

Slave to the Empire

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Dedication

This series is dedicated to my friend Jennifer Vale for allowing me to write and expand her wonderful fantasy world. Thank you for the opportunity!

A Note on Appendices

For readers who are interested in a brief reference guide for the various characters, places, and terms used in the book, I've included an appendix at the end of this volume. It isn't necessary to enjoy the story (I promise!) but I've provided it for your convenience in case you are interested.

Enjoy!



Chapter One

Men craved power. It was a simple enough truth repeated throughout history irrespective of age, race, or station. The peasant farmer, the journeyman glassblower, the upstart noble—ultimately they all wanted to be in control. And it was as true in the bedroom as anywhere else.

“Sit down.”

I dutifully sank back onto my haunches and allowed Master’s cock to gently slip out of my mouth until just the tip rested atop my tongue. I could tell from the quickening of his pulse and the tightening of his leg muscles that he appreciated the gesture of submission. He always did.

Gripping my long hair in both hands, he watched approvingly as I kissed, licked, and otherwise worshipped him from my knees. Eventually he pressed against the back of my head, and I opened my throat for him again as he slid in deep. He held me firmly in place, his eyes locked with mine as he scoured my delicate features for any signs of hesitation or distress. He wouldn’t find anything. I waited patiently until he finally withdrew and allowed me the briefest respite before plunging in again.

“Good,” he said between labored breaths. He could have easily finished several times by now, but this wasn’t about his sating his desire—at least, not directly. This was about my continued education, and I had learned long ago that he was nothing if not a devoted teacher. “Duke Arland will expect complete obedience. He will expect perfection. And you will give it to him.”

He withdrew slowly, torturously, but again I refused to show any visible signs of discomfort. Once he was free he tapped me gently on the shoulder, and I obediently hopped up on the bed and swiveled onto my side. He clutched onto my calf and nestled in behind me before lifting my leg out of his way.

I whimpered reflexively when he thrust into me, and I could feel the magic brimming on his fingertips. Now the real battle was about to begin. While his hands remained clamped on my calf and thighs, a set of invisible, illusory fingers tickled their way across my flesh, stimulating each and every nerve from my toes to my breasts. They would arouse and ensnare me until I was almost literally drunk on his touch...and as usual it took every ounce of my willpower not to surrender to his power. This was a test, after all, and I wasn’t about to disappoint him. Not now, not when he had placed so much faith in me.

And so instead I did what no other slave in the Empire could do: I countered with magic of my own.

Reaching back to clasp his hand, I tapped into the Aether and channeled its energies from my body into his. I roused his nerves just as he had mine, and I smiled when a faint, uncharacteristic gasp escaped his lips. All the while my hips met his thrust for thrust, and a raw, animalistic heat swelled between us until beads of sweat trickled down my brow.

Just when I braced myself for his inevitable climax, he abruptly withdrew and flipped me over onto my back. I yelped in surprise; it was a rare thing for Master to take me face-to-face, especially of late. But tonight he wasted no time in swinging my slender legs up onto his shoulders and plunging back inside me, and within moments he was pressing down hard enough that my knees brushed against my own chest.

“Who am I?” he asked, his dark eyes boring into me.

“You are Gabriel Kristoff,” I breathed, “Archduke of Glorinfel.”

“What am I?”

“You are my master.”

“And how will you serve me?”

“I will do anything you wish,” I panted. “And you can do anything you wish to me.”

He slammed into me harder and deeper than ever before, and for a moment I thought his lips might actually drift close enough for me to kiss. But just before they touched I felt him channel another spell, and suddenly the illusory fingers still dancing across my breasts tickled their way up my sternum before eventually grasping around my throat. They squeezed, gently at first but then tighter and tighter as Master drew closer to climax. It was his way of demonstrating his ultimate dominance over me. He owned me, body and soul. Here in this bedroom it didn't matter how much influence he had lost in the Imperial Court, nor did it matter how quickly his family's lands were buckling from the strains of the Emperor's misbegotten war with the Vaeyn. Here he had power. Here he was in control. Here he could fuck his elf slave any time and any way he wished. My life was quite literally in his hands.

And I wouldn't have had it any other way.

My vision blurred as he moaned in pleasure, but I even as my consciousness threatened to slip away I reached my fingers down to his thighs and unleashed the final weapon in my arsenal. There was nothing subtle about this particular spell; it was like I'd fired a jolt of energy straight into his loins. When he had first showed me the technique, it had taken almost a week for him to learn to resist its power. But here and now, with my legs tucked over his shoulders and his cock buried to the hilt inside me, he had no chance at all.

He climaxed immediately, his ghostly hands clutching and unclutching at my throat between waves of ecstasy. A ripple of delight shuddered through me even as I struggled for breath...and then suddenly the tension around my neck was gone. His spell faded and air returned to my lungs, and before he could regain his senses I slid my fingers around the back of his head and pulled his lips down to mine—

He pushed me away just as they touched, and despite my body's reflexive protestations he slipped out of me and sauntered over to the liquor cabinet on the far wall. “You're getting better,” he said approvingly as he wiped the sweat from his brow and poured himself a glass. “Almost ready for Duke Arland, I think.”

“I'm pleased you believe so, Master.”

He grunted softly but didn't reply. While his back was turned I finally allowed myself a moment to bask in the magic still tingling across my skin. I had no idea how Master had learned to manipulate the Aether in such a way. He had spent almost five years studying at the Aetherium, the vaunted college of magic here in the imperial capital of Sanctum, but based on all his tales about the stodgy channelers who ran the place I doubted they had taught him anything about the erotic applications of magic. Perhaps he had taught himself. If so, it would explain how easily he had been able to pass the techniques on to me.

Regardless, it took all my willpower to break his hold and sit up in the bed. Under different circumstances I would have begged him to take me again, both because it pleased him to hear it and because I legitimately yearned to cradle him inside me once more. But I knew that tonight was different. Tonight the lesson was discipline, and he needed to know that I could keep my wits about me even while my entire being pleaded for release.

Taking in a deep breath, I closed my eyes and let the Aether flow through me. I shaped its ever-present warmth into a cleansing pulse, and the last of Master's ensnaring illusions faded from my flesh. My longing for his touch, regrettably, did not. But I could resist. I could become the weapon he needed me to be. I would help him secure Duke Arland's support against the

Emperor, and then I would help him secure the loyalty of the rest of the Grand Dukes after that. Once we were finished, the Emperor would have no choice but to end this war...and then at long last we would finally be able to return home.

“You will need to be perfect,” Master said under his breath as he swirled the last of his wine over his tongue. “Arland himself will be easy enough to please, but his wife will pose a greater challenge. And ultimately she’s the one we need to worry about.”

“I don’t understand why he would allow her to make such important decisions,” I said. “She is a foreigner, is she not?”

“You’ll understand once you meet him. Darian is a decent enough man in his own right, but Luriel has been the real power in Sorthaal ever since she stepped off that boat from overseas.”

I licked nervously at my lips. “I beg your forgiveness, Master, but I still don’t understand why you believe she will respond so well to me. You don’t think she’ll be upset when she learns that her husband is...?”

“Fucking you?”

“Yes.”

He snorted. “On our way here I warned you that you’d have to get used to different rules and different customs. Sanctum is unlike anywhere else in the Empire. Few of the other nobles—especially the other Grand Dukes—possess my restraint. Especially when it comes to *avenari*.”

I nodded slowly. I had heard the stories of the unabashed depravity in the Emperor’s Court before, but having never witnessed it myself I still found the tales hard to believe. Courtesans and prostitutes were common everywhere, naturally, and elven pleasure slaves like myself—*avenari*, in the Old Tongue—were especially prized for our graceful figures, ageless beauty, and inability to bear human children. But if the rumors were true, the court’s appetites went far beyond simple harems and pleasure slaves...

Master must have sensed my discomfort, and he glanced back over his shoulder and flashed me a faint smile. “I already told you that you have nothing to worry about. Darian and his wife may have voracious appetites, but they aren’t fools. They respect the law. Harming my property is the same as harming me, and they wouldn’t dare risk drawing the ire of the magistrates over something so trivial.”

“Of course not, Master,” I whispered.

His smile faded as he turned back around and poured himself another glass. “Still, you will need to be ready for a certain amount of enmity, especially from Lady Luriel. Her people hold long grudges, and her family in particular claims to have suffered greatly beneath the rule of the Faeyn.”

I frowned and searched my memory. I may have been the only slave in the Empire with the ability to channel the Aether, but my wide-ranging historical and linguistic knowledge was almost as rare. Ever since he had first purchased me at auction, Master had insisted upon training both my mind and body, and as always I was eternally grateful for his generosity.

“Weren’t my people driven from Torsia over two centuries ago?” I asked.

“As I said, many foreigners hold long grudges,” Master murmured. “And Luriel may wish to...*punish* you in some fashion or another.”

“I see,” I whispered, my voice so brittle it nearly cracked.

He waved a dismissive hand. “But again, you needn’t worry. She won’t actually harm you, and if by some odd circumstance she tries, Larric will be nearby to protect you.”

I nodded reflexively as my eyes drifted over to the doorway. Larric was undoubtedly outside somewhere, probably glaring silently at the maids or anyone else who dared approach within a hundred feet of the bedroom. The thought of him being close by at the Arland's Estate did make me feel a bit better...but not much. I didn't doubt his *ability* to protect me, of course—Master had assured me numerous times that his bodyguard was one of the most deadly men in Sanctum. What I doubted was his *willingness*. Larric had made no secret about his burning hatred of all elves, both free and slave, Faeyn and Vaeyn...and I couldn't help but wonder darkly if he might appreciate tormenting me even more than Lady Arland...

I shook away the thought and glanced back to Master as he downed his second glass. His skin still glistened with sweat, and I could see a fresh knot of tension twisting in his neck. Out of habit, I crept up behind him and began to knead away the pressure as best I could. When my fingers proved insufficient, I channeled a soothing spell directly into his aching muscles and coaxed them to relax—

"No," he said, spinning around and grabbing my wrist. "No magic. I've told you before: you can't afford to start treating your power as a crutch. If Arland or any of the others catch you channeling, it's over. For both of us."

"I'm...I'm sorry, Master," I stammered, taken aback by his intensity. "I just wanted to please you."

"I understand that, but this isn't a game, Elara. You have to stay focused, and we can't afford any mistakes. Do you understand?"

I swallowed heavily. "Yes. It won't happen again. I promise."

He glared at me for what felt like a small eternity before his expression finally softened. "I know," he whispered, flashing me a tired smile. "I know..."

He released his grip and turned back to his wine, and I yet again marveled at just how much he had changed in the two months since our frantic flight from Glorinfel. Life in his family's castle, Stormcrest, had been contented and carefree even with the war raging along the nearby border. On a typical day, Master would call for me after lunch and bend me over the table or sometimes even take me right up against the wall of his study. Then at night I would spend hours in his bedchamber attending to his desires.

But the Vaeyn's devastating attack on the castle had changed everything. Master no longer summoned me for pleasure; everything was centered around my training. And while I relished the opportunity to expand and hone my channeling abilities, I still wished we had never been forced to flee to Sanctum. I still wished things could return to the way they used to be.

Stifling a sigh, I glanced over my shoulder to the wall-length mirror on the far side of the room. By all appearances, I was the same woman I'd always been: short and willowy, with long brown hair dangling down my back and bright green eyes that Master loved so much. But inside, there were times I felt I like an entirely different person. Not just because of how much I had learned about the Aether, but because of what I had seen that harrowing night in Stormcrest.

I closed my eyes as the memories flooded back over me as vividly as if the attack had happened yesterday. The Vaeyn had struck just after dusk, and no one, not even the top Legion generals, had seen it coming. I'd barely had time to look out a window before the dark elf sorcerers had blasted a hole in the outer wall, and their black-armored soldiers had poured into the courtyard in far greater numbers than anyone had imagined possible.

I should have died then and there. I knew it in my heart even now. Most of the castle slaves had been left behind, but Master had personally come to rescue me even as Larric and the

other guardsmen had pleaded with him to flee to the escape tunnels. A week later we reached the safety of Sanctum, and Master's rage had been smoldering quietly ever since.

In a single night of fire and death, he had lost virtually everything. He was still officially a Grand Duke, one of the five most powerful provincial lords in the Empire, but the Vaeyn had effectively split Glorinfel in half. Worse, the Imperial Legion, the "invincible" swords of the Empire for nearly five centuries, showed no signs of mounting a legitimate counterattack anytime in the near future. It was easy to understand why Master despised the young Emperor for starting this war in the first place, just like it was easy to understand why he had lost all faith in the Legion. What was hard for me to reconcile was that he had chosen me, a mere *avenari*, to be the instrument of his vengeance.

"I'm still not certain whether any of the other Grand Dukes will be at the gala tomorrow," Master said into the silence, "but either way, Arland has to be our first priority. With a little luck, one or two of the others will end up supporting me on their own. If not...well, then we'll have to improvise."

I nodded but remained silent, and once he finished the last of his drink he finally turned back to me and cupped my hands in his. "You should try and get some sleep," he told me. "I have a meeting in the morning, but when I return we'll continue our lessons."

"Of course, Master."

He brushed his hand through my hair and smiled. "They won't be able to resist you. I promise."

I smiled back, and the knots twisting in my stomach finally started to unwind. "Master is most kind."

He leaned in and kissed me. It took me completely by surprise; it felt like an age since our lips had last touched, and I melted into his arms before I even knew what was happening. My tongue greeted his, and for a long moment I thought he might lay me back down on the bed and take me as gently and lovingly as he used to...but then he pulled away and squeezed once at my arm.

"I will see you in the morning," he said. "Sleep well."

He started to leave, but before he reached the door I hopped forward and locked my arms around his waist. He turned in annoyance, but his expression softened when my fingers curled around the base of his cock.

"Are you certain you don't wish to have me again before bed?" I asked. "There is still much I need to practice."

"Tomorrow, my dear," he promised. "It's been a long day, and I no longer have the energy."

"You don't need any," I soothed as I pivoted around in front of him and slowly sank to my knees. For an instant it seemed as though he might protest or even push me away, but once I took him into my mouth his cock swelled in appreciation...and then the last of his resistance melted away.

"Well, if you put it that way," he said as I swallowed him deep, "who am I to argue?"

Chapter Two

The sun had melted into a crimson smear along the horizon by the time Master escorted me out into the courtyard, and the house guards were already waiting for us. Beyond the estate's walls I could already hear the growing bustle as nobles from the far corners of the Empire poured into the city to attend the Winter's End Gala. The time for my first public appearance was fast approaching, and it took every scrap of willpower I could muster to keep my legs from openly quivering.

"Your carriage is ready, Your Excellency," Larric said as the horses came to a halt in front of us. As usual, the bodyguard didn't even acknowledge my presence. He just stood there stiffly, his pale blue eyes taking in everything at once. His sleek but muscular form had always reminded me of a great hunting cat lying in the weeds and waiting to pounce on potential prey. "Are you certain I can't convince you to bring along a larger escort?"

Master turned and flashed a bemused smile at the younger man. "Half the Emperor's Praetorian is out patrolling the city today. Do you really believe we need to worry about thugs and pickpockets?"

"Criminals don't always think rationally," Larric replied. "Some will be willing to take greater risks knowing the potential prize awaiting them. And with the rest of the Third Army departing the city yesterday, the streets are—"

"We will be fine," Master assured him with a wave of his hand. "Come along, dear."

I took his arm as he helped me step up into the carriage. Once we were settled, Larric barked out orders to the other guardsmen and then climbed inside with us. His armor and scabbard clattered against the wooden bench, and I sunk deeper into Master's shoulder as if it would somehow protect me.

"Let's go," Master ordered, wrapping his knuckles against the door. Outside, several of the mounted guards fell into formation around us as we rolled across the courtyard, and soon the full might and grandeur of Sanctum sprawled out before us. From the first time we had entered the city's main gates I'd felt as out of place as a minotaur in a ballroom, and even now, two months later, I couldn't shake the feeling that we were about to step into a different world. In many ways, we were.

I had grown up in Mavarinth, a large but cozy port city in northwestern Glorinfel, and I had so rarely left my first owner's home that I'd never really grown comfortable with crowds. After Master Kristoff had purchased me at auction and taken me back to his castle, my horizons had been broadened... if only just. Stormcrest might have been the capital of Glorinfel, and its silver-plated spires might have been the envy of most of the north, but standing here amidst the wealth and decadence of the imperial capital made everything else seem like a hamlet by comparison.

Master had told me once that half a million people called Sanctum home, and that number tripled if one counted all the slaves. An army of nearly fifty thousand legionaries protected the main gates at all times, and every noble family with a modicum of influence maintained an estate within the towering walls. Sanctum was more than just the capital in name; it was the cultural and political heart of the Empire.

"You know what the real problem is?" Master asked as he squinted out the carriage window. "You can't even tell there's a war going on. Everything looks the same as last year and the year before that."

“I suspect that’s the point,” Larric said. “The Emperor and his pet generals have spent the last two months trying to convince the court that the loss of Stormcrest is just a temporary setback. He insists time and again that the Vaeyn aren’t a real threat. Filling the streets with legionnaires would only call his bluff.” The bodyguard shuffled beneath his armor. “That’s exactly why I wanted to bring more men. The cartels and gangs have been growing bolder by the day, and rumor has it the Faedari rebels freed several of their people from the prison earlier this week.”

“You know what they say about rumors,” Master muttered.

“Listen; don’t believe. Yes, I’m well aware. Still, I wouldn’t anything past the Faedari at this point. Watching their gray-skinned cousins sack our cities has undoubtedly emboldened them.”

Master grunted but didn’t reply. I knew for a fact he was far more afraid of the Covenant than he was of the Faedari. The rebels—mostly Faeyn like myself—had been a thorn in the Empire’s side for many decades, but they were few in number, especially after the Legion had tracked down and destroyed one of their hidden settlements just last year. In essence, the Faedari were the last remnants of my people’s long-forgotten kingdom, and while they still occasionally managed to raid a caravan or “liberate” a group of slaves here and there, in general their influence had waned almost to the point of obscurity. The Covenant, on the other hand, had grown more powerful than ever...especially here in Sanctum.

I glanced out the carriage window as we passed by the Aetherium, the center of Covenant authority in the region. It was the only officially sanctioned college of magic in the city, and as usual I had to suppress a cold shiver at the sight of the massive, gold-encrusted dome and accompanying spires. The buildings themselves didn’t terrify me, of course, but the dozens upon dozens of Covenant priests living inside them did. The priesthood controlled and regulated every college of magic in the Empire, just like they controlled and regular every channeler—even socially powerful ones like Master Kristoff.

The reason was simple enough: the Covenant held the only key to unlocking the power of the Aether, and they forced every would-be channeler to swear allegiance to their gods—known colloquially as the Triad—in order to get it. It was why the Covenant was arguably more influential than the Legion...and it was why the Hierophant might have been even more powerful than the Emperor himself.

“It would seem that the prelacy didn’t want to feel left out of the celebration,” Larric commented as we passed by a veritable parade of crimson-cloaked men and women marching along the streets outside. “They must have summoned every Inquisitor in the duchy for this.”

“Or brought in some from Abenwreath or Rivani,” Master agreed. “The Prelates aren’t stupid—they understand the value of pomp every bit as much as the Imperial Court. And I’m sure they’re happy to remind the Emperor that even his vaunted Praetorian can’t shield him from the Inquisitors.”

“As if anyone could forget,” the bodyguard murmured.

I glanced past Master’s shoulder until I caught a glimpse of the procession, and suddenly the cold shiver tingling down my spine transformed into a full-blown knot in my stomach. The priests were terrifying enough, but the Inquisitors were the men and women I truly needed to fear. Their entire purpose was to prowl the Empire in search of renegade channelers like myself who didn’t need the Triad’s blessings to touch the Aether. They branded us as heathens and heretics and demon-touched monsters...but to everyone else, we were known simply as Unbound.

To this day the Hierophant insisted that we were the only true threat to imperial sovereignty, and it wasn't hard to understand why. Magic was power, the old saying went, and the Unbound were the only source they couldn't control. In a sense, I was the ultimate manifestation of their darkest fears. A slave channeling Aether violated imperial law; an Unbound channeling Aether violated the law of the gods. And I was both at once.

If the Covenant ever learned of my true nature, Master would be stripped of his office and cast into the palace dungeon. I would likely be burned alive in the public square for all to see. The thought seared into my mind, and it suddenly felt like everyone we passed was staring straight at me. Not because of the extravagant, thousand-coin imported dress Master had wrapped me in, but because they were just waiting for the smallest slip-up so they could turn me over to the nearest Inquisitor...

"Arland and wife aren't interested in meek little girls," Master whispered into my ear. "Submissive? Yes. But not meek. You need to get ahold of yourself."

I closed my eyes and forced myself to take in a deep breath. I must have been trembling more than I thought, and with my arm locked around his he could probably feel every twitch and tremor. "I'm sorry, Master. I just don't..."

I trailed off as my eyes flicked over to Larric. He wasn't looking at me at the moment—he seemed to be fixated on the Inquisitors marching outside—but I still had to be careful of what I said around him. He didn't know my true nature, and I had to make certain it stayed that way. No matter how loyal he seemed, I doubted anyone would be willing to shield a heretic from the wrath of the Triad.

Master squeezed my hand. "I've taught you everything you need to know. Just remember that."

"Yes," I breathed. "Yes, of course."

"You'll do fine, Elara. I have faith in you."

He squeezed me again, and for one fleeting instant his smile was as warm and caring as before we had fled Stormcrest. Back when I had been his servant rather than his weapon—back when his schemes and machinations had seemed so distant I could pretend they would never come to fruition.

But then the moment passed, and the shadow fell across his features once more. "Time to get ready," he said as he unlinked our arms and reached down into his satchel. Inside were my enchanted obedience cuffs and collar. He rarely bothered with them while we were alone inside the mansion, but in public he knew that the sight of an unchained Faeyn slave would raise too many eyebrows. I lifted my long hair out of his way as he fastened the collar securely around my throat and attached the matching leather leash. Once they were fitted snugly in place, I swiveled to the side so he could lock my hands behind my back. He didn't bother with ankle chains; few owners worried about their slaves running off when all they had to do was touch a button on a control rod to shock them into submission.

I couldn't explain why, but for some reason the restraints actually helped settle my stomach. Perhaps I was comforted by the fact they made me appear less threatening and thus shifted attention away from my dark secret...or perhaps being helpless simply appealed to my Faeyn nature as the imperial scholars claimed. Either way, the worst of my anxiety drained away, and I closed my eyes and did my best to mentally prepare myself for what was to come.

Eventually our carriage passed through the main gates, and once we were about halfway through the courtyard the driver stopped as a horde of supplicants rushed forward to fawn over one of the Grand Dukes.

“I’ll keep them busy,” Larric said as he pushed open the door. “Have a pleasant evening, Your Excellency.”

He stepped down and joined with the palace guardsmen to keep the area clear. Master Kristoff waited a few seconds before following, just as protocol dictated, then tugged on my leash and dragged me forward until I was standing behind him. Normally, such a simple display of domination would have been sufficient, but given the grandeur the evening’s festivities Master evidently decided he needed to make a more dramatic statement. He lifted the control rod to my collar and flicked it on...and I instantly dropped to my knees in front of him as a jolt of Aetheric energy shot through my leg muscles. I lowered my eyes and waited just as he’d taught me, and a few moments later he tugged on my leash again and hoisted me back to my feet.

“Breaking in a new pet, Your Excellency?” one of the nearby Praetorians asked as he and a partner stepped forward from the rabble to greet us.

“She’s fully trained, but it’s always good to remind them of their place now and again,” Master replied. “Take us to the palace.”

“Of course, Your Excellency. Right this way.”

We traveled across the courtyard, and no one else troubled us along the way. Once we drew close, I noticed that the line of nobles and petitioners outside the main hall already stretched halfway across the courtyard, but thankfully the Grand Dukes didn’t have to bother with such formalities. At Master’s request, the praetorians led us through a second gate on the western side of the building, and soon we were inside and making our way across the upper balcony towards the ballroom floor.

I had never actually been inside the Imperial Palace before, and despite Master’s warnings that I keep my eyes low at all times, I couldn’t help but sneak the occasional furtive glance at our surroundings. I had heard so much about the decadence of the Royal Court that I felt like I just *had* to see it for myself...and it took only a few moments to realize the stories had been completely true.

Aside from the impossibly tall walls, the splendorous golden statues, and the pristine marble walkways, the palace was also filled with a veritable army of servants that was nearly as impressive as the army of Praetorians outside. Master had once said that the Emperor kept nearly two thousand slaves on hand at any time, and on special nights like tonight every one of them was out catering to the whims and fancies of the guests. The majority of them were human, naturally, captured foreigners from one of the many godless nations across the sea that refused to worship the Triad. But there were also plenty of orcs, groll, and even a few minotaur lurking about. Most were gladiators who had survived at least one blood-soaked encounter in Sanctum’s famous battle pits, but a few were simple laborers. The most striking thing to me, however, was how many of my own kind were present—not as cooks or maids or butlers, but as *avenari* like myself. And nearly all of them were already hard at work.

In the chamber directly to our left, a blond Faeyn woman no older than myself busily worked to please a pair of youngish looking lords from her knees; to our right, a red-haired woman was bent over a table as a nobleman took her roughly from behind while his companions cheered on his efforts. And straight ahead, elevated slightly in a semi-circular nook cut out from the wall, a trio of noblewoman sipped at their wine and gossiped as young Faeyn males knelt beneath their skirts.

“Darian is already here, good,” Master murmured as he swept his eyes over the crowd. “And I don’t see his wife around, either. This should work perfectly. Be ready.”

My stomach fluttered as I risked a furtive glance across the room. It was easy enough to pick out Grand Duke Arland from Master's earlier descriptions. Middle-aged and slender, he sported a neatly-trimmed red beard and a pleasant smile, and unlike most of the other nobles in attendance his skin was tanned from many hours spent beneath the sun. According to rumor he fancied himself quite the hunter, and his duchy, the Sorthaal Highlands, was allegedly rife with game.

"Hello, Darian," Master greeted once we drew close. "It's been a long time."

Arland glanced back over his shoulder and smiled. "Gabriel! It's good to see that you're safe." He reached out and vigorously shook Master's hand before shooing away the lesser nobles swarming over him. "When I heard about Stormcrest, I feared the worst. Thank the Triad you were able to escape in time."

"I mostly thank my grandfather's obsession with escape routes. I was halfway to Sanctum before they even knew I was gone."

"Wily old bastard. And to think, the other dukes used to call him a coward."

"Among other things," Master replied dryly. "Did you have any trouble on your own trip?"

"The roads from Sorthaal are safe enough," Arland said. "No elves wandering about pillaging everything in sight in the west." He paused, and I could feel his eyes shift to me. "Not yet, anyway."

Master's hand brushed reassuringly against my back before he stepped over to the nearby balcony railing. "Well, hopefully we'll be able to prevent that. Assuming we work together."

"Mm," Arland murmured, and I could tell from his tone and the subtle shuffling of his feet that he was studying me carefully...and that he liked what they saw. "This must be the prize you mentioned in your letter."

"Yes, her name is Elara. Some fool from Mavarinth had apparently been using her as a cook and got tired of her burning his roast. He sold her for just fifty sovereigns, if you can believe it."

"What fool would waste such a delicate creature in his kitchen?" Arland asked as he meandered behind me like a collector appraising a rare vase. "You should have had him executed for treason on the spot."

Master chuckled. "The thought did cross my mind."

Arland dragged the back of his hand across my cheek. "Have you considered breeding her? I hear that healthy Faeyn babies are selling for almost five hundred down south in Rivani. More overseas in Torsia, if you can believe it."

"I might eventually, but right now she has better uses, I think."

"Yes," Arland said, his eyes glimmering hungrily. "I suppose that's true. How about selling her, then?"

"I'm afraid not. She's the best investment I've made in years, really." Master snapped his fingers to the side, and one of the palace slaves rushed over and handed him a glass of wine.

"Still...just because I won't sell my toys doesn't mean I'm averse to sharing them with friends. You can take her right here, if you wish."

"Very tempting, but I'm not sure how long we have until His Majesty arrives. I'd rather not be interrupted." The duke's fingers settled on my lips, and with my eyes lowered I could see the swelling bulge in the front of his trousers. "Still, it would be a tragic waste to pass up such an exquisite beauty..."

"A compromise, perhaps?"

“Yes...yes, I think so.” Arland lifted up my chin and smiled devilishly. “On your knees, girl. Let’s see what you can do.”

My heart raced as I obediently dropped down before him. He unclasped the front of his trousers, and I could tell he was rock hard long before he sprung himself free. I was tempted to lean forward and swallow him deep just to see how quickly I could make him finish, but of course that would defeat the entire purpose of this encounter. I needed to do more than simply take him into my throat and drink his seed like a common harlot; I needed to prove to him that I was special enough to warrant a private visit to his estate later. And with my hands restrained behind my back, that left me with only one real option.

Taking in a calming breath, I reached out to the Aether. Its familiar, all-encompassing warmth coursed through me, and I delicately channeled the bulk of its power into my mouth and lips. I leaned forward as if to kiss the head of Arland’s cock, and I could see his hips quivering in anticipation of my touch. I paused and allowed him to feel the heat of my breath for a moment before finally flicking my eyes up to meet his.

I could taste his yearning and desire as if they were a part of his flesh. Like Master, Duke Arland was a man accustomed to getting what we wanted, and even though I was nothing but a slave—even though I wore an obedience collar around my neck and cuffs around my wrists—right now I had all the power in the Empire. And I savored every moment of it.

After making him wait a few more agonizing moments, I finally ran my tongue across the tip. He trembled in delight, and I released the smallest spark of Aether from my lips as I curled them around his cock. It coursed through him like a spark of electricity, and I braced myself in case he lost control and climaxed...

But Arland was obviously both disciplined and practiced; he groaned and clutched tightly at my hair, but he didn’t spend. The rumors about his appetites and depravity must have been true after all.

“Are you still certain you don’t wish to take her?” Master asked with obvious amusement. “There’s a table right over there...”

I doubted that Arland even heard him. He moaned in excitement as I swallowed him whole, and once he was thoroughly distracted I decided that now was the perfect opportunity to start my real mission. Channeling the Aether again, I reached out and slowly pushed into his mind.

At first, his surface thoughts and emotions nearly overwhelmed me; I had only ever practiced this kind of telepathy on Master, and his “mental paths” had become familiar enough that I could navigate them without much difficulty. But a new mind was like a new river complete with new twists, new currents, and new rocky shores. It took me almost a whole minute to get my bearings, and I jolted Arland with another burst of Aetheric energy just when I sensed his interest beginning to wane.

“She’s quite ravenous,” he breathed. “Where did you send her for training?”

Master Kristoff smiled again. “I didn’t need to send her anywhere. She’s a quick study and eager to please—a rare combination, in my experience.”

“Then you should definitely breed her,” Arland managed. “Just...not quite yet.”

His cock swelled in my throat as he held me in tight, and once I felt his mind flutter off in ecstasy again I took the opportunity to slip past his surface thoughts and delve into the very core of his memories. This time I was better prepared than the first; I kept my focus even as the torrent of images and words and knowledge poured over me. I was actually tempted to rummage around and see what I could find—Master would certainly welcome any dark secrets I might be able to

uncover—but I knew I wouldn't have enough time to find everything tonight. Fortunately, now that I was inside it was a trivial task to make sure I got another chance.

Slowly, methodically, I implanted a subtle suggestion in the back of his thoughts: later, before he returned to his estate for the night, he would ask Master if he and his wife could borrow me for an entire evening sometime this week. His mind accepted the request readily—greedily, even—and I couldn't help but wonder how easy it would be for me to manipulate him further. I should have broken contact and accepted the easy victory for the triumph it was, and a part of my mind was screaming at me to do just that. But another part—an emboldened, confident part I hadn't even know existed before this moment—begged me to put my budding skills to the test despite the risks.

And so I did. Prying even further into his consciousness, I suggested he become more aggressive...and just seconds later I felt both of his hands grip firmly onto my hair. He thrust into my throat as deeply and fervently as if he'd just bent me over the railing, and soon it was all I could do to hold myself steady as he ravaged my mouth. I could have stopped him anytime, of course. I knew that now, just like I knew that once I had slipped past his defenses, I could make him do almost anything...but I didn't want to. I was enjoying it too much. Both the feeling of his manhood sliding across my lips as well as the knowledge that even while he believed he was dominating me—even while I was on my knees with his cock battering the back of my throat—I was in control. I was the puppeteer, and he was the marionette. And the thought sent a shiver of bliss cascading through me until my toes curled inside my shoes.

“Merciful Triad!” he exclaimed as he continued his relentless assault, and I could feel the eyes of half the room fastening upon us. His pulse quickened, his cock throbbed, and I slipped out of his mind as gently as I could as he rapidly approached climax. “Here it comes, girl. You'd best not spill a drop!”

I didn't. The warm flood flowed swiftly and easily down my throat, and after a few final spasms his cock fell silent. He held me in place as his knees threatened to buckle, and once he eventually regained his strength and withdrew I hungrily cleaned him off with my tongue.

“As I said,” Master whispered, his eyes glittering with approval, “she's one of the best investments I've made in years.”

“Magnificent,” Arland breathed. “And I see you've even taught her to clean her toys once she's done with them.”

He ran his hand gently through my hair as I finished, and when I leaned back on my haunches and saw him smiling down at me, I knew I had him.

“My wife would love to play with her,” the duke said after a moment. “It's almost too bad she won't be in Sanctum for a few more days. She stopped in Riverboro to meet with one of her family's old merchant contacts.”

Master smiled. “That almost sounds like an excuse to miss the gala.”

Arland grunted as he brushed the back of his hand across my cheek. “You know how much she hates playing the token foreigner in the court. And it's worse when half the nobles in the Empire are here.”

“Well, I'm sure we can come to an arrangement once she's in town. Just let me know.”

“I will,” the duke promised. He stared down longingly at me for a few more moments before finally turning away. “I'll catch up with you later. I need to speak with the leader of the Mason's Guild before she's too drunk to sign a contract.”

“But just drunk enough to give you a good deal,” Master replied with a thin smile.

“Naturally.” Arland squeezed at my cheeks. “I'll see you again soon, my dear.”

Master waited until the other man had vanished into the crowd before ordering me back to my feet. “Like I said before, you have nothing to worry about. None of these fools have a hope in the void of resisting you.”

I smiled, and for a moment his eyes warmed enough that I thought he might actually lean down and kiss me . . .but of course I should have known better. He would never do such a thing in public, and certainly not while standing here among the Empire’s elite. Instead he glanced away and tugged at my leash.

“Come, General Torelius is downstairs,” he said. “I’d like to speak with him before the Emperor arrives, if possible.”

I nodded and lowered my eyes. “Of course, Master. Anything you wish.”

Chapter Three

In theory, the Imperial Legion was run by a cabal of six High Generals, each of whom commanded an army of legionnaires and a vast retinue of supporting officers. The arrangement was roughly analogous to how the Grand Dukes ruled over a province and the scores of barons and lesser lords beneath them. Both the generals and dukes were given considerable autonomy to manage their own affairs, but in times of crisis the Emperor had the authority to take direct control of both the duchies and the Legion as he saw fit.

In practice, of course, things were never that simple. Just as the Grand Dukes were not all equal in power and influence, there was a great disparity between the various High Generals. The head of the First Army had always commanded more respect than his peers, largely because he represented the central province of Veshar and was thusly responsible for the protection of Sanctum itself. Today that honor was held by a man named Antoine Torelius, and though Master had been complaining about the man for months, I had never met him or even seen his likeness in a painting. Until today.

Following our meeting with Duke Arland, Master and I made our way across the palace and down into one of the vast conference chambers on the main level. Legion officers were interspersed with lords and barons everywhere, from the lowest-ranking centurions all the way to the legates who commanded the armies on the field. For the first few minutes I wondered if I would even be able to pick out Torelius once I saw him, but then Master steered us towards one of the corners and I realized the general's identity couldn't have been more obvious.

Tall and wide with a well-trimmed beard and puffy cheeks, Torelius looked like a man who had never wanted for anything, and I couldn't decide if his splendid white coat and gleaming golden sash were supposed to be fashionable or simply garish beyond reason. His own *avenari* stood behind him, shackled at both her hands and feet, but I didn't recognize either of the men he was speaking with. The first was lanky and young, probably in his early twenties, but as for the second...

I might not have known *who* he was, but his crimson armor and inscribed tabard left no doubts as to *what* he was. A dark chill rippled down my spine, and Master gripped sternly at my hand when he felt my muscles tense. I couldn't afford to panic and draw attention to myself here, not in front of a Covenant Inquisitor.

"Ah, Duke Kristoff," Torelius said with an awkward smile as we approached. Judging from all three men's aggressive postures, we had interrupted a rather intense verbal spat between them. And judging from the flush of the general's cheeks, I suspected he had been on the losing end. "It's good to see you again, old friend. I know you've wanted to speak with me for a few weeks, but my schedule has been unrelenting."

"One of the many burdens of fighting a losing war," the young man muttered as he sipped at his drink. I caught myself just before my mouth dropped open. For anyone to dare mock a High General straight to his face...

"Don't mistake a few minor setbacks for defeat, Lord Bolvir," Master said with a carefully-practiced grin. It was so convincing I almost believed it myself. "I'm sure the Legion has everything well in hand, as always."

Bolvir turned, eyebrow cocked. I belatedly recognized the name: he was Grand Duchess Farrow's oldest son and the heir to the vitally-important province of Abenwreath. The "Wreath feeds the Empire," the old saying went, and Duchess Farrow was probably the most influential of any of the Grand Dukes.

“A curious position for someone who has lost nearly all of his lands due to Legion incompetence,” Bolvir said. “Or have you abandoned hope for the people of Glorinfel already?”

“Not at all,” Master replied calmly. “I simply have faith in our fine soldiers and the gods that watch over them. Surely the Triad will not allow a band of heretics to destroy their devoted servants.”

“Well spoken, Your Excellency,” the Inquisitor said. Somehow I managed not to jump despite his deep, gravelly voice. “It’s a pity that not all of your comrades seem to share your confidence.”

“This has nothing to do with faith, Jodai,” Bolvir spat. “It is simply a cold, hard fact. We weren’t ready for another war, not so soon after that disastrous skirmish with the Numenese two seasons ago. Everyone recognized that, even Lucian’s father. But evidently he died before he could teach his son to temper his bloodlust.”

“As I have tried to explain to you before, my lord,” Torelius said with strained patience, “with the Third Army moving in to bolster our forces at Balagarde, the Vaeyn will be surrounded. They will be forced to fall back.”

“And what if they decide to attack Abenhold instead? We have fewer soldiers than Stormcrest, and if they take the fort they could pour into the Wreath and burn half our fields before the next harvest. They could even march within spitting distance of Veshar by autumn!”

Inquisitor Jodai snorted. “And so the truth finally comes out. Our young lord suddenly fears the war once his own lands are threatened.”

“Of course I fear it!” Bolvir snarled. “That’s the whole damn point. Kristoff might be able to sit here and smile to your face, but I’m not. We want answers, General, starting with an explanation for how Vaeyn agents were able to infiltrate and destroy your prison camp at Agara just last week.”

Torelius’s face hardened, and I clutched reflexively at Master’s hand. I had never heard anyone speak to one of the High Generals so callously, not even the son of the most powerful noble in the Empire. Ostensibly, the Grand Dukes and their heirs outranked anyone in the military, but Master had warned me many times that politics were rarely so straightforward.

“Perhaps your mother should have spent more time teaching her son about the dangers of listening to rumors,” Torelius said coldly. “And of asking too many questions.”

A cold silence settled over the group, and for a moment I wondered if Bolvir might actually draw his sword and skewer the other man right then and there. I squeezed tightly at Master’s arm as the tension grew... and then someone abruptly snorted from behind me.

“An abundance of questions has rarely been the Empire’s problem,” an old, exquisitely-dressed woman said as she stepped over towards the circle. “Quite the contrary, in fact.”

Torelius’s cheeks twitched, and a second later he flashed one of the most fraudulent smiles I had ever seen. “Good evening, Your Excellency. We were starting to wonder if you would make it.”

“You were starting to *hope*, you mean,” Grand Duchess Kathryn Farrow corrected. “Don’t worry, the healers assure me that I’ll still be a splinter under the Emperor’s fingernail for many years to come—assuming the Vaeyn don’t torch Sanctum by the end of the year, of course.”

The general chuckled humorlessly. “It’s good to see that the brave soldiers of the Legion still have the confidence of the Grand Dukes and their families.”

“I have every confidence in their ability to stab whatever they’re told. I have less confidence in the people doing the telling.”

The awkward silence returned, and Torelius's smile vanished completely. After a few seconds Master Kristoff simply snorted. "The celebration just wouldn't be the same without your irreverent charm, Kathryn."

Farrow shrugged. "My son raised an excellent point earlier, and I think all of us deserve a real answer. When the war started the Emperor promised us that we'd have troops in the heart of Sulinor by the first snowfall, and yet here we are struggling to push the bloody elves back out of Stormcrest. At some point the Legion needs to admit it swatted a beehive and wasn't prepared to get stung."

"War is inherently unpredictable, Your Excellency," Torelius said. "I would think that someone who has lived through so many of them would appreciate that."

The duchess scoffed. "Yes, I'm old and you're fat. Apparently you really *can* see the obvious when it's standing right in front of you. Who knew?" She waved a dismissive hand. "The elves weren't threatening anyone, and yet here we are."

"The mere presence of the heretics is a threat," Inquisitor Jodai growled. "You would prefer we sit back and do nothing while they continue to spit in the face of the Triad?"

"I would prefer that we pick and choose our battles more carefully," Farrow said. "The Emperor's father understood that well, just like his father before him. The Empire has bled enough these past few decades, Jodai. I'm sure even the gods recognize that."

The Inquisitor took a menacing step forward. "I would be careful, Your Excellency, lest His Majesty confuse your words for treason."

She snorted. "His Majesty knows exactly how I feel, just like he knows it's pointless to try and make me shut up about it. Now why don't you take the general here and go scurry off somewhere, hmm? I have some business I need to discuss with Duke Kristoff. In private."

The two men glared at her for a moment longer before finally nodding and disappearing into the crowd. Master Kristoff waited until they were well out of earshot before turning back to the old woman.

"You walk a dangerous path, Kathryn," he said under his breath. "Emperor Lucian lacks his father's patience...not to mention his restraint."

"Perhaps," she murmured after a sip of wine. "But he's not a fool, either. If he wants to feed his army, he can't touch me and he knows it. The Wreath is too important."

"I fear you underestimate his ambition. If he was willing to remove his own father as we suspect, then eliminating one of us would be a paltry task by comparison." Master turned to face Bolvir. "Or if not that, he could always strike at us in other ways."

"I don't fear Lucian," Bolvir said. "And not all of us are as eager to play supplicant as you."

"It's not a matter of eagerness," Master corrected. "It's a matter of acknowledging reality. Antagonizing the Legion and the Covenant serves no purpose. We can't afford to go on the offensive until both Arland and Darkstone join us."

"There is no 'us,' Gabriel," Farrow corrected. "This war is a mistake. That's all there is to it. I haven't agreed to join you in anything."

"Maybe not, but the only way we'll be able to put enough pressure on Lucian to stop the fighting is by standing together."

"Perhaps," she murmured as she took another long, slow sip from her glass. "You do realize the Grand Dukes haven't officially held a Quorum in decades, yes? And the Quorum hasn't successfully called for the nullification of a sitting Emperor in well over a century."

“I’m aware,” Master assured her. “But with luck, we won’t have to go that far. Lucian might back down once he knows we’re all unified against him.”

“Or he’ll order the Legion to turn around and burn our cities. It’s hard to tell with him.”

Master smiled. “If you were really worried about that, you wouldn’t have been scolding Torelius so openly. Besides, even if the good general went along with such an insane order, the rest of his colleagues wouldn’t. He’s not so powerful that he can stand against *all* of the other High Generals.”

Farrow grunted. “Hopefully we never have to find out. But I have a sneaking suspicion we’ll need more than just the Quorum to change Lucian’s mind.”

“Maybe, but first things first. Arland continues to waver, but he’s in Sanctum for a few days yet and I have confidence that I can persuade him to see things our way. It’s in his best interests to stand with us, whether he realizes that yet or not.”

“Sorthaal is far from the front lines, and you know how much his wife despises the elves,” Bolvir pointed out. “She’s the one you’ll have to convince.”

“I know, but I have a plan,” Master told them. “Contrary to what Torelius says, I don’t believe for a moment that the Vaeyn will stay contained. They won’t risk stretching their lines and attacking Abenhold, but I wouldn’t put it past them to hit Mavarinth or even Balagarde. And we know for a fact they have a sizeable fleet in the north waters already. If they take Mavarinth, they could easily land in Sorthaal not long after. Arland will need help if he wants to fend them off.”

“You could be right,” Farrow said, her mouth twisting as if she’d just noticed a foul taste on her tongue. “But Arland is one thing; Darkstone is another. Between the Salt Peaks and his own army, Korvale is better defended than Sanctum.”

Master shrugged. “I have ideas for how to convince him, but for now we should stay focused on Arland.”

“Mmm,” she muttered noncommittally as she looked upon me for the first time. “You’ve never been one parade around your pets before, Gabriel. Have these dark times changed you that much?”

“They’ve encouraged me to appreciate simple pleasures, wherever they might be found,” he said as he traced a finger through my hair. “I purchased at her auction in Mavarinth a few years ago, and she’s been very...*dependable*.”

“I’m sure,” Farrow muttered as she eyed me with borderline contempt. Her son, on the other hand, smiled sadistically as he paced around me and eventually pressed his palm against the exposed section of my belly.

“No Covenant brandings,” he remarked. “She’s still ripe, then?”

Master nodded. “Yes, and I intend to keep her that way for some time.”

“Good idea,” Bolvir said, his smile widening.

“Stop drooling, dear,” Farrow scolded. She rolled her eyes and glanced back to Master. “His birthday is coming up. He might be interested in using her, assuming you’re willing to loan her for a day or two. He tends to get bored of his own pets quickly.” She scoffed. “I swear, he spends more time at the brothel or trading at the auction block than managing the farmstead.”

“I won’t apologize for having refined tastes,” Bolvir said as he tilted my head back and forth.

“Nor should you,” Master soothed. “I’m sure I can arrange something. Though I figured your mother would have married you off by now.”

“He’s been engaged for almost three months,” Farrow said. “But his fiancé is every bit the glutton he is. She went through eight different serving boys just last month. Eight! I’ll never understand why the two of you can’t just fuck each other and save me a fortune.”

Bolvir shrugged. “It’s hardly my fault you chose me a moose for a bride. What did you expect?”

Farrow harrumphed and finished the last of her drink. “Just stay in touch in let me know if Arland comes around, Gabriel. If he does...well, then I’ll see what I can do about applying pressure to Darkstone.”

“Threats from Abenwreath carry weight even in the farthest reaches of the Vale,” Master said. “If you speak, he’ll listen.”

Farrow grunted again. “We’ll see. Now if you’ll excuse me, I still need to meet with some of the merchants in from Talisham. If those idiots think they can short me on the havinroot seeds this spring, they’re in for a surprise...”

She tromped off across the ballroom like a brooding thunderstorm, her son closely in tow, and even the Emperor’s fearsome praetorian scurried to get out of her way. I had never seen anything like it, and I couldn’t decide whether I should have been awed or horrified.

“She doesn’t seem to fear the Emperor,” I breathed once we were alone. “She doesn’t seem to fear anything.”

“That’s because she’s a fool,” Master hissed under his breath. “Lucian doesn’t care about the Wreath or its farms. He isn’t like his father; he’s driven by ambition, not vision. He’ll destroy her even if it means crippling the Empire in the process.”

“If he did attempt to harm her, wouldn’t that unite the other nobles against him?”

Master grunted. “You’d think so, but it’s not that simple. Farrow was right: it’s been a long time since the dukes have successfully called a Quorum, and even longer since they’ve actually tried to replace a sitting Emperor. My father always said that the duchies are too independent for their own good. He was probably right.”

I nodded nervously. Master had spent many nights instructing me on the intricacies of court politics. His hope was that it would allow me to manipulate his rivals more effectively, but there were many subtle nuances I had yet to grasp. I just hoped I was able to learn them all in time.

“So we must act quickly then,” I said. “Before the Emperor has a chance to strike out against her.”

Master nodded and glanced upwards. “Speaking of which, it would seem that His Majesty has finally decided to grace us with his presence.”

I followed his eyes to the balcony looming above the center of the ballroom. There, sauntering over towards his splendid golden throne, was Emperor Lucian Patravian III. His purple-cloaked praetorian fanned out along the edges of the railing, and despite their imposing, close-faced helmets, I felt like they were glaring at each and every guest in turn. The Emperor himself looked almost bored, and he paused briefly in front of the throne as all of the guests—us included—dropped to a knee in his honor. The trumpets unleashed a brief, staccato fanfare, and by the time I looked back up he had already taken his seat.

“I will say one good thing about him,” Master murmured under his breath as we rose back to our feet. “He doesn’t waste nearly as much time on idiotic pomp like his father. Frankly, I doubt he’ll even speak tonight.”

I nodded absently, my eyes unwittingly transfixed by the Emperor’s surprising physical appearance. I had never seen his likeness on portrait or etching—all the banners and paintings in

Sanctum were still dedicated to his recently-dead father, Rikus—but for whatever reason I had always imagined Lucian as a portly, moon-faced man with pleasure slaves draped over his bulbous arms like Torelius.

I'm not sure I could have been more mistaken. The Emperor was tall and broad, and his toned, muscular arms were plainly visible beneath his cape and sleeveless tunic. Had I not known better, I might have assumed he was one of the praetorian rather than their sovereign. He wore his blond hair long, and the stubble dotting his cheeks added a few years to his otherwise youthful face. Most interestingly at all, however, was the fact he didn't have any slaves with him whatsoever.

Though if Master got his way, that would change sooner rather than later. Eventually he hoped to convince the Emperor to take me as a gift for a night. And if the thought of spending an entire evening attempting to secretly manipulate one of the Grand Dukes wasn't harrowing enough, the thought of doing the same to the Emperor himself was downright horrifying.

"He looks...distant," I said quietly after a moment. "As if he doesn't want to be here."

"He probably doesn't," Master replied. "Gatherings like this are an inconvenient reminder that his throne is not the only seat of power in the Empire. The Dukes, the Covenant, the Legion, the various guilds...we're all here, and whether he likes it or not he can't ignore us forever."

"Do you really believe that's what he wants?"

"What I believe is that this isn't the place for such a conversation," Master said as he tugged gently at my collar. "For now, I have plenty of others to speak with. Let's go."

Chapter Four

The next afternoon, Master officially received a request from Duke Arland to borrow my services, and by evening the deal was struck: I would visit his family's estate in Sanctum the night his wife was scheduled to arrive from Riverboro. Master was obviously pleased at the news, and I should have been, too—it confirmed that my earlier performance had gone just as well as I'd hoped. But for every part of me that was ecstatic about living up to Master's expectations, another part was terrified at the prospect of being left alone inside the estate of a stranger and his infamously depraved wife.

They wouldn't harm me, of course. Master had assured me many times that imperial law protected slaves as stringently as any other valuable property, and ostensibly even the Grand Dukes weren't immune to prosecution from the magistrates. But there were plenty of ways to torment me without physically harming me, and my imagination quickly became my worst enemy. Would they restrain me? Flog me? Humiliate me in front of their friends or other servants?

I distracted myself by practicing my channeling ability whenever Master left me alone, and for the most part the trick worked. By the time the day finally arrived I had successfully reminded myself that ultimately this wasn't just about pleasing Master—this was about ending a foolish war that had already consumed our homeland. Thousands more would die on both sides if we couldn't summon the Quorum and confront the Emperor. And as impossible as it seemed, I, a mere *avenari*, was going to play an integral part in its success or failure.

With that harrowing thought spinning through my mind, I settled in for a bath on the afternoon of my appointment. The water and salts usually helped assuage whatever doubts I might have had, but not today. It probably didn't help that I had never been taken by another man before. My first owner had been old and spent, and all he had ever wanted from me was hot meals and a clean house...neither of which I'd been particularly adept at providing. I had been terrified when he'd announced his intention to sell me at the auction block—I could still remember my legs quaking so hard they had rattled the chains around my ankles—but as it turned out the change of ownership had been the best thing that had ever happened to me. Master had granted me more freedoms that I had ever dreamed possible, and he had helped me to control the forbidden power burning inside me. I might have been his property, but he had never made me feel like a victim. And when it came right down to it, I didn't want to be with anyone else.

Still, I couldn't deny the excitement I'd felt at the Gala. For a few fleeting moments I had been in control of one of the Grand Dukes...and no matter how nervous I might have been about the prospect of spending an entire night in a stranger's estate, deep down I longed for another taste of that power.

I spent the rest of the afternoon making final preparations with Sharela, the house tailor, and she wrapped me inside a shimmering, backless dress that managed to be elegant and scandalous at the same time. We didn't bother with undergarments, for obvious reasons, but at Duke Arland's request I wore a matching pair of jeweled heels and silver earrings—both of which were worth more than I was, Sharela saw fit to remind me at least a dozen times. If only she knew about my true powers.

Once everything was situated, we moved into the conference chamber for Master to complete his final inspection. Curiously, however, he wasn't waiting for us inside the main conference hall, nor was in his bedroom or the library or even the courtyard with the guards. We

ended up searching half the mansion before realizing he must have been down in the basement practicing his channeling techniques.

I could hear his strained exertions the moment we approached the doorway. The walls flickered ominously as we spiraled down the stone stairwell, and once we reached the bottom I had to shield my eyes from the flashes of lightning and flame. Standing shirtless at the center of the deadly tempest, his arms and back glistening like he had just stepped out of the tub, was Master Kristoff. A half a dozen enormous crystalline shards surrounded him on all sides, and they thrummed with Aetheric power as he channeled spell after spell into them.

Sharela stepped forward, but before she could announce our presence Master raised his hand and directed a blinding bolt of electricity into the nearest crystal...and then hissed in disgust when the energy almost immediately dissipated. "Not enough," he murmured. "Not nearly enough..."

"I apologize for the interruption, Your Excellency," Sharela said into the silence. "But your *avenari* is ready for inspection."

Master turned. At first he appeared withered and drained like he'd just fought through half the Vaeyn army...but then his eyes latched onto me and a wide smile stretched across his face. "Perfect," he breathed as he stepped forward to inspect me more closely. "You've outdone yourself again, Sharela. I'm not certain how I ever got by without you."

"Neither am I," the older woman grumbled. As a human native of Veshar, she was a paid servant rather than a slave, though she complained so much it was sometimes hard to tell. "His Excellency may wish to remind Duke Arland not to damage the silk, if at all possible. It was hard enough to find an authentic Numenese weave in the market before pirates started blockading all the trade routes to Torsia."

Master eyed the dress up and down before nodding in amusement. "If he does ruin it, you should take it as a compliment of your work. No man can resist a beautifully wrapped prize."

Sharela grunted. "As you say."

"Go ahead and return to your other duties. And thank you again."

She bowed and returned up the staircase. Once the door had closed behind her, Master pivoted back around towards the crystalline shards. "Do you appreciate the irony?"

"My lord?" I asked.

"You are the slave, and yet at times you enjoy more freedom than a Grand Duke. To be able to channel freely without a crutch..."

He trailed off and closed his eyes, and I watched in silence as he worked through his meditative breathing routines. Like all sanctioned channelers in the Empire, Master had been forced to swear an oath of allegiance to the Triad before being gifted with the ability to touch the Aether. He had been ritually bonded to a great crystal called the "Godstone," which allegedly contained the souls of Sanctus Veshar and the other two mortals-turned-gods who made up the Triad. The premise was fairly straight-forward: as long as these bonded channelers remained loyal to the ideals of the Triad, they were free to manipulate the Aether as they saw fit. But if the Covenant believed they had misused their abilities, they could be severed from the Godstone immediately and lose all of their power.

It was, Master liked to jest, as much of an obedience collar as the one he so often fitted on me. I may have been a slave, but he was one of the "Bound." The price for my life was obedience; the price for his power was piety. The difference was that only one of us loved our master.

“The Covenant believes it is a curse,” I whispered after a moment. “The Hierophant says it is proof of our heresy that we can channel the blood of the Old Gods without recompense. She says we have been tainted by demons.”

“The Hierophant says many things that are not true,” Master replied as his eyes flicked back open. “The Covenant cares about expanding its power. Everything is a means to that end. The binding ritual, the war...even the text of the Levinthian has been altered a hundred times since the founding of the Empire.”

I tilted my head. In all the times he had taught me about history, he had only rarely mentioned the Triad’s holy text before. “Master?”

“Never mind,” he said, turning and waving a dismissive hand. He smiled at me again and placed his hands on my shoulders. “All that matters right now is tonight. Are you ready?”

“Yes, my lord,” I said with as much confidence as I could muster. “I will do my best to make you proud.”

“I know you will. Just remember, your first priority is convincing him to support us at the Quorum. But if you get the chance, feel free to rummage around his mind and see what else he knows about the Emperor or any of the other dukes.”

“I will try.”

He smiled again, and to my surprise he leaned in and kissed me. A tingle of delight shuddered through me, and I opened my mouth and entwined my tongue with his. When he tried to pull away, I pressed forward and even wrapped my arms around his neck...

“Focus, Elara,” he scolded gently. “You can’t afford to be distracted. Not tonight.”

I sank away in disappointment and nodded. “Yes, Master. Of course.”

He touched my chin and held my eyes for a long moment before finally pivoting away and retrieving his tunic. “Neither Darian nor his wife is particularly knowledgeable about magic, but you’ll still need to be careful. Luriel in particular is clever. Don’t underestimate her; don’t use your powers on her unless you’re absolutely sure she won’t notice.” He pulled his shirt back on and then sighed. “Unfortunately, she’s also more likely to know important information than he is. Try and distract her like we’ve practiced and you should be fine.”

I could hear the tension in his voice, but I couldn’t decide if he was more worried about my safety or the success of the mission. Perhaps it didn’t matter since in this case they were one and the same.

“Anyway, it’s time to go,” he said. “Let’s get you ready.”

He led me back upstairs to the main greeting room before retrieving my collar and fastening it around my neck. With my hair tied up the task was even easier than normal, and once the band was securely in place he tapped the control rod. The embedded gemstones began to glimmer softly, and he stood behind my shoulder for a moment and smiled into the mirror on the other side of the room.

“There’s not a man in the Empire who could resist you,” he breathed into my ear. “Or a woman, for that matter.”

“My lord is most kind,” I said, smiling back. My heart begged me to spin back around and kiss him again, but I knew he wouldn’t approve.

“Let me get your cuffs on and then we’ll head out. The guards should already be waiting for us outside.”

As he shackled my wrists behind my back, my thoughts once again returned to that familiar dark place of fear and uncertainty. Soon I would be beyond his protection for the first time since he’d purchased me, and I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to handle it. Originally I had held

out hope that he would escort me to the Arland mansion himself and perhaps even stay to observe...but of course that wasn't how this was going to work. Arland wanted me alone for an evening, and Master was perfectly content to let this serve as my first real test without his supervision. If I succeeded here, then he would have the confidence to send me to Farrow or Darkstone or whoever else requested my services. I would become his perfect little spy.

Assuming I didn't get caught, of course. If that happened, this war and the recovery of Stormcrest would be the least of our worries.

A few minutes later we stepped out into the courtyard, and a small squad of soldiers was indeed waiting for us next to the carriage. Larric, naturally, was among them.

"Everything is ready, Your Excellency," the bodyguard said with a half bow. "I took the liberty of sending a few men ahead to ensure that the route is clear."

"We're in the imperial capital, not a warzone," Master replied mildly. "You're overreacting as usual."

Larric shrugged. "Experience has taught me to prepare for the worst. I'm only doing my job."

"Of course," Master murmured as he offered the other man the control rod. The exchange was a show, of course, a feigned bit of nonchalance so the guards wouldn't recognize just how important a mere slave was to him. Master had probably ordered Larric to send out those scouts and make sure the path was safe himself. "Now get moving."

"At once, Your Excellency."

Larric tilted towards me, and as usual I couldn't help but wilt beneath his gaze. Not because he was loud or physically imposing like so many of the rank-and-file legionnaires—quite the opposite, in fact. He was relatively short and slender compared to most of the other house guards, and I had rarely ever heard him speak more than a few words at a time. No, he was terrifying precisely *because* he wasn't a towering, screaming brute.

I also had trouble ignoring the fact that he so obviously reviled me. He had never told me so openly, of course, but I was as much a master of body language as any erotic technique. From the fractional curling of the man's lip to the occasional furtive glower I could tell that my very presence disgusted him. I knew he despised all elves—Master had told me as much—but he treated the other Faeyn servants well enough. It seemed like there was something about me specifically that sickened him, and I had no idea what that could be. I trembled to think what would happen if I was left alone with him for an extended period of time...but mercifully I wouldn't have to find out today.

I rode alone inside the carriage as we traveled across the city, and for once I didn't spend the entire trip leering at the sights and sounds of Sanctum. Instead I closed my eyes and did everything I could to mentally prepare myself for the task at hand. In all likelihood, Duke Arland would be so enamored with me at this point that I probably wouldn't have to do anything special to please him. His wife, unfortunately, would be different story. But once again the purpose of this trip wasn't to merely satisfy a lust-filled duke; it was about worming into his mind and convincing him to risk his armies, his wealth, and possibly even his life to join the Master in the Quorum. Even with the aid of magic it wouldn't be a trivial task, but Master had faith in me.

And I was not going to let him down.

We arrived at the Arland estate about an hour later, and once the carriage stopped I finally opened my eyes and took a quick peek. The central mansion was a bit smaller than Master's, but the actual grounds were probably twice the size. The entire property looked like it had been plucked straight out of the forest; other than a pair of guard towers and the pristine

cobblestone walkway winding its way up to the gate, all I could see were thick bushes, vibrant flowers, and a sprawling tree canopy that cast long shadows across the entire area. Master had told me that Arland's home province of Sorthaal—once the ancestral home of the Faeyn—was essentially a giant forest, and for the first time in my life I desperately wanted to visit.

After a brief exchange with Arland's guards Larric helped me out of the carriage and escorted me up the long, winding walkway. A series of soft, Aether-powered lanterns lit up the path in front of us as we traveled, then slowly faded as we passed by. The effect was both majestic and soothing, and I wondered dimly if I could ever learn to enchant such an item myself. The guards let us inside without incident, and the concierge opened the door and led us into an expansive sitting room lined with paintings, sculptures, and tapestries from across the Empire.

"Ah, good—you've finally arrived," Duke Arland said as he sauntered down the staircase, drink in hand. "I was about to send a runner to remind Gabriel of our arrangement."

"Duke Kristoff sends his regards, Your Excellency," Larric replied with a formal bow. He held out his hand and offered the other man my leash as well as the control rod for my collar. "He hopes that you will enjoy his gift."

"With a not-so-subtle reminder that if I damage his property, I'll have an ex-Inquisitor to deal with," the Arland murmured as he took the rod. "I should probably be insulted."

I reflexively glanced over to my escort. A former Inquisitor? I had no idea the Covenant even allowed its enforcers to retire. But it would explain Larric's hatred for my elven blood... and why Master had worked so hard to keep my true nature secret from a man he otherwise trusted implicitly. It also meant that all my trepidations about spending time alone with the bodyguard were completely justified.

"My lord did not mean to cause offense," Larric soothed, "but he was concerned about the growing number of vagrants and dissidents on the streets."

"Naturally," Arland muttered under his breath. "Still, I have heard rumors that Faedari agents might have infiltrated Sanctum, so perhaps a bit of extra caution is necessary. I'm sure the rebels would just love to free such an 'abused and tormented' creature as a trophy. Never mind the fact she's been given free meals and a warm bed, not to mention an education and clothing worth more than half the villages in Veshar." He scoffed. "Ungrateful pissants. They should be thanking us for introducing them to real civilization."

Larric smiled, and it was so cold it sent a shiver down my spine. "Indeed. Though I trust the praetorian and the Covenant will root them out soon enough."

"Yes, just like the Legion will drive back the Vaeyn," Arland replied snidely. He finished his drink and set it down on a nearby table before sliding over to me and rubbing a hand across my cheek. "Anyway, thank you, Captain. My wife and I will make certain she earns her keep for one night at least."

"I'm sure you will," Larric said. His eyes locked onto mine, and I could almost see the sadism smoldering behind them. "I shall return to retrieve her in the morning. Have an enjoyable evening, Your Excellency."

He stepped back out the door, and the moment he was gone the duke leaned in closer to me and gently ran his fingers through my hair. "You have no idea how much I've been looking forward to this, my dear," he purred into my ear.

"It is my pleasure to serve, Your Excellency," I said. "Do you wish to have me now?"

"More than you can imagine, but Luriel will be annoyed if I sample desert before dinner. Come, I might as well introduce you. She's been looking forward to meeting you."

The lady of the house was waiting for us in an open chamber just outside the dining room, but she wasn't alone. A heavily tattooed, barrel-chested orc stood in front of her, and a pair of servants seemed to be measuring him for clothing...or more likely, armor.

"Impressive, isn't he?" Duchess Luriel asked without turning as we stepped into the room. "More than enough to embarrass whatever lout House Brigaere sends at us."

"I should hope so, considering how much we paid for him," Arland said. "He'll need to survive at least three matches just to break even."

"He will, don't worry," she said as she slapped her hand against the orc's broad chest. "Isn't that right, Gor...something. What's your name again?"

"Gorbuk, my lady," one of the servants prompted helpfully.

"Yes, I knew it was something unpronounceable. You will make me proud, won't you, Gorbuk?"

"I fight for glory of Arland," the orc said in a broken, thickly-accented version of the imperial tongue. "Kill all enemies."

"Good. That's what I like to hear."

The duke cleared his throat. "If you're quite done, darling, your other present has arrived."

Luriel finally turned toward us, and her eyebrow cocked as she noticed me for the first time. "This is her? This is the one that made you split your trousers?"

"She's everything you want, love," Arland replied patiently. "There's no need to be tart."

The duchess grunted as she inspected me more closely. She was younger than I expected and prettier too; her long dark hair and glimmering amber eyes were a perfect complement to her russet skin. Talshites had been rare in Stormcrest—or anywhere in Glorinfel, for that matter—but I had always found them exotic and mysterious. Luriel was no different. She towered over me despite my heels, and her glimmering silver dress showed off her toned arms and impossibly long legs.

But behind her beauty I could see a cold, ruthless hatred smoldering inside her...a hatred that was now directed squarely at me.

"It's just that you've spent so much time fawning over her that it's hard to be impressed by the real thing," Luriel said as she roughly grabbed ahold of my chin and twisted my head back and forth. "And what's *your* name, girl?"

"Elara, my lady," I managed.

"Well, at least it's pronounceable," Luriel muttered as she let go. "I do like her eyes, at least. I suppose that's better than nothing."

"You will be satisfied, I promise," Arland insisted. "Gabriel has fine taste."

"We'll see. If she doesn't hold our interest we can always give her to Gorbuk for the night." The duchess glanced back over her shoulder to the orc. "What do you think? You want to fuck her?"

The gladiator's mouth twisted into a sickening smile as he looked at me. "Pretty elf."

"I assume that means yes," Luriel murmured. "Well, go and win me three matches and we'll see what I can do. If not her we can probably find some cheaper ones at market next week."

By some miracle I managed to keep the terror off my face, and a few moments later another servant peeked his head out from the kitchen.

"Dinner is ready, Your Excellencies," he said.

Luriel nodded. “Good. Take Gorbuk back out to the pen with the others, and make certain no one else bothers us for the night.” She smiled as she looked upon me again, and a nervous shiver rippled down my spine. “We’re going to be quite busy.”

Chapter Five

Having spent most of my life inside the modest estate of a minor noble in Mavarinth, I had always been fascinated and a little terrified by the tales of the Grand Dukes' and their wanton excesses and debauched parties. And so when Master Kristoff had first purchased me and taken me back to Stormcrest Castle, I had anticipated a never-ending spree of elaborate dinners, festive galas, and even depraved orgies. The reality couldn't have been farther from the truth.

Master was a private and contemplative man, and he rarely hosted individual guests, let alone an entire gathering of them. He went to parties on occasion, of course, but he never organized one himself. He preferred to dine simply and in solitude, which even at the time I had recognized as an odd habit for any imperial noble, let alone a Grand Duke. Occasionally he even did the unthinkable and invited me, one of his slaves, to dine with him. It was a rare event and one I always relished.

The Arlands, I quickly learned, fit the decadent noble stereotype much more closely. They enjoyed a magnificent feast despite the fact they had no other company, and every course of their meal, from the aged Rivani cheeses to the imported Numenese kada berries to the spiced Talishite wine, probably cost as much as one of their house servants made in months. And unsurprisingly, they didn't include me in their conversation at all. For the first several courses I was essentially invisible as Lady Luriel recounted the story of her trip to Riverboro and blamed the Empire's woes on indolent laborers, unappreciative slaves, and incompetent soldiers. It was only after the main course that she finally seemed to remember I was still present.

"You were at Stormcrest when the Vaeyn attacked, weren't you, girl?" she asked me as she speared the last bite of fish off her plate.

"Yes, my lady," I said, clearing my throat.

"We heard that the battle was short, but Gabriel never mentioned exactly how the defenses were overwhelmed so quickly."

"I'm afraid I'm not aware of the details, my lady," I replied carefully. "All I know is that they attacked at night and we were forced to flee by dawn."

Luriel grunted. "Well, at least General Matavius was kind enough to be there during the assault so he could die for his incompetence. If General Tervane ever made such a mistake in the defense of Sorthaal, I would have her flogged and fed to the pigs."

"Somehow I doubt that Torelius would shed a tear," her husband murmured. "He's already consolidated enough power *without* his comrades falling onto spears. The only real question is why Emperor Lucian seems to place so much trust in him. Torelius is obviously overmatched—the Vaeyn are cunning and ruthless, and the Legion is old, tired, and fat."

"I'm not sure our beloved Emperor thought that far ahead when he ordered the invasion," the duchess replied snidely. "He really should have sent the legionnaires to slaughter some groll in the mountains before throwing them at a real enemy."

"Or he could have just ignored the Covenant and left the elves alone. Gabriel is right about that."

Luriel scoffed. "Gabriel wants his land back, nothing more. And he expects us to put our necks on the block to help him. But what do we get out of it? One little elf whore?"

"The survival of the Empire," Arland countered. "The Vaeyn won't stop with Glorinfel. Once the frost has melted, who knows what they'll do?"

She waved a dismissive hand. “I knew I should have been here for the Gala. He’s already filled your head with his panicked nonsense. The Legion might have has its nose bloodied, but we still outnumber the heretics at least three to one. Even an incompetent tit like Torelius will eventually win with sheer numbers.”

“Maybe, but that won’t be enough for Lucian or the Covenant. They’ll demand a full-scale invasion, and we could lose everything.”

“Perhaps,” she murmured as she turned to face me. “So what are your thoughts on the war, girl? Are you secretly hoping your gray-skinned cousins will kill us all and set you free?”

“Of course not, my lady,” I assured her. “They are barbarians and heretics. The Empire will prevail, as always.”

Luriel cocked a curious eyebrow. “You almost sound like one of the Inquisitors. But do you actually believe it, I wonder?”

I glanced between them as I struggled to contain my growing anxiety. Was she testing me? What was she expecting me to say? As experienced as I was at reading body language, her face was a closed book to me.

“I believe my Master has given me a good life,” I said eventually. “He provides for me and he asks little in return.”

“Well, at least there’s one slave who understands how good she has it,” the duchess commented. “The Vaeyn wouldn’t free you, anyway. From what I’ve heard they’d be more likely to sacrifice you in one of their blasphemous rituals...” She finished off her wine but kept her eyes on me. “When did Gabriel purchase you, anyway?”

“Two years ago, my lady.”

“So recently? Did you offend your previous owner somehow?”

“Apparently he was a spent wick who just wanted a cook,” Arland chortled as he slid an arm around my waist and pulled me in close. “Gave her up for only fifty sovereigns, according to Gabriel. The fool must have been blind.”

“Yes,” Luriel said quietly as she dragged her finger along the edge of her empty glass. Something dark glinted in her amber eyes, and a bemused smile tugged at her lips. “Still, Gabriel had quite the reputation for using up his slaves during his younger years. I’m surprised you’ve been able to hold his attention for so long.”

I remained silent, and despite her feigned nonchalance I could tell she was evaluating my responses—or non-responses—very carefully. Her husband, for his part, had begun exploring my thighs with his left hand.

“I’ve always wanted to get to know Gabriel better,” Luriel went on after a moment. “He’s such a private man and something of a curiosity among the Court. He almost never attends the seasonal events, and I doubt he would have come to the Winter Gala this year had Stormcrest not fallen.” She leaned back in her chair and crossed her long legs. “And of course he has his father’s smile and a legionnaire’s body. You’re lucky, you know. You could be spreading your legs for a fat wretch like Torelius.”

“I am very grateful, my lady,” I replied as her husband’s hand slid into the folds of my dress. He gently pushed my thighs apart and settled his fingers against my sex, and I half-gasped, half-whimpered in response.

“She’s soaked already,” he commented with obvious amusement.

“I’m not surprised,” Luriel said, her smile widening. “She knows her place, unlike so many of the others. I’m sure that’s why Gabriel keeps her around. Tell me, girl: what is his favorite way to take you?”

I blinked in confusion and glanced between them. “My lady?”

“It’s a simple question. How does he prefer to fuck you? On your stomach? Your back? Your knees?”

I licked at my suddenly dry lips. “He...enjoys variety.”

“Ah,” Luriel chuckled. “And what about you? What do *you* enjoy the most?”

“I enjoy whatever pleases Master Kristoff at the moment.”

“Hah!” Arland snorted. “Such careful answers. Gabriel really has trained her well.”

“She could always be telling the truth,” Luriel said. “Her people do seem to gain satisfaction in servitude. Not like groll or minotaur or even orcs. I swear, the overseers have to beat them almost daily to any work out of them.”

“As the priests say, the gods would not have provided us with such beauty if they didn’t intend for us to make the most of it,” Arland said as the tip of his finger slipped inside me. “And you really are beautiful, my dear.”

The duchess tilted her head back towards her husband. “Why don’t you take her now?”

“Here?” he asked. “Before desert?”

She shrugged. “Why not? The servants won’t have the cake ready for a few more minutes. Besides, I can almost feel your cock bursting through your trousers from here.”

“Indeed,” he said, standing and hoisting me to my feet. He placed his hand upon my back and shoved me down onto the table with surprising force, and I felt the swollen bulge of his manhood against my leg as he lifted the long folds of my dress out of the way. Reflexively, I widened my stance to accommodate him, and thanks to the extra height from my heels had no difficulty working himself into position. His cock pressed against my smoldering entrance, and with a single determined thrust he buried himself to the hilt inside me.

A soft, contented moan escaped my lips despite myself, and Lady Luriel chuckled. “Like I said, servitude is in their blood. The Faedari rebels can deny it all they want, but they’re just making their own lives miserable. One of these days they’ll figure that out...and the Vaeyn too, perhaps.”

Arland grunted a response but didn’t reply. He held himself in deep for a few more seconds before gradually pulling back and settling into a slow, surprisingly gentle rhythm. When the initial wave of ecstasy passed and I returned to my senses, I remembered that my purpose in being here was to do more than simply bend over for him; I needed to delve into his mind and convince him to support Master Kristoff in the Quorum. But with his wife watching me so closely, I didn’t dare risk channeling. She wasn’t a mage herself, as far as I knew, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t notice a stray spark of Aether when she saw it. I would have to wait until both of them were occupied...

“Keep those pretty eyes of yours on me, girl,” Luriel commanded as she set down her glass and leaned forward. Cupping my chin in her right hand, she held my head firmly in place as her left reached behind my ear and unfastened my hair clip. My dark locks spilled across the table, and she nodded in approval. “That’s better. Is she tight enough for you, darling?”

“By the Triad,” Arland panted. “Gabriel must hardly use her.”

“Well, then I suppose it’s up to you to break her in. Fuck her harder.”

He didn’t need any more encouragement. Wrapping his hands around my waist, the duke plunged in faster and deeper. The silverware clattered against the table with each of his thrusts, and without looking Luriel casually reached over to grab one of the desert plates before it crashed to the floor. Her eyes remained locked on mine as if she were baiting me to cry out or

squeal in discomfort. But I stood my ground, as it were, and Arland continued to groan in pleasure.

“Don’t finish yet,” Luriel chided. The corner of her mouth curled into a devilish grin. “Take her ass first.”

“Already?” he asked breathlessly. “We have all night.”

“I know, but I want to see her squirm.” Her amber eyes glinted as she casually swept the loose strands of hair from my face. “Better she learn her place now while it’s early.”

“I think you’re right,” he managed as he slowly withdrew. His hand pressed more firmly against the small of my back. “I should be slick enough.”

Luriel shrugged. “Does it matter?”

“No,” he said, and I felt the tip of his cock press against my nether entrance. “I suppose not.”

During the many months of my *avenari* training, Master had done his best to prepare me for every situation he could imagine. I was no stranger to being taken in any position at any time for any duration. And now, as Arland eased his cock back inside me, I was more thankful for that instruction than ever.

“By the Triad,” he breathed again. “So perfect...”

“Then what are you waiting for?” his wife taunted. “Fuck her.”

He did. With his hands locked on my hips, he pounded into me relentlessly, remorselessly, to the point my feet slid out of my shoes beneath the table. Even if his wife hadn’t been watching me so closely, I doubted I would have been able to concentrate hard enough to channel regardless. I was almost thankful for the excuse; it allowed me to submit to the shivers of elation cascading through me.

“You know, they say that your people once ruled over this land many centuries ago,” Luriel remarked as casually if they were still in the middle of dinner. “They wielded powerful magic and controlled an empire that stretched all the way to sea and into Torsia. Can you imagine that? An entire continent filled with elves?”

I did my best to shake my head as husband continued his assault. I knew he was rapidly building towards a climax, and I managed to get a grip on the edge of the tablecloth.

“How does it make you feel knowing that if you had been born in a different era, our positions could have been reversed?” the duchess continued. “Instead here you are bent over our table with my husband’s cock buried in your ass.”

Arland abruptly groaned and clutched more tightly at my hips. “I can’t hold out much longer.”

“That’s all right, darling; I think she’s ready,” Luriel smiled again, but she kept my chin locked firmly in place. “Finish whenever you want.”

He reared his head back barely a fraction of a second later, and with a final cry of triumph I felt the warm rush of his seed flood into my bowels. He slumped atop me, pinning me against the table, and his wife chuckled in amusement.

“He’s much easier to please than I am,” she told me. “But don’t worry: you’ll get your chance soon enough.”

“Definitely,” Arland murmured as he slowly withdrew. “Like I said before, the night is young.”

Chapter Six

The Arlands ate their desert as if nothing had happened, and I once again faded into the background. I knew I shouldn't have expected anything different; this was exactly how Master had said they would treat me. They carried on with their gossip about the other noble families, and they didn't seem to care if I overheard their astonishingly mean-spirited criticisms and commentary. They must have assumed that I wouldn't share what I'd heard with Master Kristoff, or perhaps they didn't believe I was clever enough to understand the nuances of politics. Or maybe, if Lady Luriel was as shrewd as she was supposed to be, this was all just a show for my benefit designed to feed Master disinformation.

Whatever the true reasons, I warned myself against overthinking it. Later, once I finally had the chance to touch their minds, I would get the truth. For now I just needed to remain patient and keep my wits about me—which, given the euphoric tingles still rippling through me, was more difficult than it seemed.

Eventually, once the Arlands finished their cake and downed several more glasses of wine, Luriel clapped her hands and summoned one of the house servants. A few seconds later, a fifty-something human woman who looked like she'd probably been a fixture of the mansion for decades appeared in the doorway.

"Go ahead and take her to our chambers," the duchess ordered. "Make certain she's ready. We'll be up shortly."

"Of course, mistress."

The woman grabbed my leash and dragged me through the mansion and up two separate flights of stairs before stopping inside an elaborate dressing room. Enough mirror lined the walls that I could inspect myself from virtually any angle, and the shelves were stocked with more cosmetics, herbs, and oils than I'd ever seen in one place before. I almost asked how long it had taken the duchess to assemble such a collection, but my new keeper didn't seem interested in casual conversation...or in being gentle. She gripped tightly on my leash the entire time she touched up my makeup, and then she roughly bent me over one of the chairs before wiping me down with a damp cloth.

Ten minutes later we arrived in the master bedroom, and I couldn't help but boggle in amazement at the size and scale—not to mention the decorations. The room was easily as large as most of the houses in Stormcrest, and the collection of tapestries, silks, and other artworks was every bit as impressive as the entry foyer downstairs. If I didn't know better, I would have assumed no one had ever actually slept in this place before. It seemed more like a museum than a bedchamber.

Most of the room did, anyway. The back corner, on the other hand, looked like something straight out of a castle dungeon. A stripped-down torture rack was nestled firmly against the wall, and the adjacent shelves contained a dizzying assortment of restraining devices from collars to leashes to limb cuffs. There was even a pillory set up nearby along with a complete set of chains, scourges, and conventional whips. The entire collection was in pristine condition, as far as I could tell, and I cringed involuntarily as I wondered how often the Arlands used any of the devices upon their own *avenari*.

"Down," the handmaiden commanded as she pressed on my shoulders. I sank down to the floor, and she swiveled around behind me and unfastened the straps of my dress. She stripped me naked in record time before tightening the shackles around my wrists and ankles. By the time she

was done, I wasn't sure if I'd actually be able to stand back up even if I'd wanted to... which was probably the point.

After tying my leash to one of the bedposts, she set my control rod on the nightstand next to the door and then slipped out of the room. I had no idea how long the Arlands would make me wait, and so I seized the opportunity to close my eyes and refocus. Whatever happened for the rest of the night, I needed to be ready to channel at a moment's notice. I knew I would get the opportunity to slip into one or both of their minds eventually. And if I didn't...

Well, then I would need to force the issue without getting caught. Somehow.

I remained in a near trance for what felt like hours before my hosts finally made their way upstairs and shut the door behind them. At first, they didn't even seem to notice me; they continued their conversation as the duke slipped out of his overcoat and the duchess sank into one of the plush chairs along the wall. But then eventually Arland settled in behind me and ran his fingers through my hair.

"Well, what do you think, darling?" he asked. "Shall I tie her to the rack, or do you wish to take her on the bed?"

"Neither," Luriel said as she crossed her legs. "She must earn that right first. Send her over."

The duke grunted as he unfastened my leash from the bedpost and leaned in to my ear. "Good luck, girl. You had best not disappoint her."

He nudged the small of my back, and I crawled forward towards his wife on my knees. It wasn't easy or quick, and Luriel smirked in amusement as I struggled the entire way across the floor.

"Good girl," she praised. "As obedient as a hound without a single lash."

Arland chuckled as he retrieved one of the scourges from beside the rack. "It's almost a pity," he said. "We'll see if she can keep it up."

On impulse, I leaned down and kissed the duchess's foot as it bobbed in the air. It was a risk doing anything without a direct command, I knew, but something in the woman's eyes told me she appreciated it when her slaves took initiative. I was right.

"She knows her place," Luriel said approvingly. "She's even grown to enjoy it. Like I said, the rebels would be so much happier if they simply accepted the truth of their nature."

I continued nibbling my way up her smooth calves before she finally uncrossed her legs and lifted up her skirt. I leaned forward just enough to be within her reach, and a second later she curled her fingers into my hair and pulled me down to her sex.

She was sweet—far sweeter than any of the other noblewomen the Master had trained me on over the past few months. I couldn't tell if it was a special oil or herb or just her natural taste, but whatever it was I felt compelled to drink her more deeply. She moaned in delight—the first such sound I had heard her make all evening—and once she was appropriately distracted I knew my opportunity had finally come. Channeling the Aether through me, I reached out and slipped into her mind.

I was careful at first; I merely brushed against her surface thoughts to see how she would respond, and when I felt no resistance I slinked in just far enough to titillate her senses. A spark of pure bliss crackled down her spine, and her thighs abruptly clamped around my head. For a moment I wondered if she might actually choke me; her strong, athletic legs squeezed with the strength of a vise. But eventually she relaxed enough for me to catch my breath... if only just.

"I knew she'd be good," Arland said from somewhere behind me, his voice laced with amusement. "Now you're going to want to fuck her too, aren't you?"

“Oh, yes,” the duchess breathed as she came down from her sudden climax.
“Absolutely.”

Her grip on my head tightened, and I delved into the nether folds of both her body and her mind. While her husband’s thoughts had been as straight-forward as his desires, Luriel’s were a veritable maze of schemes and machinations. She had only lived in Sorthaal for five years and already she seemed to have leverage on almost every noble in the Empire from the Grand Dukes all the way down to the regional barons. Outstanding debts, illicit liaisons, bastard children—the web of secrets was so thick it threatened to ensnare and suffocate me just like her thighs. But I managed to navigate the maze well enough to find what I was looking for: the deepest recesses of her mind and the dark, almost sadistic desires that dwelt within.

“Come on, girl, bring me again,” she half-begged, half-ordered as she tugged at my hair. I lashed my tongue across her folds, and I sent a smaller but no less powerful spark of magic into her sex. She didn’t climax, but her muscles quivered in anticipation of my next maneuver. It was only then, once I had lowered virtually all of her defenses, that I finally dared to push past the toughest and last of her mental barriers.

I wasn’t even close to prepared for the violent tempest of emotions inside her, and once again I nearly lost control. Her hatred in particular was so raw, so visceral, that it nearly paralyzed me before I could dig any further. And what I couldn’t understand was why it was directed so squarely at my people. Luriel didn’t just resent elves; she *despised* us. Master had mentioned that her family had once been wronged by the Faeyn at some point in the distant past, but the further I delved the more I realized she didn’t actually care about avenging historical slights. Her hatred was much more banal: the cunning and ruthless Grand Duchess of Sorthaal, architect of a hundred schemes and manipulator of half the nobles in the Empire, hated the Faeyn because we were beautiful.

The revelation splashed over me like a bucket of cold water. I had trouble believing that such a powerful woman could be so incredibly vain...but there it was, laid out as plain as day before me. She was jealous of our large eyes, our sharp features, our supple bodies, and of course our longer life-spans. By the time she withered into an old crone I would look virtually the same as I did today, and by the time her infant son grew senile I would only just be crossing into middle age. The Covenant had never hidden its hatred of our longevity, and some of the more fanatical prelates had even suggested that it was simply more proof of the heretical blood flowing in our veins. But I had never confronted that raw jealousy personally before, and now that I had I couldn’t help but see it as extraordinarily...*petty*.

Luriel’s thighs clenched about my head yet again, and as her second climax approached I knew this was my opportunity to finish what I’d started. Reaching in past her memories, I implanted a suggestion deep into her subconscious mind: once we were finished here, she would speak to her husband about allying with Master Kristoff. She would explain how they couldn’t afford to lie back and wait as Emperor Lucian’s foolish war tore the Empire apart. They would join the Quorum, and they would commit Sorthaal’s impressive auxiliary army to the capital if Lucian and the Legion refused to see reason.

The duchess bucked in pleasure just as I finished my work, and I lapped up her sweet nectar even as I once again struggled to breathe. This time when she finally came down she lifted up my head and ran her fingers almost lovingly through my hair.

“You really are a prize, aren’t you?” she gasped. Her glittering amber eyes bored into mine for a long moment before she finally glanced past my shoulder to her husband. “Get out my cock. I want to fuck her. Now.”

“Already done,” Arland said.

He tugged on my leash from behind until I sank back on my haunches, and then he leaned forward and handed his wife an impressively large *dintare*. It was an artificial phallus, pure and simple, though judging from the small crystals along the harness this one had been imbued with a variety of Aetheric enchantments. Master had shown me a massive assortment of such devices at market once, and he had even taken me with a few different types during my training. But that had been several months ago, and a nervous twinge rippled through my stomach as the duchess secured the *dintare* around her waist. Behind me, Duke Arland unlocked the cuffs around my ankles and wrists.

“On the bed, girl,” she ordered once he was finished. I stood and bent over the end of the bed for her, but when I glanced back over my shoulder she was shaking her head. “No, on your back. I want to be able to see you while I fuck you.”

I dutifully flipped over and spread my legs, and without a moment’s hesitation she climbed between my knees and pressed the phallus against my sex. With our minds still connected I could feel her desires almost before she even knew she had them, and I allowed the faintest moan to escape my lips knowing how much would entice her. She smiled wickedly, hungrily, as she casually traced her fingertips across my breasts.

“Tell me, whore: have you ever been taken by a woman?”

I shook my head. “No.”

Her finger stopped the moment it touched my nipple. “‘No’ what?”

“No, mistress,” I repeated. “I have never been taken by a woman.”

“Good,” Luriel breathed as she leaned down and dragged her tongue across my sternum. Despite my best efforts to remain in control, my skin caught fire; I nearly lost my link with her mind as my hold over the Aether faltered. But somehow I managed to maintain the spell, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Duke Kristoff take a seat behind us and settle in to watch.

“I’m sure Kristoff has gifted you to many men already, and he will undoubtedly gift you to many more before he decides to breed you,” the duchess continued. Her tongue lashed at my nipple as her mouth closed around my right breast, and this time the gasp that escaped my lips was entirely genuine. “They will use you, they will fuck you, they may even hurt you...”

Her eyes lifted back up to mine, and her smile froze against her face. “Don’t expect any different treatment from me, whore.”

She thrust the phallus into me in a single motion, and I yelped in startled delight. My toes curled, my back arched, and a full-blown tremor of bliss rattled through me. But Luriel didn’t stop there. She slammed into me relentlessly, remorselessly, and yet again I felt my concentration slipping away. This time, however, I couldn’t hold onto the spell...and the truth was that I didn’t really want to.

“Please,” I whispered into her ear when she leaned in close. “Please fuck me, mistress.”

The words were as much for my benefit as for hers. For whatever reason the moment they rolled off my tongue I trembled in ecstasy, and judging by how she clenched more tightly at my hips it must have had the same effect on her. She splayed my legs so far apart it almost hurt, and she dove into me deeper than I ever thought possible...but each twinge of pain only made the shudders of pleasure that much more intoxicating.

Distantly, as my senses threatened to slip away entirely, I noticed Duke Arland climbing up over her. Luriel paused for the briefest of moments as he entered her from behind, and I could feel the aftershock from each of his thrusts as they staggered with hers. We quickly became a tangled mass of bodies, and I whimpered in helpless joy as I finally climaxed.

At some point before my senses fully returned I felt a stiff arm grab my wrist and fling me out of the way, and once my vision cleared I saw the duke flip over his wife and drive into her from the front. She locked her legs around his waist, and just like during desert I once again faded into the background.

But that was all right. I had accomplished my mission, and if the Arlands to bind me to the rack or stick in the pillory for the rest of the night, it didn't really matter. The secrets and schemes I'd plucked from Luriel's mind would serve Master well over the next few months, and most importantly the Arlands would join us at the Quorum. We were that much closer to pressuring Emperor Lucian into calling off his foolish crusade, and with luck, we might even be able to convince the Vaeyn to give up Stormcrest in exchange for some reparations and the promise of an extended peace.

I smiled despite myself. Master had put himself at considerably risk by placing so much faith in me, but I knew he would be proud. By tomorrow afternoon I would be back in his arms, and we would be able to celebrate together. Perhaps he would take me then and there in celebration...or maybe he'd even carry me back to his chambers and allow me a rare night in bed with him.

Another shudder of contentment rippled through me as the Arlands climaxed in each other's arms. I was more than a slave. I was more than an *avenari*. I was a weapon—perhaps the most powerful one in the entire Empire.

And I couldn't wait for Master to wield me again.

Chapter Seven

As promised, Larric retrieved me from the Arland mansion the next morning. I'd barely gotten any sleep by that point; while the duke had passed out just after midnight, Luriel had kept me awake and at her mercy until nearly dawn. By the time she'd joined her husband in bed I had curled up on the floor in exhaustion. The scowling handmaiden had eventually retrieved and dressed me before shoving me out the door like part of the morning garbage.

Not that I particularly cared. My skin still tingled as if I'd been holding onto an Aether-charged crystal, and I wasn't sure if I'd ever felt as drained and contented. Besides, I'd done what I had come here to do, and even if I never saw or spoke to the Arlands again it didn't really matter.

Larric remained silent the entire trip back, as expected, and I actually managed to fall asleep inside the carriage. But once we reached the main gate and the portcullis slowly cranked open, I realized something was wrong. The mansion was bustling with activity, far more than was reasonable for a late morning when no meetings or events had been scheduled. Had Master invited over unexpected guests? Had Larric arranged some type of new training exercise for the house guard?

I peered out the window once the carriage entered the estate, and all across the courtyard the guards were either on patrol or whispering to each other in hushed, frantic tones. It didn't look like the estate had actually been attacked—I doubted that even the Faedari rebels were crazy enough to assault the mansion of one of the Grand Dukes inside Sanctum—but enough of the men were mobilized that it certainly looked like they were expecting trouble.

My mind was fully awake and alert by the time we stopped and Larric let me out, and I made my way into the mansion as quickly as my shoes would allow. Master was waiting for me upon the second-floor balcony, his arms crossed as he stared vacantly out at the horizon.

"I trust everything went well," he said as I approached. His voice was dark and gravelly as if he'd just woken up...or had been screaming.

"Yes," I whispered as I crept forward. "The Arlands seemed quite pleased with my efforts."

"Good."

I frowned and stopped behind him. Didn't he care whether or not I'd learned any useful secrets from them? Didn't he care if I had convinced them to join the Quorum?

"Is something wrong, Master?" I asked.

His shoulders slumped as he blew a thin stream of air out the front of his teeth, and he slowly turned around to face me. "Balagarde has fallen."

"What?" I stammered, my mouth falling open. "How is that possible?"

"The Vaeyn attacked overnight. Evidently they managed to breach the northern gate before anyone knew what was happening, and the Legion was driven out before sunrise."

I stared at him unblinkingly, my mind reeling in shock and horror. It didn't seem possible. Balagarde was more of a military fortress than a city, and its position within the Salt Peaks had made it virtually impregnable for generations. Even the Reaping Horde had eventually broken on Balagarde's walls a few decades ago, and that had been an army of almost twenty thousand incensed groll warriors. How could the Vaeyn have possibly captured the city in a matter of hours?

"General Torelius is scheduled to speak in the palace plaza this afternoon," Master went on. "I'm sure he'll find a way to blame the local commanders or even claim that we must have a

turncoat feeding the elves information. The attack was perfectly timed—the Third Army was scheduled to arrive to reinforce the city by the end of next week.”

I forced myself to take a deep breath. “Do you think it’s possible? Do you think someone alerted them?”

“What I think is that Farrow was right,” Master said coldly. “The Emperor shoved his face in a beehive and wasn’t prepared to get stung. The Vaeyn don’t fight like groll or orcs. They’re clever and subtle, and they don’t burn their Unbound children at the stake. The Legion isn’t used to fighting anyone with magic, not like this...”

He slammed his fist into the nightstand. I hopped backwards as one of the vases crashed to the floor, and I recoiled in fear as his cheeks twitched with barely-controlled fury. Master had only been angry a handful of times in the two years since he’d purchased me, mostly since the start of this war. But I had never seen him like this. His dark eyes blazed like hot coals, and I could even see a spark of Aetheric energy crackling in his palms. I recoiled in terror of what he might do...

“We can’t delay any longer,” he hissed between his teeth. “We have to stop this now, before it’s too late.”

I swallowed heavily and leaned against the wall for support. All our efforts, all our carefully-laid plans, had been dashed to pieces in a single night. It was hard to believe and even harder to accept. This morning was supposed to herald our greatest triumph yet. With the Arlands’ support, we would be able to stop the war and perhaps even return home to Stormcrest before the summer. But now...

“What are we going to do?” I asked.

“I’m going to officially summon the Quorum,” he told me. “But not just to stop the war—peace is no longer an option. The Vaeyn won’t simply fall back now that they’ve conquered most of Glorinfel. They’ll dig in, and we’ll have to force them out. And that means we’ll need new leadership. The Emperor and General Torelius *must* be removed.”

I licked at my suddenly dry lips. Convincing the other dukes to pressure Lucian into calling for a truce was one thing. They all seemed to agree that the war itself was foolish, and if he refused they might have been willing to call for a nullification to replace him. But to openly try and replace both him and the most powerful High General in order to prolong the war...

“Do you think the other dukes will support you?”

Master slowly lifted his fist from the nightstand and glanced down to the bloodied splinters jutting out of his knuckles. “They will,” he growled. His dark eyes eventually flicked back to me, and a cold, vengeful smile crawled across his lips. “You will make certain of it.”

To Be Continued

The Elf Slave series continues in *Unbound*, due out early this summer!

If you are interested in more hardcore fantasy erotica, you may enjoy my **Dirty, Filthy Fantasy Tales** series starting with *Web of the Spider Queen*.

For updates about new releases, subscribe to the Sarah Hawke Fan Newsletter by sending an email to **hawkenovels@gmail.com** with the subject line "Subscribe."

Appendix

~Dramatis Personae~

The House of Kristoff

Elara: Vaeyn female, *avenari* slave
Gabriel Kristoff: human male, Grand Duke of Glorinfel
Larric Aresi: human male, Kristoff's bodyguard

The Imperial Court

Lucian Patravian III: human male, Emperor of the Veshari Empire
Antoine Torelius: human male, High General of the First Army
Inquisitor Jodai: human male, Covenant Inquisitor
Luriel Arland: human (Talishite) female, wife of Duke Arland.
Bolvir Farrow: human male, son of Duchess Farrow

The Imperial Grand Dukes

Kathryn Farrow: human female, Grand Duchess of Abenwreath
Darian Arland: human male, Grand Duke of Sorthaal
Aemond Darkstone: human male, Grand Duke of Korvale
Jora Zarene: human female, Grand Duchess of Rivani

~The Imperial Provinces~

Abenwreath: Also known as “the Wreath,” Abenwreath curls around the central province of Veshar and is known for its vast fields and farms.

Glorinfel: Once the ancestral home of the near-extinct dwarves, Glorinfel is a snowy, mountainous region in northeast Calhara.

Korvale: Also known as “the Vale,” Korvale is a fiercely independent province almost completely isolated from the rest of the Empire by vast mountain ranges.

Rivani: A warm, tropical province, Rivani is the center of power for the Covenant and the most important trade center in the Empire.

Sorthaal: Once the ancestral home of the Faeyn, Sorthaal is a sprawling mass of forests and hills known for its natural beauty.

Veshar: The central province of Calhara is home to Sanctum, the imperial capital and the home of the Emperor and the Imperial Legion.

~Terms~

Artificers: the lowest caste of Bound channelers who create enchanted armor and weapons for the Legion.

Bound: The vast majority of channelers in the Empire are granted their powers in a Covenant ritual that binds them to the “Godstone,” a crystal said to house the souls of the Triad. Through

the stone, these “Bound” channelers are able to touch and manipulate the Aether, but the Covenant is capable of severing this connection at any time.

Calhara: The second largest continent in the world of Obsidian, Calhara is under near total control of the Veshari Empire.

Channeler: The all-purpose name for someone who has the ability to manipulate the Aether.

Covenant: The central religious organization in the Empire. They control and regulate the use of the Aether.

Faeyn: the name for the fair-skinned elves who once ruled most of Calhara. The seat of their empire was Sorthaal, now an imperial province.

Hierophant: The highest-ranking priest in the Covenant. Her power rivals that of the Emperor.

Inquisitors: The chief enforcers of the Covenant. The Inquisitors’ primary purpose is to root out and destroy Unbound.

Levinthian: The holy text of the Covenant.

Numen: A large country within Torsia known for its fine silks and berries. The Numense reject the rule of the Triad and instead worship their immortal leader known only as the “Shadow King” to outsiders.

Sanctus Veshar: The founder of the Empire and conqueror of Calhara. The Covenant preaches that Veshar ascended to godhood along with his wife and his top lieutenant. Together they make up the Triad.

Sorthaal Highlands: The ancient home of the Faeyn, now an imperial province under the rule of Duke Darian Arland.

Spellswords: Legion soldiers trained to channel Aether.

Sulinor: The home of the Vaeyn located in the far northeastern corner of Calhara.

Talisham: A country located in the scorching desert region of Torsia and ruled by a powerful theocracy under the leadership of the Pah.

Unbound: A few rare individuals are born with the ability to channel Aether without being bonded to the Godstone. They are known as Unbound, and they are hunted and executed by the Covenant whenever they are found. Elves of all ethnicities are slightly more likely than humans to possess this ability, and it is incredibly rare in the other sentient races.

Vaeyn: the name for the gray-skinned elves of Sulinor. They are among the last free elves in the entire world, and the Covenant has long branded them demon-worshippers and heretics.

About the Author

Sarah Hawke is a thirty-something aspiring spinster with two cats, a horse, and a car that can technically still get her from place to place. She loves the cold, hates the heat, and desperately watches anything made by Joss Whedon for fear it will get cancelled.