



DELETED SCENES

THE
NIGHT
HOUSE

J. C. MCKENZIE

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The Night House

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Cover Art by Jacqueline Sweet

Alternate Illustrated Cover Art by JV Arts

Publishing History:

JCM Publications First Edition, 2019

JCM Publications Second Edition 2022

ISBN-13: 978-1-7752251-7-1 (digital)

ISBN-13: 978-1-7752251-6-4 (print)

ISBN-13: 978-1-990143-18-2 (hardcover)

Chapter Seven B

A Friend in Need

Taya stepped from her tent and stretched in the early morning sun. The tent beside hers rustled and John crawled out, zipping up the flap behind him. The birds chattered in the nearby trees and the river bubbled a few feet away. John had relented and they'd made camp for the night.

Not that she slept much.

Her thoughts had filled with images from the clearing with the circle of dead bodies and memories of her dead friends. The nightmares wouldn't let her rest.

Taya's skin rippled with unease. The birds had gone quiet.

"What are—" John stopped speaking when she snapped her hand up. He narrowed his eyes and curled his lip to show his teeth.

A branch snapped, then another.

"Who's there?" Taya called out.

John stiffened.

A woman stepped from the bushes lining the forest. She looked around Taya's age, maybe a little older, and wore a sweater and khaki shorts. Her clothing was dirty and scratches crisscrossed her

toned legs. Even at this distance, even with the amber brown tone of her skin, bruises stood out, decorating her exposed skin. She'd tied her loosely coiled hair into a high ponytail. A few twigs stuck out from the black mass. Whomever this woman was, the last few days had been rough.

Then again, it had been rough for all of them. Taya and John probably looked the same.

"You're not one of them?" the woman asked.

Taya sighed and put her knife away. The strange men who'd led the attacks had white hair like her. Gauging from this woman's reaction, and John's, it wasn't just a fluke coincidence. "No, I'm not."

"Oh, thank God." The woman let out a long breath and her shoulders slumped.

John chose this moment to step around his tent and join Taya. "Who are you?"

"Chantelle." She stepped farther away from the forest. "You're not the first survivors I've come across, but the others..." She rubbed her arms. "The others stole my stuff and threatened to kill me. I have nothing. Can I...Can I join you?"

No.

How could they possibly trust this woman?

What if she planned to do the same thing to them?

Taya looked over at John. He shook his head. He didn't like the idea any more than she did, and Taya's first experience with a survivor hadn't been great, either.

"How do we know you won't do the same thing?" Taya asked. Worse things could happen than their food being stolen.

Chantelle flinched, her bottom lip trembling. If she'd been an actress in a former life, she would've been phenomenal. "I'll promise? Please. I've been travelling ever since...ever since it happened. I know there's a town nearby. Maybe there are more survivors. Maybe we can travel to the town together and find them."

Taya and John shared a look. His most definitely said no.

Chantelle studied them, her lip quivering, her shoulders sagging down. "The town is empty, isn't it?"

John grunted.

"There are more farther south," Chantelle said. "Maybe we could travel to those. That blue stuff couldn't have gone on forever." She licked her lips. "Please. I don't want to be alone."

Taya's brain told her to dump the extra baggage and run, but she couldn't survive on her own, either, and the weather would only hold for so long.

"Taya..." John reached out to grip her elbow gently. "We can't."

She sighed and shook her head. Leaning close, she whispered to him. “We need more people if we’re going to survive the winter. There’s safety in numbers.”

“And more mouths to feed,” John snapped back.

And more opportunity for betrayal. He wasn’t wrong, but they had to start trusting someone.

“I can cook,” Chantelle called out. “I know a lot about herbs and medicine as well. I was practicing to be an herbalist before...well, before.”

Taya nodded at Chantelle to acknowledge she’d heard her but focused on John. “We can’t keep wandering around and scavenging. We need to make a plan. Those...people...might come back.”

“They already have,” Chantelle piped in.

Taya froze before slowly turning to the newcomer. “What?”

“After the survivors stole from me, I ended up finding them again. They had been slaughtered. I heard horses, so I hid. There were more warriors, and the leaders looked like you. They had rounded up a group of survivors. They also had carts full of food and another towing fabric and what looked like bedding.”

“They’re raiding for supplies,” John said.

Taya nodded again. “Now we really need to make a plan.”

John groaned, obviously reading Taya's decision on her face before she spoke.

"You can join us," Taya said.

Chapter Twenty-Two B

Dance with the Devil

Taya drew her swords and ran the last length toward Thane, gaining momentum. He stepped to the side, taking a position to stop her flight.

Not today, Satan.

She jumped to the side, out of the reach of his swords, their sharp edges dangerously close to making contact. In the air, she spun and struck out. Only to find he'd anticipated her attack.

Again.

They moved back and forth in a flurry of attacks, blocks and counters, their swords clashing in the early morning spring hours. Their breath condensed around them and plumed in the air.

It had been months since their trip to Earth and she had to kill John in self-defence. Time might've passed, but John still visited her nightmares. To escape the dreams, she poured everything into her training.

Taya knew with the first few exchanges that Thane still surpassed her own skills. He always would. And he also could've ended

this sparring match multiple times, but chose to prolong it. He probably savoured her futile attempt at victory. Sick bastard.

Taya would normally continue these games, but she was tired. She'd had enough.

Faking a strike to the body, she stepped to the side to appear off-balance. Thane didn't take the bait.

He didn't need to.

He wasn't supposed to.

She dropped her off-hand sword to unsheathe her dagger in a quick, fluid transition. With a flick of her wrist, she brought the dagger under Thane's guard.

Not bothering to hide her smile, she pressed the sharp edge into Thane's pretty throat.

"About time," he grumbled.

Her smile faltered. "W...what?"

"I was getting hungry."

She dropped the arm holding the dagger. "You're an ass."

"No." He leaned in, his face unbearably close. "I'm Thane, the second son from the House of Jericho."

She rolled her eyes and sheathed her dagger. "Can we train with the bō staff after lunch?"

“Why do you like those sticks so much?” He raised his eyebrows and waited for her response.

She chose to ignore the double entendre and answered him truthfully. “In my world, nobody walked around with swords. I always thought my father’s fascination with them was misplaced, even though I enjoyed the practice. The bō was always more practical.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Slightly more practical,” she amended, scooping up her dropped sword. “Even if someone had a sword on Earth, they likely wouldn’t know how to use it.”

“I have skill with using both.”

Ugh. She raised her eyes to the sky but no divine intervention would save her from this man. He either planned to kill her with his ego, or innuendo. Instead of coming up with something witty to say, she glared at Thane.

“Oh, good,” Julian’s voice broke their staring contest. “You haven’t finished training yet.”

Thane pulled away from her to face his brother. “What do you want?”

Taya also looked over and froze. Julian stood beside his father. They both had their swords drawn.

“To test your new merchandise,” Lane said.

Taya scowled but remained silent. She valued her head attached to her shoulders and now was not the time to talk back. She'd been at the house for months. Was she still considered new?

“Taya isn't some purchased item to be reviewed, father,” Thane said.

“Yet, you own her,” Lane said.

Thane stiffened.

Yeah, she didn't want to examine the accuracy of that statement too much, either.

Before Thane found his voice, Julian and Lane launched in a coordinated attack. Thane had the choice to defend her or step back.

He grimaced and moved out of the way.

Okay, then.

He either didn't care to defy his father or he trusted her abilities enough to let her stand on her own.

Taya didn't have a chance to think more about his motivations. Instead, she focused on deflecting Julian and Lane's attack.

They danced around her, their blades flashing in the weak rays of sunlight. Dance wasn't appropriate—it felt too fancy for something so deadly. They didn't seek to kill her, purposefully pulling away from deadly openings. They truly just wanted to spar and test her mettle.

Instead of letting fear rule her, she loosened her limbs and met their attacks with her own. This reminded her of practicing with her dad and brother.

Her stomach dropped. She swallowed the unexpected grief and pressed on. She used to spar with her dad and brother for hours, only pausing to go over mistakes. The crunch of dirt and snap of peeled arbutus bark would fill the air along with the ring of metal. The cool air would burn her lungs in the fall and winter, while the sun would burn her shoulders in the summer. The world around them would go through the seasons, but they would remain constant, practicing sword work in the yard for hours and hours until Mom yelled at them to come in for dinner.

And they were gone.

Dark energy curled around her, seeping into her skin and mind. Her vision became cloudy, her mind fuzzy. She stumbled and received a hard blow to the stomach. She spun around and someone's fist connected with her face.

She pulled on her own magic. It sparked and sputtered out, slipping from her grasp. One of her assailants gripped her arm and threw her to the ground.

Her back smacked against the dirt, air forced from her lungs.

The dark energy receded like the grime was suctioned from her skin. Julian and Lane's magic felt nothing like Thane's and the touch of their magic left her feeling dirty.

Her vision cleared to find all three men standing over her.

"Sword work isn't bad," Julian conceded.

"Need work on her magical defence," Lane stated the obvious.

Thane grumbled in agreement.

Chapter Twenty-Two C

The Pen is Mightier Than the Sword

A gust of air travelled through the room and tussled Taya's hair. She was no longer alone in the library. She spent her time training during the day and laying exhausted on her bed at night, but sometimes, during the time in between, she either snuck off to the library or spent time with Adrianna.

Taya quelled the instincts to bolt. Arkavians would view such an act as a weakness and if the late-night visitor was Thane's father or brother, the last thing she wanted to do was make herself look more like prey.

Instead, she straightened in her seat and turned slowly to the door. At the same time, she drifted her hand to the hilt of her dagger.

Thane leaned against the door frame, arms crossed. He didn't wear armour or court clothes for once, instead, he wore the leather pants Arkavian royals favoured and a loose, long-sleeved shirt. With slightly-messed white hair and sleepy eyes, his appearance gave her the impression he'd tried to sleep and failed.

Tired and agitated, Thane wasn't guarding his expression like he normally did. Instead of stone, his open gaze drew her in and

threatened to drown her. Something tugged on the magical bond connecting them.

Thane in off-mode was mesmerizing. He seduced her without even trying.

And she hated herself for her weakness.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Looking up Arkavian history.”

“I thought Adrianna was helping you with that.”

Taya closed the old leather-bound book in front of her and pushed the heavy wooden chair back so she could face Thane better. “Adrianna is filling me in on all the latest court gossip, house affiliations and their history, in addition to the Old Arkavian dialect.”

“Swear words and pick up lines?”

Taya shrugged. “She says they’re the easiest way to remember and a good place to start.”

“She’s not wrong.”

Taya pushed off her seat to stand.

Thane swiftly stepped into the room and wave his hand up and down. “Sit. I’ll join you.” He pulled out a chair and slid onto the wooden seat as she sat back down. “Is there any part of our illustrious past that you find particularly interesting?”

She pushed the old book across the polished wood.

He glanced down, gaze scanning the title. “Reapings?”

“Yeah, reapings,” she said. “How well do you know the process for creating the portal between realms?”

He shifted on his feet. “Enough.”

Taya tapped the book. “There’s a lot of information about how to forge a connection from one realm to another.”

“Yes...”

“None of them mention sacrifice circles.”

“That’s because they’re not involved in the forging process.”

His tone was dry, mocking.

Ugh. “Yet, the sacrifice circles are located around the portal, so that were created shortly after the connection was made. You said reapings weren’t always this way. Maybe something in the process changes to allow the Tarka to set up the leaching spell.” She pulled the dusty old book back, opened to the marked page she’d been reading and scanned the words.

“And they use the portal as the funnel.” Thane scratched the stubble along his jaw. “There’s nothing in the process that I’m aware of that allows for the leaching.”

“*That you’re aware of.* It might be something hidden in the magic incantations. If we can figure out how the portal allows or

funnels the leaching, we might be able to track the magic somehow to the Tarka responsible.”

Thane closed his mouth, pressing his lips together firmly. His jaw muscles popped out and he glowered at the book in front of him.

“Is there anyone we can ask?”

The tension in Thane’s shoulders didn’t relax.

“Someone involved in the reaping?” And maybe after they completed interrogating the Tarka, she could go back and slip a knife between their ribs. Maybe this was the opportunity she needed to exact her revenge.

Her friends’ faces flashed in her mind. Memories of their shenanigans were always bittersweet.

“That might tip are hand.” Thane glanced down at her clenched hands. “And it’s also probably not wise to let you question them. Besides, I don’t think it will be helpful.”

“Well aren’t you a ray of sunshine.”

Thane scowled. “There are three things going on here. There are the reapings, where Arkavia opens a portal to another world to reap the resources and power of that land. There’s the leaching, where someone has somehow tapped into the reapings for personal gain, and there are the sacrifice circles. We believe the circles are somehow linked to the leaching. The thing is, I don’t think the leaching spans

more than a few generations, or something would've been mentioned in the history books, or at least the family's personal accounting of past events."

"But you just noticed the circles now."

"I never travelled to a reaped world before," Thane said. "I can only guess, but I think these circles have to be new. Surely someone would've said something before now."

"So the Tarka or Tarkas involved have evolved to use these circles for leaching, or our entire theory is wrong and the circles aren't involved with the leaching at all."

"And if any of the Tarkas involved in the reaping of Earth are involved they're hardly going to admit it. We need to find out what, if anything, has changed in the reaping process."

She sat up in her chair. "In order to do that, we need..."

"A comparison." Thane completed her thought.

"Is there an old, crotchety Tarka stashed away somewhere?" she asked. "One involved in previous reapings? Preferably ones from a long time ago? In a time before the leaching presumably began?"

Thane hunched over the table and examined his calloused hands. "There is a guy."

"But?"

Visibly stealing himself, he straightened and removed all emotion from his face. “But nothing. We’ll leave tomorrow.”

Though she’d found a possible lead to solving the circle mysteries, Thane didn’t seem very grateful. If anything, he’d become more hostile.

Why?

Chapter Twenty-Two D

A Horse, Of Course

It took over a week of dreary horse riding, uncomfortable nights sleeping on hard ground and tense silence from Thane to make it to the House of Edur.

The usual crew accompanied Thane, but they took their lead from Thane and travelled with the same silent treatment.

Sugar huffed, her warm breath condensing in the dewy morning air. She shifted side to side, restless, but not nearly as tired at Taya. Clearly, her horse was bored and just wanted to get on with it.

Yeah, girl. Same.

Thane had set a slow, agonizingly boring pace, taking multiple breaks for the horses. She'd asked if they had some sort of system involving relay stations set up on Arkavia. Everyone had looked at her like she'd lost her mind, even after she explained how people on Earth used to replace exhausted horses for fresh mounts to reduce rest stops and subsequent delay during a long journey.

"The horses need to rest," Thane had growled. "We brought our war mounts. Even if we could exchange or trade them, we wouldn't. They're not replaceable."

Sugar huffed again, apparently agreeing with Thane and a pang of guilt stabbed at Taya for asking the question in the first place. Which was totally ridiculous, but true nonetheless.

Lokni pulled up beside Taya, still focused on the small fortress in the valley below. “What do you know about this house?”

Taya played with the leather reins in her hand. “Oh, so now you’ve decided to speak with me?”

Lokni cut his gaze to her before quickly turning his attention back to the path ahead. “I don’t know what you’re referring to.”

“I was beginning to wonder if he placed some sort of gag order on the team.”

“Too tired to talk.”

Taya gaped at him.

“What?”

“I find it very unlikely you ever become too tired to talk.”

“Taya. Stop harassing Lokni,” Thane snapped.

She threw up her hands. “Is anyone going to tell me what’s up?”

“No.” Thane drew his horse to her other side. “Now pull your face mask up and keep your mouth shut. Under no circumstances are you to speak or ask questions. If you have something to say, do so after we’ve left this place.”

She pursed her lips.

Thane ran a hand down his face. “Taya?”

“Fine.” She pulled up the black material that covered the lower portion of her face. Hopefully, the murderous glare she directed at Thane spoke for her.

Shockingly, he didn’t fall over on the spot, killed by the potency of her gaze.

“We’re not among friends here.” He turned away, expression stony and prodded Hades forward.

And she followed like a good little soldier. This servitude itched at her skin. She’d grown to like Thane and his team, but it didn’t dull the pain of loss, nor her anger at those responsible for her world’s destruction.

She needed to keep her focus on the end game. This was temporary, a means to an end, the best positioning she could manage to get her sweet justice.

Instead of speaking, she trained her scowl on Thane’s back. He’d shown her kindness, even vulnerability, but that was gone. Where did that Thane go? Or was the other Thane all an act? Maybe this cold, detached version of Thane was the authentic one.

Sugar plodded along as Taya continued to run through her first memories of Thane. No, he had asshole-like tendencies, but he

wasn't actually an asshole. Something about coming here had rattled him. This house had set the entire team on edge, but no one thought to let her in on the big secret.

She studied the simple stone fortress, looking more like some glammed up outpost from medieval times than the house of someone capable of making Thane worry.

Now late spring, the sun should've warmed her back as they made their way into the courtyard. Instead, a frosty chill settled over her.

The House of Edur. Or at least one of them. Cousins from the direct line took up smaller fortresses and buildings away from the main one, choosing to live apart, or being forced to. This must be one such place.

All Taya knew was what Adrianna had told her, which was very little. Now reflecting on their chats, Taya should've picked up on the anomaly. Adrianna normally went into great detail to describe a house and all the gossip surrounding it.

Except this one, and House Jericho. Adrianna had only told her "Edur" meant snow in Old Arkavian.

Huh. Maybe they got the house name for the frosty welcome.

A pale boy, no more than fifteen ran out from some shadowy corner and took Hades' reins from Thane.

“Cool him down, water and feed him,” Thane said. “The roan, too. After the horses are brushed, tack them back up with new blankets. We’re not staying long.”

Taya bit back a groan and dismounted. If they didn’t stay here for the night, that meant another night sleeping on hard-packed, sun-dried dirt again.

Not a fan.

If this was an adventure experience on Earth, she’d rate it one star.

The boy led Hades and Sugar away. The other men would stay and look after their own mounts. Thane must really hate this place. He normally groomed Hades himself. Allowing an unknown stable boy to attend his war mount to decrease time spent here spoke volumes all on its own.

A grizzly old man with white hair and a white beard ambled down the steps from the main entrance. Though stooped with age, his wide shoulders, large hands, and scars lining his exposed forearms hinted at a warrior’s past. He squinted at their entourage, the expression looking vaguely familiar.

“Lord Edur.” Thane bowed, stiff and shallow.

Taya moved to stand slightly behind him, scanning the courtyard and the parapets for archers.

“You still need to work on your greetings, grandson,” the old man growled.

Shock spread through her body like ice. Lord Edur was Thane’s grandfather? No wonder he seemed familiar. Thane’s mother looked like a female version of him.

“May I have a moment of your time?” Thane asked. “I have some questions I’d like to ask you in private.”

The old man heaved a laborious sigh before jerking his chin toward the entrance.

Thane walked up the first few steps and she followed closely behind him.

Lord Edur stiffened. “What is this?”

Thane paused to glance over his shoulder. “One of my team members.”

“A girl?”

“A woman.”

The man’s scowling lowered Taya’s opinion of him. So what if she was a woman? Thane had told her how a lot of Arkavian women held positions of power and could be hellish adversaries. Tarka power also didn’t discriminate, creating monsters out of anyone, regardless of gender.

“Does she speak?” Lord Edur asked. “Or does she just follow you around like a shadow?”

“My shadow?” Thane’s grin was evident in his voice. He stroked his chin. “I think I like that. Yes. She’s my shadow. Where I go, she follows.”

Lord Edur glowered. “You always were a sentimental boy. Too much like your mother.”

Thane shrugged as if the comment meant nothing as if the words glanced off him. Only she caught the tension in his hand as if he fought the urge to grip the hilt of his sword and pull the weapon from its sheath. Instead, he waved at the walkway in front of them.

The older man took the hint and led them through the entranceway. The inside of this place was just as cold and unwelcoming as the outside.

They followed Lord Edur down an empty sparsely decorated corridor until they reached a heavy wooden door with squeaky hinges. Once they stepped into the dusty sitting room, Lord Edur motioned for Thane to sit in a large chair, one of those with a long, tufted backrest covered with hard creaking leather, narrows arms, and iron-clawed legs that looked like they should be on an old bathtub instead of a chair.

Thane didn’t hesitate, sweeping graciously into the chair. A cloud of dust rose around him, but he didn’t comment or react to it.

Air whipped around Taya as though someone had opened a window during winter to let a cold draft cut through the heat. Magic. She was somehow sensing Lord Edur's Tarka power. He pushed the cold energy from the room, off to do his bidding. Thane didn't appear overly worried, but he'd probably have the same blank expression on his face if a dragon suddenly sprouted from the shadows and breathed fire at him.

The door creaked behind her. In a flash, she had her dagger out and pressed to the neck of the person standing in the doorway.

"By all means, kill that one," Edur's voice held an indifferent tone. "He's as worthless as the other earthens."

Taya froze.

The man in front of her couldn't be more than twenty. Long and too lean, his collar bones poked from the drooping neckline of a cotton shirt. He'd synched in the drawstring of his pants to keep them up, but the baggy clothing did nothing to hide his skeletal figure. He held a tray with both hands. An Arkavian tea set sat on the tarnished metal surface of the tray.

Taya dropped her dagger quickly sheathing it.

The entire time, the earthen hadn't flinched or moved, instead, he merely observed her dispassionately from behind his shaggy brown hair.

“This lot of slaves haven’t been very good,” Edur said.

If only she could place her dagger in his neck.

She stepped to the side and the earthen walked past her without changing his expression. He reminded her of a robot, not that anyone in this room other than her or the slave would get the reference.

“Most of them have died,” Edur continued.

Though half her face was covered, Taya forced her expression to remain neutral while she felt each of Edur’s words like stabs to the heart. He spoke of her people like someone would discuss a bad crop year, and he crushed one of her dreams. She’d never be able to save them now. She wanted to liberate the earthen slaves from Arkavia, but the truth slapped her in the face. The earthen who just walked past her would never survive on Earth, not without help. His chances of living were better here but only marginally. How could she round up, liberate and care for the handful of earthen left scattered across Arkavia without getting caught and killed?

She couldn’t.

Her gut twisted and stomach acid bubbled up her throat.

“If the power levels on Arkavia are dropping faster than the last time, we’ll need to do another reaping soon.”

“That’s actually why I came, grandfather. I’d like to ask you about the reapings from when you were involved.”

“Why? You’re so big and powerful. What possible information can I provide?”

Thane ignored his grandfather’s comment and pressed on. “It’s not so much the portal I’m inquiring about, but something I’ve witnessed on the earthen side. I’m wondering if it’s connected somehow.”

The old man’s eyes narrowed. “Why do you think I would know anything about that? I’m the impoverished, distant fourth cousin to the head of the house. I had to send your mom to that fool just for this house to survive. And look at it.” He threw his arm out to wave at the room. “Look at the state it’s in. Look what little your mom’s life bought. Your father has forgotten me. He left me here to rot the day your mother died.”

Thane looked away. The muscle in his cheek flexed and relaxed as he clenched his teeth together. “When you journeyed to the reaping lands, did you notice or hear anything about sacrifice circles?”

“Eh, now?”

“Dead bodies, arranged in a circle in multiple clearings around the portal entry point.”

Edur narrowed his eyes.

“Did you see anything matching this description during your trips to the reaped worlds? From the stories I remember you telling, you

often had to survey the land around the portals on the other side.”

Thane’s words became more clipped as he spoke, his body tense.

Edur grunted. “I’ve never heard or seen such a thing. Is that how your generation is running things now?”

“No,” Thane snapped back. “The circles as far as I can tell have nothing to do with the actual portal formation, but I wanted to confirm this with someone whose experience can provide a comparison. Can you describe how you formed portals for reappings?”

Lord Edur scowled again before he opened his mouth and a long technical explanation of magic fell out.

Thane grunted, seemingly following all of it. “Nothing has changed. The circles are separate from the portals, or at least the formation of the portals.”

“What’s the point then?” Lord Edur asked. “Of these sacrifice circles?”

Thane clamped his mouth shut. He knew the purpose, or at least highly suspected but was he willing to share his suspicions with his maternal grandfather?

From the closed-off expression, she already knew the answer before he spoke.

“That’s what I’m trying to find out,” Thane replied. “Thank you for your time, grandfather. We’ll take our leave now.”

Lord Edur stood with Thane and Taya. “So you got what you came for and now you’re off.”

Thane clenched his teeth and took a long breath before responding. “This place is full of memories. I’d rather not stay and if you were honest with yourself, you don’t wish me to stay, either.”

Something flashed in the old man’s gaze and his expression softened for the briefest of moments. “You look so much like her.” He huffed and looked away, waving his hand in the air. “Off with you, then.”

Thane nodded and turned to leave. Taya quietly followed, letting the silence of the building fold around them as they left Lord Edur in his dusty sitting room and made their way to the exit.

Thane stopped abruptly before the grand doors and took another long shaking breath.

“Thane?” She rested her hand on his shoulder.

“This place...” He shook his head.

“Do you need a moment?”

Without turning toward her, he reached up and placed his hand on hers. “This place used to be warm and filled with love.”

When his mom lived.

“Seeing it like this is difficult.” He squeezed her hand before letting his fall to his side. “Now it holds only pain.”

“And answers? Did you get anything else from the information your grandfather provided?”

“Like I said before, the process hasn’t changed. No one has altered the formation of the portal or the reaping process to allow for leaching.”

“So we can rule out that as a potential lead. That’s something.”

“That’s something,” he agreed, but his following silence said more than his words.

They might’ve ruled out a possible lead, but they were no closer to identifying the person or people responsible for the leaching and sacrifice circles.

Chapter Twenty-Two E

Sweet Wine

After leaving the minor House of Edur, Thane had dropped all talk of the sacrifice circles, apparently content to let the mystery remain as such, even though it meant the leaching would continue. The status quo remained. With her days filled with weapons and hand-to-hand combat training, history lessons and magic theory, Taya's days blurred together in one exhausted heap. She rarely got away from the main house, but when she did, she tried to savour the moments, so she, too, had stopped investigating the sacrifice circles. What could she do about them, anyway?

The sweet smell of the Arkavian summer drifted over the distant hills and wove through the tall grass surrounding Taya and Adrianna. The long blades slapped against Lokni's armoured shin guards where he stood a few feet away, looking miserable. The sun beat down from above and bathed Taya in its warmth.

The summer after Taya turned sixteen, her family travelled to Hawaii during the summer break. They'd never gone on a tropical vacation before, opting to camp throughout the province and down the

island instead. Mom and Dad had saved for years to take them on this trip.

Everything about that vacation had been magical—the plane ride, the leis, the culture and markets, the boys, but what Taya still recalled so vividly, was the smell—hot sand, coconut-infused sunscreen and moisturizer, and the fragrant white flowers from the trees that surrounded the hotel.

Arkavia’s sweet summer air smelled like that. Like a tropical paradise from her most cherished family memories, and for some reason, it made her angry.

Okay, she knew the reason.

Arkavia had already stolen so much from her and now, without even trying, it was tainting her memories as well.

When she’d first sat down on the picnic blanket with Adrianna, the floral smells surrounding her triggered memories of Tommy cackling as they attempted surfing for the first time. His white hair had glowed under the hot sun and his nose and cheeks had burned.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen your pasty skin without bruises or scratches,” Adrianna remarked, bringing her wine glass to her lips.

Taya shook the memory of her brother away. She shrugged and leaned back on the large picnic blanket. “No pain, no gain.”

Adrianna liked to haul Taya out of “House Jericho’s evil clutches” when she had a rest day. Though Taya enjoyed the time and gossip, she couldn’t help suspect Thane had put his cousin up to these outings. Or at least planted the seed for Adrianna to eventually come up with the idea.

The Arkavian noblewoman spent most of the time educating Taya on the houses and their politics, under the ruse of gossip. Without television or any other form of entertainment from Earth, Taya enjoyed the stories. So whether Thane orchestrated the outings or not, Taya didn’t mind.

“Are you sure you don’t want a glass?” Adrianna turned to Lokni and raised the wine bottle. “Thane’s not here.”

“No, thank you,” he said.

“You could sit on the blanket with us and join the conversation.”

“I’d rather die, thank you,” he growled.

Adrianna rolled her eyes and turned back to Taya.

“You never finished your story,” Taya said. “What happened to this Izar?”

“Well, no one really knows.” Adrianna’s eyes widened with delight and her smile grew. “What I want to know is what family you come from.”

Taya shrugged. "I don't know."

"But who raised you? And don't tell me the wolves. Thane might enjoy spreading that particular story, but I don't buy it."

Taya took a sip of red wine. It was heavier and spicier compared to what she'd had on Earth. Not particularly a fan of wine, she'd rather have a beer, but at this point, she'd willingly accept anything Adrianna shared if it meant getting away from the House of Jericho.

"I was raised by a loving couple. They took care of me and my brother."

Adrianna perked up. "A brother? Why am I only hearing of this now? What's he look like? He must be handsome. Where is he?"

Lokni grumbled and shuffled his feet. God, he was so obvious. Why couldn't Adrianna see it?

The Arkavian noblewoman's excitement sent a bolt of pain through Taya's heart. Where was her brother? She knew the likely answer to that question and it crushed her. "Most likely dead like the rest of my family."

Adrianna sat back, wine momentarily forgotten. Her smile disappeared. "I'm so sorry, Taya. I didn't realize."

"I know. But hopefully, you can understand why I don't like to talk about them."

She nodded, white hair falling over her face.

“I’ve been on my own ever since,” Taya said. Though the words hurt, sticking as close to the truth seemed like the best course of action. She didn’t have to fake any of the emotion. She didn’t have to act or pretend. The feelings were so real and still so very fresh.

“On your own with the wolves?”

“With the wolves.” Taya held up her wine glass and clinked the edge against Adrianna’s.

The noblewoman narrowed her eyes at Taya’s glass. “That’s looking suspiciously full.”

“I have another training session tonight. I can’t get plastered.”

Adrianna pouted, her bottom lip sticking out and her shoulders drooping. “This is supposed to be your day off.”

“It is.”

She glared.

“Sort of.”

“What’s so important it can’t wait until your regularly scheduled program?”

Taya looked down at her wine glass, wanting to disappear into the dark amber fluid.

Lokni chuckled. “She needs help.”

Adrianna's eyebrows crept up. "With what? You're a skilled warrior."

"With my magic," she said. It still felt silly to say the word.

"Not all Arkavians can become Tarkas, even those with the correct hair colouring." Adrianna tugged on her platinum hair. "Or they have so little it's barely notable."

"Thane's convinced I have magic"

"Thane's an idiot."

Taya choked on her wine. "I'd like to see you tell him that."

Adrianna brushed the hair from her face. "I tell him that all the time. He's just too pigheaded to listen." Adrianna placed her empty wine glass on the ground near the edge of the picnic blanket so it wouldn't topple over, and scooted closer to Taya. "What Thane has always failed to understand is not every powerful skill has to be offensive. He relies on brute force, skill and the potency of his magic. Not everything needs to be beaten down or bashed on the head."

Taya frowned. This didn't sound like Thane at all. He had more finesse and cunning than Adrianna's words implied and she said as much.

"No. That's not what I meant." Adrianna glanced at Lokni for help, but their somewhat silent guardian shrugged and went back to scanning their surroundings.

“Thane has never struggled to grasp anything. If a new problem arises, he meets it head-on.”

“Are you trying to say he’s direct? But in, like, the most indirect way possible?”

“Yes.” Adrianna breathed out a sigh. “And he’s pigheaded. I stand by that one. If something doesn’t work, he thinks trying harder will result in success because that’s what’s always worked for him. He never thinks to stop and look at things from a different angle. Changing approaches will not occur to him.”

“So you’re saying I should ask for a second opinion.”

She shook her head. “Ask for a different explanation.”

Taya grunted. Like that would go well. Thane didn’t take criticism well and asking for an alternate method might be taken as exactly that.

“Do you have anything to lose?” Adrianna’s eyebrows crept up.

Just her life. “Not really.”

Chapter Twenty-Two F

Jerks Travel in Packs

Taya kicked a pebble and watched it bounce down the overgrown path to the House of Jericho. The tall grass swayed in the gentle breeze. She closed her eyes and stole a moment to enjoy the feel of the sweet air over her skin.

Taya enjoyed the combat defence training, the magic lessons...not so much. Taya reflected on what Adrianna had said about Thane. And in a way, she could relate. Taya never struggled to master a concept or skill before, at least, not like this, not to this extent. Picnics with Adrianna helped take her mind off her failure, but even these outings involved lessons and learning. And she sucked at languages almost as much as she did magic.

It was moments like this. The solo walks from one point to another that she truly savoured, and found herself wishing the trip took longer.

Taya hadn't argued when Lokni offered to stay behind to help Adrianna clean up their picnic while Taya had to leave for training. It meant she had another stolen moment of solitude.

Sleep didn't count. Thane dominated her dreams.

“Look what we have here,” Chadwick spoke as he stepped from a bush lining the path not looking surprised at all. His acting skills needed work. He’d obviously hid and waited for her return.

Had Julian sent him? Or Lane? Or did he have his own secret agenda?

A dry twig snapped behind her and she cursed. Where there was one, the other two usually followed close behind.

Chad wasn’t alone.

She should’ve realized. Julian’s henchmen only had half a brain put together. They never operated alone.

“To what do I owe the honour?”

Orrin and Steele chuckled and stepped onto the path behind her. They must’ve used some cloaking skills. They weren’t full-blooded Tarkas, but they possessed a little magic, enough to be a nuisance.

“Does Julian know you’re here?” she asked.

Chad scowled and sheathed his sword, apparently determining it unnecessary.

First mistake.

“We don’t need his permission to move about the grounds, but I doubt he’d disapprove.”

“Of what?” Exactly what did they plan to do? Kill her? They must not know about the bond between her and Thane.

“Consider this an extra training session,” Orrin spoke behind her, still several feet away.

Taya groaned. Her body existed in a perpetual state of aches and pain. An “extra training session” wasn’t needed or welcome, but the glint in Chad’s eyes told her they didn’t give a shit about her progress or improvement.

“Wow. Three against one. You must be really desperate for validation.” She turned slightly to get the other two in her field of view and shifted her weight to her toes.

Steele attacked first—it was always the quiet ones. He leapt at her with a flying right knee, his fist raised to follow up his attack. Stepping to the side, she blocked his knee by driving her own into his thigh. At the same time, she slipped past his punch. His massive fist grazed the side of her head. If he’d connected, she’d be flat out on the ground.

Quick as a snake, she struck out with a bladed hand and aimed at his throat as his momentum carried him past her. He gurgled in surprise.

Not wasting any time, she threw her hands up to block Orrin’s attack. He grabbed her wrists, his strong hands clamped down. Crap. She couldn’t let him neutralize her.

Twisting her wrists, she brought her arms down and across her body to break his grip. She countered with a vicious punch to the head, but it barely fazed the large warrior. He stepped to the side, shook his head and wiped the blood away from his mouth.

“You’ll have to hit harder than that.” He leaned to the side and spat on the ground, his saliva tinted red from blood.

The crunch of dirt gave her the only warning that Chad had decided to participate while Orrin sneered at her from a few feet away and Steele tried to regain the use of his esophagus.

Chad lunged at her exposed back. She kicked her leg out behind her, right into his jaw. His eyes widened before they rolled up into the back of his head and his legs gave out beneath him.

Orrin and Steele gave her no time to catch her breath. They attacked in unison this time. She blocked, stepped and slipped away from their strikes. With each step though, she got slower, and the attacks got closer. Orrin and Steele relentlessly kept coming at her. Orrin’s fist grazed her. Steele caught her with a bone-crushing kick to the side and knocked the wind from her lungs.

She stumbled, her foot catching on an upturned rock, mind frantically trying to come up with an exit strategy as she continued to try to avoid getting pummelled to death. Pulling on her magic as Thane taught her, the power whispered along her skin, teasing and tempting.

And then fizzled away.

Again.

Orrin's fist slammed into her jaw and she lurched to the side, staggering to keep upright.

Chad had regained consciousness and scrambled to his feet, murder in his gaze. He unsheathed a dagger and stalked toward her.

"Enough." Thane's low voice stopped the men mid-attack. They straightened and scowled.

The Tarka walked down the overgrown path to stand by her side.

"Leave us," he said to the other men.

Chad, Orrin and Steele walked away without a word.

Thane waited until they disappeared before he turned to her, his gaze scanning her from head to toe. "Are you okay?"

"I totally had that." She panted for air and straightened. Pain shot through her mid-section and she winced.

Thane grunted, eyes narrowing. "Totally."

She'd smack him, but then she'd have to reach out and with a rib most likely broken, the idea didn't appeal to her.

"Rib?" Thane always saw too much.

"Yes." She hissed.

“They will pay for this.” His voice held the cold tone of promise. He kept his hands clasped behind him. “I can heal it for you.”

Memories from the last healing session flooded her mind. “No, thank you. I think I’ll let these heal the old-fashioned way.”

Thane remained expressionless, her response hadn’t surprised him, or if it had, he hid it well. “You tried to use your magic.”

“Tried would be the keyword in that statement,” she said.

“I felt it.”

“Oh?” She turned to walk down the path. “Is that why it didn’t work? Does the bond bind all my power up somehow?”

Thane walked alongside her, following her leisurely pace. “No, that’s not how it works. I can control the flow for you if you lose control, and I can siphon the power away if you built up too much. But I would have to actively try to block you from accessing your power, which I’ve never done.”

“Oh.”

“I suspect it’s a mental block.” He tapped his temple. “You haven’t quite wrapped your head around the existence of magic, nor accepting that you have a well of it inside you. Understandable, given you spent your formative years living in a magicless world”

Taya sighed, knowing what Thane planned to follow this explanation with, yet powerless to stop it from happening.

Thane leaned in. “Today’s incident has highlighted the need for three things.”

Taya groaned.

A smile tugged at Thane’s lips. “You will wear your swords with you everywhere. No exception.”

Now that, she could live with.

“Until I say otherwise, you will always have one of us with you at all times. While my men will never harm you unprovoked, I cannot control my brother’s or father’s men.”

Taya flinched. He didn’t need to specify who “one of us” referred to. He meant his trusted inner circle. And while Taya knew and respected all of them, she could kiss her moments of solitude goodbye.

“And last we need to up your magical training sessions.”

And there it was. The death knell.

Chapter Twenty-Two G

My Mother Gave Me the Moon

Taya stepped around Thane to view the drop-off to the ocean below. The sweet pine scent of the surrounding forest curled around her. “Why are we here?”

Thane unbelted his sword sheath and rested it against a stone bench facing the water. “This is one of my favourite lookouts.”

Okay. Sightseeing wasn’t exactly in the training regimen.

“During this time of year, the moonlight hits this spot perfectly.

“For seducing young, unsuspecting women? For shoving someone off a cliff to their gruesome death below, or...?”

Thane smirked. “We’ve been going about your magical training all wrong.”

“Ah...it’s to be torture, then.” Tension automatically built up in her shoulders.

Thane narrowed his eyes at her. “We’ve practiced in the fortress and outside. We’ve never tried accessing your power at night.”

“Will that make a difference?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. I can feel your magic. You have a lot of it. Drawing it out, even while bonded, should not be difficult or dependent on the time of day, but if it’s linked to the night or the moon, it might be easier to learn about your power here. Now.”

“Isn’t the House of Jericho all about the moon?” She kept her gaze out, watching the waves crash against the jagged rocks below.

“Of course. Jericho means moon in Old Arkavian, but it is not the only house with its magic tied to the night.”

That made sense. Kind of. If she was being honest, nothing about magic truly made sense to her. It went against all the things she learned on earth about math, science and technology. It defied the law of nature. It laughed in the face of logic.

Thane was right. Her inability to wrap her mind around having and using magic undoubtedly caused her failures in learning to master her own power.

“You can feel my magic?” She turned to Thane to find him watching her. “What does it feel like?”

His gaze flashed in the moonlight, unguarded and wild for a brief moment before he shut it down. “You’re not ready.”

Fine. Whatever. “What am I ready for then?”

He sat down on the bench and patted the space beside him. She walked over and slipped out of her double sword sheaths, propping them on the other side of the bench.

She took a deep breath in and blinked at Thane expectantly. This was it. He planned to kill her with magic.

Thane's lips twitched. "Relax."

"Easy for you to say," she grumbled. "I bet you probably tell women to calm down when they're upset, too."

His smirk spread into a large smile, his teeth glinting in the moonlight. "I'm smarter than that."

She grunted and closed her eyes, letting the gentle touch of the wind and the repetitive sounds of the waves flow over her. The breeze whipped stray strands of her hair across her face. She breathed in the sweet-smelling air, holding it for a three-second count before releasing it. The tension eased from her shoulders.

"Good. Now reach for your magic. Don't try to control it. Just touch it."

She bit her lip, but instead of making a joke, she did as he suggested. This was the moment she encountered failure. Her power would either flare up before burning out or fizzling to nothing.

She kept her breathing regular, reaching for that mental space her mind went to during a fight—the quiet place where she existed with all her senses and none of her doubts.

Her magic responded, rising up to coat her mind and her skin.

“There it is,” Thane whispered.

She opened her eyes, magic thrumming through her veins. Ribbon-like bands of silver wound around her creating a layer of power over her skin and clothes.

“You’re a creature of the night.” He nodded at her arm.

With the power wrapped tightly around her, she looked down. Her arm had become translucent in the moonlight. Instead of stiffening or panicking, she took another deep breath and raised her other arm. Also translucent.

“It’s called Tarka shielding, though few can achieve this state of invisibility.”

“Will it protect me from what Julian and Lane did?”

He smiled, his teeth flashing in the moonlight. “Absolutely. It also explains why you found the other magical activities so frustrating. Your magical strength lies in defence, not offence.”

Her magic pulsed as if in agreement. “And how does my magic feel now?” Surely, she was ready to hear the answer.

He leaned in, slipping his hand up to cup the side of her face.
“Delicious.”

His answer shocked her and she let the magic go. It fell away like shards of glass, bouncing along with the surrounding stones and glinting in the moonlight. Thane pressed his lips to hers, his magic winding around her. She leaned in, wanting more, running her hands up his armoured chest. He deepened the kiss, angling his mouth and flicking his tongue. He kissed like a man on a desert who finally got to drink a glass of water, he kissed her like he'd been starved of this his entire life and finally had what he wanted.

Wrapping her leg over his thigh, she arched her body into his, trying to get closer. She'd let him do anything right now. She was clay in his hands, ready to be worked and moulded. She wanted their clothes off. She wanted his skin on hers. She wanted him inside her. All of it. She would die if he stopped touching her.

Thane broke away first, gaze flashing.

She had no words. Speaking required air and she struggled to breathe.

“We can't do this.” Thane abruptly stood from the bench, grabbed his sword and stalked off into the night.

Taya remained on the bench, her fingertips lightly pressed against her still-tingling lips. Whatever was happening between her

and Thane, it threatened his resolve to stay away, and the promises she made to seek revenge on all Arkavians.

Chapter Thirty-Five B

Island Hopping

The cool winter breeze cut past Taya's face as she walked down the road ahead of her brother and father.

"I don't see why we couldn't use one of the boats moored in Pilot Bay," she said. Not only did Pilot Bay have a number of boats moored in it, the bay was only a five minute walk away from the house.

Tommy caught up to walk beside her. "None of them could fit a horse."

"Ah, the horse, of course."

Dad groaned. "No more rhymes, please."

They'd been mercilessly playing old games from their childhood for the entire walk and Dad looked about ready to tap out. But just when she thought he would, he'd get a small, somewhat sad smile on his face, and let them continue. He might make a fuss, but he couldn't hide how happy he was to have both his children with him. And how bittersweet the moment was without Mom.

Tommy nudged her. "I think he means it."

She snorted. This was entirely too easy. "Does anyone want a peanut?"

Dad rolled his eyes in a manner that would've made her fifteen-year-old self proud. "Come on, you two jokers. I know the Philips had a boat moored in Degnen Bay large enough to transport your magical horse. I even know how to sail it, so that's a plus. We'll cut down Gray Road."

Right. No motoring over to Nanaimo.

Taya readjusted the backpack she wore over the dual sheaths and trudged on. They were almost there. "I could use a nap."

"Don't worry. The refreshing swim to the boat will wake you up," Tommy said.

Taya snorted. "I'll take one of the rowboats that are always stashed on the shore, thank you very much. I'm not getting the supplies wet."

"Sure, it has nothing to do with the weather..." Tommy shrugged. "If you're chicken, just say so."

She scowled at her brother. "If you're stupid, just—"

A branch snapped in the forest.

Taya had her swords out, lightning blazing down the sharp blades before her brain registered what stepped out on the road ahead of them.

A large llama blocked their path to the beach access, chewing something in its mouth and looking at them as if they were the most boring things in its day.

“Get out of the fucking way, Darla!” Dad yelled.

Taya sheathed her swords and bit her lip. Darla?

Tommy chuckled before glancing at the hilts of the swords that peaked out past her shoulders. His gaze widened. “Those are dope.”

She flashed him a smile. Her hands drifted to the hilt. No harm in showing them off again. Darla didn’t look ready to move any time soon.

An older man with sagging skin stepped onto the road behind the llama. He was completely naked. In winter.

“Why are you upsetting my girl?” the man yelled out.

“Why are you naked, Bill?” Dad called back.

Bill leaned forward and squinted. “Is that you Knight? Thought the blue blaze got everyone.”

“Not everyone,” Dad replied, though his shoulders dropped. He was thinking about Mom, again. He had to be, because she was, too. They all were.

Sadness clung to the air.

Dad cleared his throat and waved his hand at the llama.

“What is this? Your security llama?”

“Eh? Don’t be ridiculous.” Bill placed his hands on his hips and straightened with zero concern that he thrust his exposed junk in their direction. “She’s my therapy llama.”

Of course. Only on Gabriola Island would they run into a nudist with a therapy llama.

“Well, get her out of the way,” Dad said. “Please.”

Bill scowled and walked to the side of the road. “You know, Knight. You’ve become a real dick. Come on, Darla. Let’s find some better company.”

The llama gave their group a final dismissive look before haughtily turning away. She sashayed over to Bill and the two disappeared into the treeline.

Better company?

“I know, sweetheart,” Bill spoke loud enough for them to hear. “You’d think they’d be nicer to the only other survivor on the island.”

Dad shook his head before walking toward the beach access.

“This way.”

Chapter Thirty-Five C: Have Fun Docking

Taya braced against the mast as Dad rammed the boat into the dock. The impact jarred her. Tommy recovered first, jumping from the boat onto the dock to quickly tie the boat down.

“Smooth, Dad,” Tommy said. “Like butter.”

“That was shit and we all know it.” Dad scowled and waved his hand at her.

Without a word, she lowered the last mast. Despite her need to laugh, Dad did a better job docking a boat under half-sail and without a motor than either of them could manage. It’s not like they grew up practicing these types of maneuvers.

“Any damage? Dad asked.

Tommy shook his head. “Barely tapped it.”

She snorted and grabbed her stuff. “The challenge will be getting back out again.”

“You have more to worry about than sailing,” a new unfamiliar voice called out from the shore.

Huh? Taya turned to the source to find the man wasn’t alone. Eight young men stood at the entrance to the dock with baseball bats and machetes. One held an axe. They wore clothing in various styles, fit and condition. They didn’t need to announce they were earthens.

Their ragtag appearances and the inflection of their words gave them away.

“What...” Tommy straightened from tying off the boat and scratched his head. His confusion faded to a look of pure sadness.

“Oh...”

“Tommy.” Dad picked up her brother’s sword and tossed it.

“Here.”

“We’re not them,” Dad called out. “I know we look like them, but we’re not.”

“And regular humans just run around with swords, huh?” the leader called out “You made a mistake coming here without your army.”

“The only mistake here will be if you attack us.”

Tommy’s expression turned grim. This must’ve been what happened last time.

The boat bobbed in the water, doing little to relax any of them. They stood, frozen, waiting for the chips to fall.

Taya stepped from the boat onto the dock, relishing the more stable footing. She strapped on her sheaths and continued to wait. She’d killed earthens before but had no wish to do so again. There weren’t that many survivors left on either side of the portal.

“My name is Tommy Knight,” her brother said. “I went to high school here. Played for the Islanders.”

The men hesitated, turning to look at one another. Their brows furrowed, they glanced at each other, sharing looks of confusion, then determination.

Ah. It didn't matter whether they were Arkavian or not. Taya, Tommy and their father were a threat, and that's all that mattered to them.

Please, just go away.

The men rushed the dock.

An amateur move. They gave away their advantage in numbers by filing themselves into two rows on a narrow dock.

Taya unsheathed the swords. The blades flared to life, thirsty for blood. The man at the front of the line faltered, nearly tripping over his own feet. His friend shoved him from behind.

“I knew you were lying,” another man in the line yelled out, followed by a string of curses.

The other men join in, bolstering their confidence as they closed the distance to her and her family at the end of the long dock.

They met Taya and Tommy in a clash of metal.

She danced around the men, who swung their weapons wildly. Her brother moved seamlessly around the inexperienced fighters as well, cutting them down. The afternoon sun glinted off their blades.

Dad had joined them on the dock and protected their backs from the few who slipped past them. Three experienced swordsmen against eight novices didn't equal a fair fight.

The battle ended almost as quickly as it began.

Taya flicked blood from her sword and knelt by the nearest body to wipe both of her weapons clean. Though she didn't hesitate, and she understood the alternative was dying, the knowledge didn't lessen the weight pressing down on her shoulders and twisting her guts.

"Such a waste," Dad said, mirroring her actions.

"Is this what happened the last time you came to town?" she asked.

Tommy nodded. Having already cleaned his blade, he sheathed the weapon. "Pretty much. There were more last time and they caught us off guard and in the open. We had to cut our way through to run."

Taya sheathed her swords across her back and looked toward the shed where she'd housed Sugar with plenty of feed and water.

"That horse better be a fucking unicorn that shits gemstones," Dad grumbled.

Chapter Thirty-Six B

Confrontation of the Heart

Taya stared at the crackling fire, trying to force her muscles to relax while Thane took care of the horses. They'd decided to camp here, near the river for the night after a long, hard ride toward the portal. If they kept this pace up, they'd reach it in another two days.

She'd left Dad and Tommy in Nanaimo while she accompanied Thane back to the gate. Her family hadn't been impressed and argued for half a day, but she insisted.

She needed to do this alone.

Despite the privacy and time with Thane through the rest of the day, though, they hadn't spoken. At least not on important stuff. It was as if they both silently agreed to postpone any serious conversations for when they could talk in a more relaxed setting.

Well, here she was, supposedly in a more relaxed setting, tension knotting her muscles, and worry twisting her stomach. The long day gave her time to think about what she wanted, but would she have the guts to say any of it?

Thane finally sat on the log beside her, the warm light of the fire flickering in his gaze and illuminating the sharpness of his features.

He'd appeared lost in thought for most of the day as well, and his brow bunched forward.

"I was never going to kill you." She spoke softly, but her words broke the silence threatening to suffocate them and sounded like a death knell.

Thane hesitated. "I wasn't sure."

She waited for him to elaborate. Just when she thought he wouldn't, he cleared his throat. "I saw your memories," he said. "I've felt your loyalty, and your love for your friends as if they were my own. I felt it all. Your need for revenge, even in a memory, was palpable." His mouth flattened. "Not only was I responsible in part for their deaths, but I kept this information from you. I let you remain ignorant of my involvement and the extent of what bonding entailed while we consummated the bond. I am not innocent. I have wronged you, and I'm sorry. I will spend the rest of my life trying to make amends if you let me."

"You expected me to kill you."

He clenched his jaw and nodded.

"And you came anyway." He'd shown up in Nanaimo in time to save her and her brother. He could've hesitated. He could've avoided her altogether. Instead, he tracked her down, fully expecting to answer for his past crimes with his life.

He nodded again.

“To save me?”

He paused and licked his lips. “You’re everything to me.”

She swallowed and ran her sweaty palms down her dirty leather pants. When he asked for his life as payment for saving her brother’s, he’d given her an out from her promise to her friends. He’d given her a way to make peace with sparing his life even though she’d already decided she couldn’t live in a world without him. “What is it you want, Thane?”

He stared up at the night sky and studied the stars. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed and visibly sorted through the words to use next. “I want to close the gate and stay here with you.”

She waited, not daring to attempt words. Pain clenched her heart. Could it be that simple? Could they find happiness? As soon as he spoke those words, they *felt* right. She wanted that, too.

“If you want me,” he added.

She took a deep breath. If she wanted to hurt him, she could draw this out. She could lie or evade. But they’d already suffered enough. Both of them. “Along with all that other stuff, you’ve seen yourself in my memories. How can you doubt how I feel?”

Something intense flashed through his gaze and he gathered her in his arms. He kissed her and stole her breath away. Her mind

spiralled and her thoughts became a muddled mess, but a persistent worry pinged in her mind.

She tore her mouth from Thane's, panting to catch her breath. "What about your friends? Your family?" She didn't particularly care about Thane's evil father, but he had people he cared about on the other side of the portal.

"I killed my father," Thane explained like it was no big deal. "And assumed control of the House of Jericho."

She blinked at him. "You killed him?"

Thane nodded.

"And you're just telling me now?"

"I was processing. I still am," he said. "I confronted him and he confessed everything. He expected me to accept it and fall in line. Like every time before. I can't believe I didn't see it sooner. Before he died he told me he killed Adrianna's father and sent Julian after you as punishment." Grief clouded his expression. "They'd sent the assassin who interrupted us after the wedding reception."

She nodded. "I figured that out. I think Alexis was meant to distract you."

Thane scowled, but continued. "When I dropped the body at Julian's door, they assumed you'd sent them a warning message. The javelin arrow that almost killed me was meant for you, too. After the

failed attempts, they decided to wait until they could get you alone. My arrogance and willful ignorance almost killed you.”

She cupped his square jaw, his stubble rough against her fingers. “You’re not responsible for their actions.”

He reached up and gently wrapped his hand around hers, pulling it from his face. “I have no wish to remain in a broken world. I want to build a new one with you.”

“Here?” How could he want to give up everything he had in Arkavia to struggle for existence here? No wealth. No status. No fucking castle. Would he be happy in this mundane world?

“You have asked me more than once what I want,” he said. “But what do you want? Will you have me?”

She licked her dry lips. “Yes.”

He leaned forward.

Before she got lost in his dizzying kiss, she needed to tell him something else. “If you close that gate, you will likely lose access to your power. I will lose my power. It happened to my ancestor.”

He shrugged. “Then I won’t be a Tarka, and neither will you.”

“What about our bond?”

His gaze flashed. “Our bond will remain. Nothing can break it. Not even a closed gate. It is more than magic now. It is who we are.”

His words comforted her. Now that the bond had settled in place, the idea of losing it was almost worth closing the gate from the other side and staying on Arkavia. Almost. One thought of her brother or dad quelled that notion.

“And your friends?”

“*Our* friends are already on their way here.”

If she had been drinking anything, she would’ve sprayed it out over the fire or choked on it. “W...what?”

“I left my cousin and the inner circle with instructions to pack up and follow.”

“As an order?” She cringed, feeling icky just for asking the question. Thane didn’t operate like that.

He narrowed his eyes. “As a choice. They all accepted. None of us are disillusioned with the current state of affairs. Arkavia is dying. The leaching has slowly poisoned our world. The House system is a broken, antiquated establishment that is falling apart. Closing the gate won’t condemn everyone on that side to death, but it will ensure our safety here. We have the opportunity to start something new and I’m not the only one thrilled with the idea. I wish we could scour the land and save everyone, but I’m not some kind of hero. I’m not willing to sacrifice you to save the world. I will shut the portal to save you. And us. Your family. Those I care about most.”

She squeezed his hand, not quite sure words would work for her right now.

“I love you, Taya. You’re my redemption. You’re the light that staves off the darkness. Though I had wealth, fame and power, I used to feel so alone in my world. It took a trip to yours to find what I’ve been missing all this time.” He slipped his hand to the back of her neck, tangling his fingers in her hair.

She could answer with some corny line about how he completed her. She could make a joke to try to lighten the mood. Instead, she slid onto his lap to straddle him, the campfire heating her back. “I love you, too.”

They still had a lot to say to each other, but the rest of the night they didn’t speak with words. Instead, Thane proved how much he loved her with his teeth, and tongue and lips, with his body pressed to hers. And she lapped it up, enjoying and responding to every second of it. For Thane was the light to her darkness, too. He kept her grounded and her nightmares at bay. He might think he wasn’t a hero, but he had the heart of one. And it belonged to her.

New Epilogue

Taya sat on Sugar and glared at the portal. Thane drew up beside her on Hades and stopped. They sat in silence, letting the sounds of the forest wash over them. Time stretched, Thane apparently as lost to his thoughts as she was.

Finally, Taya slipped from the saddle and walked toward the gate. Gravel crunched under her boots. Thane mirrored her actions and approached. His armour clanking with each step and glinting under the sun.

“They’re not here yet,” she said, though Thane could very well see this for himself.

“We should make camp.”

“You don’t think anything bad happened to them, do you?”

She bit her lip, unease clawing at her stomach.

Thane turned to face her, his large hands slipping to each side of her face. “It would take a lot to bring my team down. Besides, packing up a house isn’t a fast process.”

She shuffled her feet, turning up dust from the dry ground. She didn’t like the idea of the others still on the Arkavian side, but she also didn’t relish the thought of going back through the portal to get

them. She would, of course. She wouldn't hesitate. But that didn't make travelling to Arkavia one more time any more palpable.

"Let me take your mind off it." Thane's mouth quirked before he brought his mouth down to hers. God, he could kiss. He could take all her worries away with the flick of his tongue, and create an inferno burning low inside her. She grabbed his armour and pulled on the straps.

"Um, can you guys maybe hold off on all that lovey-dovey crap until later?" Lokni's voice sent Taya jumping from Thane's arms and reaching for her blade.

"Wha—?" She spun to face Lokni, Soka, Axel, Bertrand and Adrianna.

They grinned at her.

She dropped her hand from the pommel of her sword. "What took you so long?"

"It takes time to defect from our homeland to follow our exalted master," Soka said.

"Deflecting isn't quite the right word," Adrianna chimed in. "There's no house left to defect from. I want to be with my friends...and..."

Come on, say it.

She drew herself up in the saddle. “And I want to be with Lokni.”

Wide smiles erupted across everyone’s faces. Lokni swung his arm over Adrianna’s shoulder and leaned over for a kiss.

“Ugh.” Axel looked away.

Bertrand scowled.

Soka shook his head and tugged on the supply mule’s reins. The beast ambled forward, bumping into Lokni’s horse. Lokni drew back, and straightened in his saddle.

“About time,” Taya said. Though she knew Adrianna had her reasons for keeping silent about her affair with someone not from Arkavian aristocracy, she didn’t need to maintain the lie with them. And not here. Lane couldn’t punish her.

“They’re all accounted for,” Taya peered at the group before turning to Thane. “Should we do this now or wait to see if any one follows?”

Axel slapped Thane on the back. “We’ll go ahead and make camp.”

“Let’s get it over with,” Thane said. “I don’t particularly like the idea of any one following.”

“There might be Arkavians on this side of the portal still. We’d be trapping them here,” she said.

Thane nodded. “We’ll have to deal with them as they come, I guess. I don’t think there will ever be a perfect time to close the portal, but I feel the longer we delay, the more likely something or someone will try to prevent it.” His gaze blazed. “I won’t let anything stand between us.”

“Are you sure? If you close the gate and there’s no more magic, you’ll leave yourself vulnerable?” The guy struggled to cross bridges for fuck’s sake.

He ran his hands up and down her arms, rubbing her woolen shirt against her skin. “I’m more than my magic, Taya. I never let it define me like my brother and father. You of all people should know that.”

She snapped her mouth shut and folded her arms over her chest.

He leaned forward, armour creaking. “Or do you only want me for my magic?”

A smile tugged at her lips, but she refused to let him derail her from her questions. “What about my swords?”

“They probably won’t shoot lightning anymore, but a sharp blade is a sharp blade and you’ll still be deadly with them if need be.”

She nodded, but a small pain punched her in the gut. Losing the ability to merge with her swords was a huge personal loss, but a

small price to pay for closing the portal and saving Earth from the Arkavian locusts. “What about next time?”

“What next time?”

“The next time evil Arkavians figure out how to open a portal to Earth?”

“It took us a hundred years to reopen this one.”

“What if?” She dropped her arms.

“We won’t let history repeat itself.” He took her hand and squeezed. “Everyone involved with opening this gate, aside from myself, is dead. I destroyed the notes on Earth’s location. Arkavia is a dying realm. Closing the gate will cut off the leaching, but also the energy and supply chain. If they don’t figure out a way to open another gate to another realm, there might not be anything left to fear.”

They turned to the portal together. Thane held out his free hand and pulled his magic. His power tugged on the bond. Without hesitation, she opened herself, allowing her magic to flow to Thane. The blue light of the portal flickered and faded, dimming gradually until it snuffed out.

And just like that, it was gone. A mere shimmer in the air marking the location where a portal to a parallel universe had once stood.

“But what if?” she repeated, reaching out internally for the reassuring presence of the link that bound them together. Awareness of Thane pulsed in her mind and relief swept through her.

Thane took her other hand and brought them both to his face to kiss her knuckles. “If they ever figure out how to reform a portal to Earth, we’ll be ready for them.”

His words held ice and deadly promise for their enemies, but they sent warmth through her body. She believed every word.

If the Arkavians ever came back, they’d regret it.

She drew the twin blades of Raiden. At first they did nothing. They flickered, the light sputtering. Then, like the hope in her heart, the blue light flared to life.

~The End~

Arkavian Upper Houses



Jericho

House of the Moon

Lane, Head of House
Julian
Thane
Adrianna



Raiden

House of Lightning

Corentine (deceased)
Gale, Head of House
Elias (deceased)



Auroris

House of the Sun

Ayden (deceased)
Aries, Head of House
Alexis



Draco

House of Constellations



Edur

House of Snow

Maris (deceased)



Ramiel

House of Thunder



Ghost

The Ghost House

Aello (deceased)
Izar (deceased)

ARKAVIAN HOUSES

