought you looked like one of the emperor's lap dogs," Chariss interrupted. "So I guess you're here to support him in his treason?"

The warriors who weren't staring in slack-jawed silence at her words stared at the traitor among them. How had she known? The man snorted some sort of curse as he drew his sword. "So. One of your champions coming to your rescue?"

Of course they were, but Chariss held up her hands to stop them. Smiling wanly, she said, "I was looking for some good practice."

"My Lady," Brell objected, putting his hand on her arm to stop her. She already drew her sword, and she shot him a look that suggested he back off.

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The emperor's warrior shook his short black hair in defiance and growled as if to intimidate them. No one knew what to do. The woman that The Master had put in charge had, essentially, told them to get out of the way, yet they couldn't merely stand aside and watch her get hurt.

"So what was your plan?" she asked. "Did you think you would harm one of The Master's men to get the traitor out under cover of darkness?"

"Sweetie, with all you 'jicked people out of the way, I could cut through half this sissy army and have my emperor off to safety in broad daylight."

She snarled at his slang term for the Geasa'n and brought her sword up to attack. The steel rang out against his and she felt the strength of his arms through her blade. He was, as she had assessed, a solid wall of muscle. This wouldn't be easy without her geasa to back her up. She prayed that he didn't have the gift of sorcery hidden within him to support him in the fight. No group of worried warriors would be able to rescue her if he threw the right kind of spell on her.

They fought. A slice followed a jab followed a stroke followed a blow while they alternately advanced and retreated, spinning and blocking and darting up and down for minutes on end. Chariss felt sweat form on her brow but knew she was doing well by the rivers of sweat flowing down her opponent's face.

*Rivers*, she thought. Rivers seemed important to her.

While she used her arms to guide the sword to deflect his blows, he used his whole body, and the effort was more than his body could take. While she moved sparingly and carefully, he lunged and leapt with all of his weight, as if to apply all he

had into each move. He would run out of energy long before she did at this rate, and that was as she wished it. In fact, when he lunged for the last time, she stepped lithely aside and drew her sword up, flicking gently toward his jugular. It was the last movement he saw. The warriors around her nodded their approval, and she jerked her skirts out of the way of the spurting fountain of blood from his neck as he crashed to the ground at her feet.

She frowned at the body's armor then, as if realization dawned on her. She hadn't tried to impale him with her blade because she'd somehow sensed she'd fail. *How did I know that?* She leaned toward the body to see that his vest of armor was made of dragon scales. Brown and black and shiny in the daylight. She recoiled in horror.

"What is it?" Brell asked.

"Scales! He has scales! Dragon scales!"

"My Lady? This is common among slayers' families. He must descend from—"

She turned a fierce look on him. "Make sure no one in my army wears such an abomination." She almost choked on the emotion behind her voice and fought to get control of it. She realized she must look crazy to the men, and re-gathered her wits. "Please," she remembered to add.

He nodded. It seemed an odd order, but he would follow it without question.

"Chariss!"

Only one person spewed her name with such venom. Rohne was the culprit. He advanced toward the group of stunned soldiers with Nigel and Mia in tow. For someone as old as he was, Rohne moved with great ease and purpose at

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the moment.

“Great,” Chariss muttered. “I apologize, Gentlemen, for the scene you’re about to witness.”

“Gentlemen?” someone asked.

She leaned back over the dead body to wipe her sword off on its pants.

“What the devil do you think you’re doing?” Rohne demanded as He closed the gap between them on the lawn. When He approached her as if He would take hold of her, Brell stepped between them. Nigel still strode to match Mia’s slower pace, to keep from leaving the lesser goddess straggling behind, and noticed Brell’s movement with admiration. *She’s affected another one of them*, he thought.

“And who the devil are you?” Rohne demanded of the soldier.

Brell gulped.

“This is Brell Galend,” Chariss interjected, standing at her full height, “a warrior in the Arcanan Army, and someone who is on your side in this fight. The dead one is a member of the emperor’s army who threatened to kill some of your men and help the traitor escape. Do you have any more questions I can answer?”

Brell glanced at her as if she were crazy. A couple of the other warriors did their best not to chuckle in front of The Master.

“Aye, Chariss, I swear, before this is over, I will turn you into a toad.”

Chariss touched Brell’s arm to get him to move so she could get past the dead body, and Mia watched the soldier’s reaction. It occurred to the lesser goddess that too many clues

were piling up for them to be coincidences. She needed to investigate the title the Ungol used concerning Amanda Chariss Derdriu.

“Are you finished sparring with the army?” Nigel asked.

Chariss grinned at him. “I had to practice with someone. Picking out a traitor among us seemed a good choice, don’t you think?”

He liked the teasing tone in her voice.

“Were you all looking for me?”

“Yes, actually. Rohne here wants to go to the city, and Mia refuses to let Him out of her sight.”

Chariss glanced at the god to whom he referred. Rohne had knelt by the dead soldier and picked at his uniform, as if making sure he truly was from the emperor’s entourage.

“And you?” she asked.

“I plan to go wherever you do.”

She grinned. “Did you give the servants permission to start clearing the wheat field to the west of the orchard?”

“Abrupt change of subject. Yes, I did. Is that bad?”

“Hm? No, not at all. I think it’s very wise. We’ll need somewhere to put Fermson and Wulfe’s entourages when they arrive.”

“I should be out there working with them,” he confessed, “but if you’re going into the city, I would rather be at your side.”

“Don’t think I can fend for myself?”

“I’m not answering that.”

“Look,” Rohne announced. “I don’t intend to stand around here on the lawn all day. Can you men tend to this?” He kicked the dead soldier for emphasis. “Chariss, if you intend

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to tag along, let's get to the stables. I want to read the books in the temple."

"Yes, we should look for references to rivers," she said.

Chariss had been in temples to The Master before, but not the one in Arcana City. To be honest, before meeting Him in the flesh, her passing interest in His religion had merely fueled a light curiosity in the temples built to honor The Master Rothahn, The Ultimate One's third child. She had shown more fondness for the structures themselves than for the gods and goddesses painted on the walls. Now that she had Rohne's life in her hands, she had a decided interest in the god.

She had been hit with a revelation while dueling with the warrior from the emperor's entourage. Noticing the sweat pouring from his brow had made her think of the flowing river in a vision she had received from Mahsilette back in Arcana City. The goddess had told her to protect someone. At the time, Chariss had assumed the most likely male to be protected was Hrazon. Now that she knew she was The Master's Protector, she realized Mahsilette had been telling her about this situation. "*Take Him back to Mahriket where the river will restore what has been removed,*" the voice in her vision had told her. It must mean His geasa.

"The books will have instructions on the healing uses of Yggdrasil," Rohne agreed.

"What instructions do you need if your own sister told me to take you there?"

"Mahsilette is hardly reliable."

Mia nodded in agreement. "She's also not the most loving toward this particular brother. Her intention may have been to drown Him."

## SANDY LENDER

“Look, I’m just going with what she told me. If the waters of Yggdrasil can heal you, let’s get you back there. I’ll hold you under until you’re healed, all right?”

“Nice. Nigel, your bride is threatening to drown me. Are you sure you want to marry this?”

“Positive.”

“Dear, let’s just go read,” Mia prodded. “Perhaps the instructions can keep you from drowning our god.”

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