

## Chapter One

Zarkina's mind still swirled around how drastically her life had changed over the course of the last seven days. She went from a wood's guide to the heir of the throne in the blink of an eye. As if that was not enough, she was also Goddess-Touched. None of the changes were such that she was pleased. All Zarkina wanted to do was return to her beloved Broken Arrow mountains but it seemed that was not going to happen anytime soon.

The two day ride to Port Evenstall was uneventful and completed in almost total silence. Sister Mira, the emissary from the Isle of Destiny, attempted to engage everyone in conversation for the better part of the first day, but her attempts fell on deaf ears. It seemed everyone was deep within their own thoughts and no one cared to share them with one another. The second day showed no improvement in conversation among the companions and it was with palpable relief that they entered the port city.

The Port of Evenstall was the primary hub for all the goods that traveled into and out of the kingdom. It was a large port that consisted of mostly docks, warehouses, and shipyards. The most notable building in the city was the Merchants' Guild whose red tiled roof could be seen rising above all others. Surprisingly, no merchant shops could be seen lining the paved roads as they made their way to the wharf. This wasn't the city

where goods were sold but rather where they were stored before being distributed elsewhere.

It was evening by the time they located the Foam Maiden. After introductions were made to the captain, it took no time to stow their gear. They were led to the galley to take their evening meal while the ship made ready to get underway once the tide turned in their favor.

Crucia, the Lar'ama Society agent, excused himself by saying he was not hungry and returned to the upper deck while the rest of them began to eat.

Zarkina could not believe how suddenly tired she had become once food hit her stomach. It appeared that Indearn, the Queen's Fist High Commander, and Sister Mira were sharing her weariness.

Zarkina thought she heard a thump overhead but dismissed it as the sailors shifting the various goods on the deck. As her eyes continued to close sleepily, the last thing she heard before her head lay on the table was the sound of a distant splash.



The blindfold was ripped from Zarkina's eyes; the movement startling her awake. She glanced frantically around, trying to see her captors, Indearn, Crucia, or Sister Mira.

Crucia was nowhere to be seen, but Indearn was directly across from her. They were in a large wooden cage that was anchored into the hard packed earth upon which they both sat. Indearn was stripped of everything, but his pants and bound almost as she was, arms stretched wide, secured to the cage behind him at his wrists and biceps. The difference between them was Indearn was

bound with thin wire whereas she could feel leather cord at her wrists and nothing on her biceps. He still wore his blindfold and at first appeared unconscious.

Indearn raised his head at Zarkina's gasp. She was still groggy from whatever drug they had used on them, but her senses continued to get stronger the longer she sat there. Before either could speak, the sound of Sister Mira struggling as she was being dragged, made them both turn in her direction.

Two men in strange black robes were dragging the Sister to a table set up outside of the cage. Their robes were cut into several thick bands from the waist down and they wore peaked hoods to cover their faces.

Zarkina was stunned into shocked silence as the two men forced Sister Mira face down over the table. She was naked and covered in bruises when two additional men in dirty armor and long grimy beards took each of her wrists and held them straight out to the sides.

The sunlight filtering through the trees reflected off the intricate gem-studded designs glittering in various shades of blue that covered the Sister's body. It would have been a stunningly beautiful sight to behold had her predicament not been so dire or her body not so badly beaten.

Sister Mira continued to struggle while two more men approached the table. The first was the largest, filthiest man Zarkina had ever seen. He had to be over seven feet tall and had arms the size of Zarkina's thighs. He wore no shirt, only a leather chest harness above his loose pants. His hair and long beard were matted into long rows and he was covered in grime.

The second man who walked beside him could not have been more different. He was short and, unlike

the others, wore a long black robe to cover his stout frame. His most striking feature was his bald head which was painted or tattooed in black chaotic swirls.

The bald man posed next to the table, like a preacher at a pulpit, not obscuring Zarkina's view of the struggling Sister when he started to speak.

"Accept your home and rule at Bis'hale's side as his Queen," his voice boomed while he stared directly into Zarkina's eyes.

"No, Mistress! You must not accept!" Sister Mira yelled out and was rewarded by having one of the robed men roughly spread her legs to place himself between them.

"It is your fate, your destiny, to become Queen," the bald man continued with a sneer.

"Mistress, do not! He lies..." Sister Mira's reply was cut off by her blood curdling scream as a robed man lifted his vestments and entered her from behind.