

Kakri: A Birthright Secrets Story

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DEDICATION

To my husband and son for being the constant voices of support in the chaos that is writing a story and wearing so many hats. Thanks to the both of you for giving me the time to do what I need to do for this dream.

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CHAPTER 1

Liz, soon to be Queen of Segenny, stormed through the halls of the palace, blind to where she was going. The insufferable fools she had just left had pushed her too far, causing her to walk out of the meetings completely. Whether they remained, waiting for her once she felt like returning she didn't care. She didn't even know if she would return. The same issue kept being brought up, some leaders, mostly those who found themselves able to take up the mantle for the first time and had arranged the meeting in the first place. They kept requesting her to order the official size of cities, towns and villages that had survived Durj down by half and force those in the newly abandoned sections to follow them. The villages would be left for any foreseeable future like that as the people moved; it was something she just couldn't justify or see the reason for ordering in the first place.

What she could understand was their desire to have something to call their own and have places in this new world, but how they were going about it was all wrong. They wanted these people to follow them into the unknown, to areas where information had been lost as to what might lie there and live their lives. Why force them into that adventure when plenty would probably seek the same thing? After all, the thrill would be enough to draw most since who knew what fortunes could await. This lesson she had learned well given her own journey into the unknown. Now she lived in a palace and was set to rule over an entire country. Their terms were ridiculous so she had declined to issue the orders, giving them the advice of seeking

volunteers among those who lost everything to settle new places.

The matter refused to drop however. Every topic, whether it was simply what projects were being done first, or making sure towns had enough supplies like food, it followed. It was often offered as a partial solution, especially on the subject of food and other needs that would maybe benefit from a lesser population. In the end she had walked out of the meeting tired of not having anything productive done. Turning a corner into a still unused room she slammed the door behind her sending a cascade of dust down to the floor in her wake. The end of her skirt was becoming dirty as she went but she didn't care. Walking over to the window and she rested her forehead against it sighing, staring out at the grounds below where a heavy rain fell from a dark grey sky and lightning streaked overhead.

Fitting, she thought bitterly staring at it. She turned so her back was against the window and looked up toward the ceiling. *They simply will not listen to me, and I cannot think of a way to make them do it. I was right when I told Kellin I was not cut out to be a ruler. I should turn this over to someone like my mother who would be able to make it work. Try as I might, I do not think this is a promise I can fulfill.*

“Then make them listen,” a quiet voice broke the silence. Liz whirled around to see a woman leaning against the wall a few windows over. “Giving up already does not seem like you.”

Liz felt along the window's edge for anything she could use to defend herself, cursing that she didn't have something on her before now. Her hands met a piece of metal she could break off in a decent chunk. Concentrating, she called on her ability, bringing the newly formed weapons up and well into view of the woman. The woman's eyes widened but she smiled as though bemused at her actions. The eyes were a vivid sky blue that almost seemed to glow in the dim light. They struck Liz as even more exotic than any Eiren's she had seen and more unnerving than her own. She took a step forward despite Liz having weapons trained on her. The light from the storm outside fell on her Liz saw that her hair and gown seemed to be almost constantly in motion. It was like a breeze or strong draft was blowing through the room though there was none Liz could feel. Both gown and hair were as white as the snow that was atop the mountains around Brookcavern, floating around her body. “Who are you?” Liz asked shifting the daggers to warn off further approach.

The woman laughed heartily. “I am Kakri, and I suppose your

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heart isn't completely lost yet. That's good, very good. That means there is still a chance to stop you from being stupid and ending your reign before it has even begun."

"How did you know what I was thinking of doing?"

"I know who you are, Cianien, daughter of Essarnis and Asirran. You are heir to the realm and throne of Segennya. In other words the heir to *my* realm. Or do you prefer Liz these days?" Kakri laughed at her dumbstruck expression. "I really must speak with your mother after this. You don't know who I am at all. Seriously, is this any way to have the future Queen of Segennya greet the Goddess of her family's House and country?"

Liz looked around frantically blushing, almost dropping her weapons. "I should bow or something now, I think."

Kakri looked about to double over in laughter, the sheer material of her gown blowing around even more. "Don't worry this time young one; I'll let it pass this time. Now, to business," she collected herself, clapping her hands causing the windows to rattle as the sound echoed throughout the room. "Oops, sorry about that." Her expression hardened a bit, "As you might have suspected, I do not like what I have been observing here."

"What do you mean?"

"Besides the thoughts of quitting, I am tired of you letting them walk all over you! Since I doubt you will listen to the mortals you call your friends and family, I will step in now to knock some sense in you. Stop thinking like Cianien, unsure heir or Liz of Lower Quarter, who was best at taking orders already! I know that you have it in you," her voice rose to sound like a low fierce wind blowing. "Give them a piece of who you really are! Tell them to shove off on this idiotic plan and thought of theirs, to just forget it like you told them to already!"

"That is easier said than done, I cannot upset those who will have a role in what will happen with my court." Liz sighed. "This is why I did not want this job in the first place! Too many constricting things, too many games to play and I knew my past would be used against me."

"Then do not let it! Who will lead if you do not?"

Liz shrugged, "Maybe my mother, or someone else the leaders will find fitting. Someone will be found though."

"How are you so sure?"

“Because that was what would have happened had I not agreed in the first place to this. I doubt my mother would want the title herself anymore, without my father, since it was mainly through him she was Queen here.”

“Exactly!” Kakri shouted. “It was through him, and I tell you what will happen if you do let them bully you out of position. The same thing that has happened for the last half a century, you mortals will not learn after all. Unless there is someone in that position who has lived through it as you have, and is someone who has not been a leader but lead. It is only because you are set to rule I can even appear before you anyway. Well, actually it’s rather complicated as to why it happened and something for another time. Seriously though, are you going to let them bully you out and give up?”

Liz lowered her daggers completely, “Truly you cannot be serious, you are a Goddess, and so are your siblings.” Kakri nodded a dramatic tragic expression across her face. “And you mean to tell me, that you came all this way to simply tell me to simply deal with it.”

Kakri grinned, “Yeah that pretty much covers it. I also came to be polite before meddling in things too much; it gets dull in my realm. I’ll be popping in from time to time, so behave yourself. Sometimes you need someone besides your close friends and family to give you perspective.” A knock came from the door, and both women heard Kellin call for Liz. “Sounds like we have company, so I’ll be off, unless you have the mind to keep considering this insane idea seriously and need my presence more.”

“No, but I will not stop thinking it from time to time,” Liz smiled. “Still do not have any idea how to stop them from raising this issue though, and it will stop me from doing anything it seems.”

“Tell them,” Kakri replied. “You rule here and it is as simple as that. I noticed you didn’t fight me when I said you were to keep ruling.”

“Even someone of my education has enough common sense to know better than to fight a Goddess on something like this.”

“Smart girl, if only more were like you.” Kakri pointed at a window which opened. Her body faded away carried on a breeze. “Now put those smarts to work.”

Liz stood in the newly empty room as the window banged shut once more for several moments. *Like it or not, it appears that I am stuck, and now apparently at the whim of the Gods as well.* She shook her head,

calling out to Kellin as she walked to the door. *It will keep life interesting to say the least.*

Without saying much more, she reentered the hallway and started walking back to the meeting room, Kelling falling in step behind her.

“So what happened that took you so long to answer me?”

Liz remained silent picking up her pace slightly as she and the entourage behind her rounded a corner and sped down a long corridor. Reaching the doors, she didn’t wait for the footmen to open them but instead flung them open with all her might. Striding in she took in the shocked looks all around the table then smirked as she retook her seat.

“Where were we ladies and gentlemen?”

“Discussing the food problem which we offered a solution to ...”

Liz raised a hand causing him to go silent. “Ahh yes, well, let me repeat for what is going to be the last time, we will not be doing that plan. There is no reason to draw more boundaries and force families that have lived where they have lived for decades out of their homes. Now,” she glared at them as a couple of them opened their mouths a couple times, as though they wanted to protest. “Let me be clear on this and if I hear anything else on this I will not allow you into this room for a long, long time. Seek out those who only share your vision to find new horizons, chances are given the situation you will have plenty of volunteers. Anything else is unacceptable. Understood?”

The men around the table nodded, some gulping at the tone of her voice. “Now let us carry on with what projects are being done before the cold sets in and we are forced to limit what can be done.” She shuffled some of the parchment on the table until she found the ones she wanted. She motioned for them to take their seats.

The meeting went by with little problems after that, in they seemed much more eager to help in any way possible before the cold was on them fully. Those who had been pressing for people to join them in their new ventures in exploring promised to send back resources to assist as they were uncovered. Liz dismissed them smiling, almost tempted to say, “Now was that so hard?” She restrained herself though, choosing to simply bask a bit in this small victory in silence, feeling confident on things for the first time in a

long time. Kellin hung back as the last of them left the room, gesturing for the door to be shut as the last passed through it.

“Okay, what gives Liz?”

Liz blinked in her seat, her face falling slightly. “I thought it went rather well. All it took was me storming off to get what I wanted.”

“That’s just it; you went from hesitant woman, to all in charge leader in a matter of something like a quarter hour. When you led us back you were all quiet then just gave them what they probably deserved but still.”

“I had a unique... perspective given to me in that time.” She glanced around as though debating elaborating more. “Let us go down the hall to my chambers and I will tell you everything.”

Kellin looked doubtful but gestured for her to lead on. At the very least this would be an interesting discussion.

CHAPTER 2

Kakri floated down to land upon on of the top parapet of the palace, invisible to mortal eyes. Despite the odd and brief nature of their conversation, she rather liked Segenny's newest ruler. The goddess lifted her head and listened to the breeze as it whistled past, its tidings were the same to her ears, change, but it was the occasional tones that interested her. Today it had hints of secrets and danger, faint but they chilled her to her incorporeal bones. She tried to push the wind for more answers, her efforts caused it gust, tossing the bare tree branches around in a frenzy of movement. Frowning after several minutes of the constant wind she released her hold on it allowing it to come and go in more natural patterns but not before her temper sparked and forced a miniature gale. A couple of frail branches fell on the streets and a couple houses causing the occupants to rush out, and the few people who were braving the temperatures to look up worried.

Kakri winced at their looks but turned away and launched herself east over the forests that spanned the distance, occasionally dotted with villages or clearings. She banked eventually to south to skirt the Boradi Mountain range and land upon one of its tallest peaks. She had mostly shaken that feeling in her stomach in her trip, as she stood and listened to what the wind had to say once more. It still warned of something hidden, but refused stubbornly to enlighten her. *Perhaps it is simply this place getting used to dealing with us again and I am simply anxious to have a new leader to train.* Satisfied with that conclusion she simply decided to sit on the mountain top and look over the

landscape. So much had changed and yet was ageless since she last graced this land. *Enough of this for now, time to go home.* Stretching she gazed at a sight only for her and those like her, a spectacular lightshow dancing on the horizon. It was somewhat a pity mortals couldn't see the entrance into her world she often thought. Grinning, she pulled one of her hands to be outstretched behind her and popped up in the air to catch another gust of wind soaring toward the light. As she got closer, the dance of colors became a swirling vortex that appeared quite turbulent. Kakri crossed the threshold unafraid, and blinked as her view changed and her eyes needed to get used to this new realm. The colors were clearer, more vivid here and auras of life faintly flared up everywhere, not easy to eyes coming from the muted mortal realm.

Rising high above the trees, she could just make out a few of the more earthy Gods wandering about their vast homes, carved out of mountains that almost mirrored the ones she just left. A loud rumble filled the air as rocks tumbled toward the base from one side of one of these homes causing Kakri to smile.

Are they ever satisfied with how they look? she wondered. To her right, she could see in the distance the massive sea spreading out across the horizon. Her destination was neither of these areas; the sky was her domain and hers alone. None of the others, regardless of the belief system that had helped shape their power shared her love of the sky. Soaring through it she skimmed along the clouds, moisture gathering on the hem of her gown until she reached her home which was a large cloud palace. It rose high above her head as she landed on the walkway that was lined by tall columns, which supported the roof that provided necessary shade being this close to the sunlight. Despite being made of the cloud the structure was quite solid, as she took a step forward she saw a couple sprites that attended her rushing up. Instead of making them walk the whole way she quickened her pace to meet them in the middle.

"Mistress," one greeted, its voice was a squeak as they bowed low. "Lord Ahiel has been waiting."

"Where is he?"

"In the main garden."

With a wave of her hand she sent them back about their duties and to leave her alone as she went to see what Ahiel wanted. She stuck to the outside paths of her home, wanting to take as much time

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as possible while she thought over what brought him here this soon after her return. She squinted as the sun glared off a reflecting pool and hit her eyes. *It is almost as though he was waiting for me, but why? Usually if someone wishes to meet with me they simply ask to do it in the forest below or in their homes, not wanting to make the trip up here. It must be special if he came all this way.*

Kakri rounded a corner and went through an open corridor that would lead her to the garden. Several more sprites wandered about their duties here taking a moment to bow to her as she passed, but she paid them no attention. It was something she knew she would have to rectify later as several scurried away and out of sight so that none of them thought they had done something to displease her that caused her silence. Eventually the passage opened up. Several trees and bushes lined clear, cloudy paths rising high with lush green or blue foliage. Flowers dotted the landscape among the trees, and at the center of the garden a waterfall rushed to the earth coming over the wall from high above. The water landed into a rapid creek that flowed until it disappeared into the cloud as it reached the other side's foundation. A small sitting area was placed near this creek with two chairs next to a small table which had a good size pitcher of pink liquid and two glass goblets resting on it. A man in long black robes sat in one of the chairs sipping from one. The robe seemed to be billowing smoke though nothing appeared to be on fire. He physically appeared Eiren but was more muscular than their usual build with dark skin that was almost as black as his robes; most notably he had their characteristic silver-grey eyes.

"Lord Ahiel," Kakri greeted as she approached, sitting across from him.

Ahiel gave her a glance and set his glass upon the table. "Lady Kakri, where might you have been?"

Kakri sighed inwardly. "Ravenwood, if you must know."

"Ravenwood?" he repeated. "Why in the realms were you there?"

Kakri's expression deepened to a scowl and her eyes turned a stormy blue-grey. "I was peeking in on Segennya's newest ruler. Doesn't hurt for the realm's Goddess to know who they are dealing with now does it?"

He laughed, causing his robes to billow with the movement and almost obscure him from sight. "Why bother? She'll be gone soon

enough like the rest. Do what the rest of us have done at this point and let them all be.”

A gust of wind blew up causing the trees around the two gods to toss and creak with the force. “This time is very different than those. Even you felt the pull of her on your charges.” She poured herself some of the liquid from the pitcher. The juice was sweet in sharp contrast to her rather sour mood. “Never before have any of us felt that, which leads me to belief that the cycle is finally broken and we would do best to be a part of this new era, than apart like we have been.”

Lord Ahiel took a dainty sip of his drink pondering her words. “I will give you that; we all did feel that pull which still unnerves me. Almost makes me think she has too much sway. Old emotions though Kakri, they still run high. Do not get your hopes up that she will bring back the golden age you want for your realm, or that her reign will even come close to her father’s.”

“Oh I’m looking at it realistically. There are still many challenges for her. Too many really, I can’t realistically handle them myself since it would make her a weak ruler.”

“Yes, like overcoming her lack of education.” He smiled at her jolt. “My charges have been raving about it ever since it became official and they stood behind her at the insistence of their queen. I know partly that you had to go reassure her just now. Add to this that she does not have the full power her ancestors had, with all their resources. She is ruling a beat up country that is torn with little chance of repair.”

“That’s an old legend, even to us.” Kakri protested. “Or should I say that it’s lost to even us so why hold that against her. As for the other, it’s easily fixed, with our example and with time.”

“You are getting caught up in it Kakri. Leave morals to mortals. She will be strong or weak without your meddling. Act like a goddess!”

“Isn’t caring acting like one?”

Ahiel’s eyebrow shot up. “There is care and then there is handholding, mortals have to do what they will do. You cannot be at her beck and call like I have a feeling you are going to put yourself in position to be. Essarnis did not rely on you and you were almost in a similar state.”

Kakri rose, her fists clenched at her side. “Is this why you came;

to lecture me on how to handle my realm and tease old legends?”

“Not at all, I simply know you are weaker when it comes to them. My dear, our powers easily display your emotions.” He gave a sly glance at the still tossing trees around them. “You also distance yourself from your other charges, the Eire.”

“It is partly their fault what happened did so as badly as it did! You have had little to do with them as well.”

He shrugged, “They were protecting themselves, and it was a wise move.”

“That depends, Segennya just had half a century in the dark ages because of it. I’m surprised really they allowed the old bloodline to rule.”

“They almost did not, had the humans not wanted it they probably would have championed themselves to provide a suitable one. Do not think that this means they will not later. If the current ruler proves to trying of their patience or just unpopular they might. One called Triok is the head of that movement.”

Kakri sighed and fell back into her chair. “She’s doomed then, she already pissed off Triok. What will it take to prove that though?”

Ahiel grinned, “I think I suggested something that will suit. It has not dawned on them yet what it is, but it has kept them quiet for now.”

“What is it?”

“That lost resource might make them silent forever.”

“Didn’t we already discuss this? It is lost even to us.”

“And it will be an amusing game. After all, after it was lost it all went to the Underworld. Makes one wonder if it might be joined somehow, does it not?”

“We’re gods, do we even believe in legends and superstitions?”

“Legends yes, because they usually have a basis in reality.”

“That we usually create.”

“As far as superstitions our charges believe them, so it pays to at least humor them.”

“So what, are they one day going to charge her with finding it?”

“I do not know. What they do with the suggestion is up to them and it will be entertaining to watch. I wonder if they will ever guess it was me who suggested it and remember how I love my games.”

“Yet you’re still hoping they won’t so you get a show,” She huffed in a rather undignified way. “And you wonder why I meddle; I

have the rest of you doing it unintentionally and intentionally. Mostly intentionally.”

“It is not like they will remember whatever it is, and someone like their Queen will talk them out of it. I was simply saying that was the suggestion I planted. A true heir of Essarnis’s line should have no problem finding it. He simply never looked.”

“He didn’t need it! He led the hundred year peace! Honestly, you lecture me on not meddling or getting too involved and then you tell me you suggested this impossible task for keeping the peace down there. What do you want truly?”

“Just ignore it for now. They are mortals and Eiren to boot; they do not take legends so seriously now. So how is your new ruler anyway?” He changed the subject to not risk upsetting her more.

“She is uncertain and admittedly was about to throw in everything due to idiocy but she was easy to dissuade there. Her heart is in the right place but she needs to up her confidence.”

“A bit concerning though,” Ahiel rumbled.

“She’ll manage eventually. It’s still pretty new to all of us.”

“Do not get your hopes up is all I still say,” Ahiel looked up at the sky which was darkening. “Curse the season, daylight never lasts as long as one likes now.”

“True,” Kakri watched him rise. “At least the weather’s mild here.”

“A small blessing. Stay in our realm Kakri, we have no place in theirs now.” Ahiel shook out his robes.

“Says the god who is meddling worse than I am. Are we so different except intent?”

“Maybe I will have some of the other Goddess look in on you. You live alone up here, isolated. Maybe that will keep you out of trouble.”

“Please don’t. We socialize enough, but there’s only so much gossip you can take when it’s all about those who live here.”

Ahiel opened his mouth and then closed it again. “Goodbye Kakri, I will see you soon.”

“Bye, Ahiel.”

Kakri watched him walk out of her home led by one of her sprites, then flopped back a bit in the chair listening to the sound of the water. She wasn’t sure exactly what he meant for her to do with that information of his, almost a dare to her new champion. There

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was something else at play with this treasure quest; she knew it, could feel it in her core. Kakri sighed and drank from her goblet as birds chirped to one another overhead. He was right she had grown isolated, before being simply content to be near the sky and now living among it and rarely leaving except for rare times. The others had grown dull in her eyes, their isolation finally getting the best of her with the same stories told at gatherings. Her sprites, who never left her home, were more entertaining. They at least had different viewpoints.

This task though, despite him insisting that nothing will come of it I know better. Polishing off her drink, she rose from her chair and called for one of the sprites to bring her any information on her House's resources. She walked through the corridors until she reached her private workspace where none but her most trusted were allowed to disturb her. Looking at the table she saw a pile of scrolls and books already accumulating with several sprites already on the way to get more. *Well Ahiel you wanted to keep me out of trouble a few days, this will buy you at least a couple.* Grinning her thanks at them she grabbed the top book and set to work.

Kakri found her research interrupted with an outing not even a week after talking to Ahiel and strolling through a sundrenched field filled with wildflowers and tall grass. Around her were her companions, goddesses all, with their attendants. She had the least with just one. The goddesses were twittering and chatting away at some antic someone had done at one of their gatherings as they walked. Kakri looked up at the sun, wanting the light to fade only to scowl as her attending sprite moved the umbrella one of the others had given it to shade her into place. Lowering her face she slyly glanced around and slid closer to the center of the group hoping to avoid the shade only to stumble into one of her companions.

"Oh Kakri," the goddess smiled helping to steady her as the Kakri's sprite took her mistress's other side. "You would do better to simply stay in the shade than these antics. We still have quite a way to go until we reach the site of our picnic; it will get quite warm for your skin tone and hair color."

Kakri gaped as she was released to her own legs once more. "We don't get warm or burn like mortals. I spend all day in the sun at home if I don't have anything better to do, Eirean."

Eirean laughed and walked away to where the others waited for the two goddesses. Kakri followed but kept a distance from both the offending umbrella and train that had been responsible for her stumble. Eirean had a unique place among the gods, like Kakri herself she belonged to two worlds. She took her shape from just one however, favoring Eiren silver-grey eyes and golden hair. Looks weren't the only thing she borrowed from them, she had an oddly Eiren way of things, everything had a protocol which was why she was subtly hinting for Kakri spotted her motioning for her to be shaded once more. Lona was a lot like her as well in favoring Eiren things, frowning as Kakri waved the offending item off again. While the attendants respected the other goddesses, they would always listen to their own masters first and foremost.

“So Kakri,” another goddess bounded over and grabbed her arm pulling her close. “What has kept you away these past weeks?”

Lepah was one of two who solely represented humans along with Apoxas, who towered over the rest of them. Even now she could see Apoxas looking over the top of Lepah's head on the other side of her waiting for the answer as well since she was never too far away. They even shared one of the mountain homes close to the others, though they had claimed a peak all their own. While by rights they should act more the mortals in their care, but they –like any younger siblings- took after the older ones, well except for Kakri.

“I've been busy.”

“Doing what? What could be so important in that cloud of yours?”

“If you must know I'm planning on making a new cream to keep the skin moist and have to research it, keeps the skin eternally youthful.”

“Really?” Lepah looked interested.

“You really must remember their ages Kakri, they do not quite grasp your sarcasm yet,” Lona admonished. “She was joking, dear,” she told Lepah.

“So what were you really doing?” Eirean asked. “I know you have not gone into the mortal realms, but still it has been too quiet from you.”

Kakri squirmed in the center of the group noticing that they now surrounded her as meadow turned back to wood. *That bastard Abiel, what did he tell them to get them to ask me on this outing?*

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“Simply a bit of research, I didn’t joke on that. I’ve been looking into some mythology.”

“We are mythology, why look at it?” Apoxas asked. “That’s for humans anyway.”

“For once the more warrior minded of us has a point,” Lona said. “What has brought this on? Planning on helping that new ruler in Segennya or something else?”

Kakri looked around frantically at something, for a distraction she saw a large pool of water that might suit. “Why don’t we have our picnic here, it’s rather lovely. Or did you have your heart set on the other place?”

The others looked in consideration. “It is perfect!” agreed Lepah at last.

“It will suit rather well,” Eirean gestured to the attendants to set to work. Umbrellas came down and the goddesses walked over the pool and dipped their feet inside to cool them. “Oh look,” she smiled grimly. “They are at it again.”

“What is it?” Kakri asked peering at her feet wishing she could see what Eirean saw.

“Oh nothing much unusual, some humans getting in a fit about having to abide by a ruler who is a complete upstart and holds them accountable to her instead of leaving them be. She actually might have to send the royal guard since I doubt they will stop.” Her eyes narrowed as she considered whatever images the pool was giving her. “Curious. They appear to not have taken the bait but have at the same time. Well that will be entertaining to watch.” She lifted her head up and smiled. “At least we should have some entertainment, more than we have had for a good time.”

“Really? I thought last year was quite lively though,” Apoxas protested. “We’ve only had a few exciting years overall.”

“So what did you see, sister?” Lona asked folding her arms across her chest.

“Oh nothing that concerns us here, it will play out as it will and for the better without our further involvement.”

A chill ran down Kakri’s spine. She couldn’t press more since their attendants motioned for them to come over to the blanket that was spread across the ground. A clear wine was poured that was rather sweet, as they sat on the blanket around platters of dainty sandwiches, fruit and vegetables. They ate in silence until Kakri

noticed Lona staring at her rather smugly. “What is it?”

“You did not think, sister dear; that we forgot you never told us what you were researching into myths for did you?”

“That’s right,” Lepah cried. “Tell us!”

“I was really into some silly myths that I was told the other day about. Since we have a bit more to do in the mortal realm, I decided to look them up since I had little else to do.” She grinned widely at them, hoping they wouldn’t call the lie.

“When did you suddenly become interested in myths anyway Kakri?” Apoxas asked between bites. “Seemed you were always one of the more practical ones around here.”

“It’s the humans, let me tell you,” Lepah said. “She’s been visiting them according to Ahiel.”

“That is what he told us as well. Why do they fascinate you? In your personal realm they change so often seems you would be more inclined to our other charges that live there or simply to doing what you want here.” Eirean wondered, seemingly genuinely curious on the matter.

“To be honest I think he’s up to one of his tricks,” Kakri said trying to skirt the issue but be direct at the same time, so that they would give her information if they had any. “Doubt anything will come of it, but always best to be safe when dealing with the god that is as shifty as our brother can be.”

“True,” Lona agreed, taking another sandwich, wrinkled her nose, and then handed it over to her attendant to remove the crusts from the bread. “I would not puzzle over it though.”

“Wise advice as usual,” Kakri replied. “I’m not though. That’s why I felt fine going on this outing. Must say, it has been nice, almost tripping over Eirean’s gown aside that is.”

Her eyes met Eirean’s, and she felt that shiver again. *She’s not telling us something; whether it’s something she saw, what Ahiel told her or both I don’t know.* She quickly pulled her gaze away as topics returned to the usual ones of outing behaviors and the latest happenings of the other gods. She returned home as soon as she could and spent agonizing hours waiting for enough time to pass to quickly slip unnoticed as possible to the mortal realms again.

The wind’s messages, Ahiel’s visitation and a somewhat friendly warning and now this with Eirean’s visions and knowing more than she should. Something else is happening, and I need to be at the heart to find out what

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threatens this future that's so promising now if it has time to take root and soar. My attendants will keep the others at bay for a while at least if they come calling, my mostly normal appearance will help that stay a long time away. She swiftly skipped from cloud to cloud over the now snow covered landscape, glad that her form allowed her to avoid sight by anyone's eyes meant that cold was not a bother to her. Landing in the courtyard of the palace, she saw only a few guards about, but she didn't return to her usual form. Lifting a hand, the wind swirled around her for a moment causing them to tighten their cloaks around their bodies, and the nearest door opened allowing her inside. Using memories long, long gone, she went to the most logical place for a ruler to be this early in the evening despite the darkness outside; the main hall. Inside the room was filled with people- Eiren, human, Uranysian and Inarnian alike all in their finest though there were plenty that couldn't be above merchants present. She approved of the choice to allow them inside to this gathering though she saw several upturned noses as she wove through the crowd to seek out Liz.

She found the woman in question sitting on the throne chatting to a few nobles in a gown of green. A crown rested on her head gleaming in the light, adorned with a modest amount of jewels. *She made it, Kakri beamed at the pleasure of it all. I hope you can see this Essarnis, your House- our House- back on the throne. She takes after you not stopping even when all sense says otherwise.* Off to the side of the new Queen she saw Essarnis's wife and the man she recognized as his Captain, chatting to a woman with bright red hair who was keeping an eye on a shorter woman next to her with blonde hair and a patched up eye. *How much time has passed I wonder since I last was here...*

Liz rose, drawing her gaze back to her and walked to the edge of the dais as the last of the line waiting to see her walked away. The room turned to face their new ruler. "My friends," she began, raising the glass in her hand at them. "At long last, we see this promise fulfilled, that the throne be filled by one who cares for the land. We can fully look to the future with Durj's trial past us at last. Never again will we have to worry about him, and we dealt what remains of his movement, a serious blow with his sentence of life alone in Dalynus." She took a breath as there was a smattering of applause at this news. "We still have a long way to go until we become what we want, to realize our full potential. But we are not alone in realizing this anymore; all races of Segennya have come together again to be

one and work toward this common goal.” She raised her glass higher. “Tonight is a night of celebration, on how far we have come and to look ahead. To our future!”

Murmurs came from all over the hall echoing her sentiments. As Liz retreated back to the throne Kakri decided it was time to make herself known. Remaining invisible to sight she whispered in her ear, “Why don’t you take a break out on the balcony?”

Liz’s eyes widened but she nodded, her movement barely noticeable except to Kakri, handing the glass to the woman with the patched up eye. “I need a breath of fresh air and a moment alone,” she smiled at the woman. “If anyone asks I will just be a moment.”

Kakri fell in step beside the new ruler as she made her way across the window. She let Liz open the door to not startle a court she was sure to be uneasy already with her antics though it was tempting. Once the door shut behind them again she became visible causing Liz to jump slightly. “Sorry,” she apologized. “Nice speech to the masses by the way. Short and simple, I like it.”

“What are you doing here tonight, if you do not mind my asking?”

“I felt like dropping in. Remember, I threatened to meddle if I felt like it.”

“All too well,” Liz frowned. “What are you meddling in then, everything has been going somewhat smoother now.”

“Good, good. No trouble from anyone then?”

“Well, I had to send Kellin and some men who were harassing a village in the north and were threatening to break off at the expense of the people there.” Her frown deepened. “No, I cannot ask that,” she muttered almost to herself.

“Ask away,” Kakri replied.

“Triok and some of the other Eirens made Queen Milinna come up and demand I produce something to prove my birthright to the throne of Segennya. Apparently, having her word, the word of the former ruler of Segennya and a birthmark only carried by those in your House is not enough. Do you have any ideas?”

Kakri pondered it pacing. *Damn Abiel to the bowels of the Underworld!* “They won’t let it go?”

“For the time being they seem willing, I think both Milinna and my mother said something to silence them. I am worried they will start up again though.”

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“Let it go- for now. It won’t be too long before something else at their own court catches their interest.”

“You seem to know a lot about Eiren court practices.”

“You could say that we wrote the book so to speak,” Kakri slumped remembering her day. “So besides that anything else?”

“Nothing that would concern a goddess really. We have to stand on our own still after all.”

And this is why there is no harm in checking in on occasion with this one, she’s smart enough to realize that, unlike my siblings. “True, but still I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t interested or concerned. You forget, this is my realm as well, I have to make sure things go smoothly.”

“Then why did the past half century happen?” Liz snapped then blushed as she remembered who she was talking to.

Kakri winced at her tone. “For many reasons,” she answered, keeping her voice calm. “Many long, complicated and annoying reasons that are painful to get into. A lot was out of my control back then, I was still green as ruler of a large domain like you are now, never having much need to practice those skills and allowed a mistake to slip through and continue to thrive. And then I was outvoted... in regards to my own realm.” Her head lowered.

“I am sorry,” Liz put her hand on her arm. “I should not have said anything, if you could have I doubt it would have happened or it still might have for some reason though we might not understand it.”

“It was a valid question; I’m surprised I didn’t get it sooner.”

The door opened and the blonde haired woman poked her head out. “Liz, you coming back in? People are getting antsy.”

“I will be back in a moment, Cat,” Liz replied.

If Cat wondered about Kakri she didn’t say anything and let the door shut again. “What happened to her eye?” Kakri asked.

“It was injured when we took back Ravenwood, they are still hoping that it can be saved but something is not allowing it to heal right.”

“I’m no good at healing, that is Lepah or Lona’s areas really or I would offer to help. She hides the pain well, but you can tell in her movements it affects her.”

“Is there any relieving it?” Liz asked.

“No, you have done all you can. The rest is up to time.”

They fell silent, Kakri felt a little better on things but still wondered how best to approach this issue that Ahiel had thrown at

her. "I need to get inside," Liz spoke up at least. "Are you going to join us? Though I can imagine our gathering is a lot less glamorous than yours."

"Are you kidding? It is a breath of fresh air." She was about to decline regardless, but decided she wanted to stay and get more of a measure of what she was dealing with before chewing out her sibling. "I'll take you up on that offer I think before I return to my home." She gestured for her to go first. "Lead the way, and by the way before we get back inside if I haven't said it yet. Your father would be proud of you for sticking to it." She grinned and Liz quickly recovered blinking away tears.

"I hope so." She replied quietly before opening the door to the music and chatter of the ballroom. "I really hope so."

CHAPTER 3

Kakri stormed through the halls of her palace, causing the sprites to scatter to avoid her rage. Ahiel had surprisingly been successful in avoiding her efforts to chat, she had attended an insane amount of social gatherings for her to try and corner him but he had disappeared from those. Her solo research was proving less than fruitful as well. Whatever this treasure was either someone was trying very hard to keep the details hidden, or it was never there to begin with. Banging open the door to her work area, she slammed it shut with a resounding bang before throwing herself in a chair that looked out over open sky. Not being able to tell Liz was annoying, yes, but she was more frustrated she couldn't figure it out like the mortals and gods before her. Sighing she put her head in her hands and rested her arm on the sill.

What am I missing here? Did it even exist in the first place, or am I just falling for the same game Ahiel is doing with the mortals, giving them tidbits and nothing actually is there? No, while this is no doubt amusing to Ahiel, he gave me that warning for a reason besides games. What is that though and why is he avoiding me so I can't ask?

A knock came at the door to the room. "Enter," she snapped.

One of her senior attendants eased through the door shutting it behind them. "This just arrived, my Lady." She held out a piece of parchment to Kakri.

"Who sent it?" She held out a hand for the parchment.

"No name was given, though it was servant of Lord Ahiel who delivered it." The attendant handed it over bowing, its robes puffing around the two of them.

“Safe guess than it’s from him. How very mortal of a message from him though.” She sat up slightly and started to open it.

“I will leave you to read it my Lady.” The attendant bowed and left her alone to finish opening the message.

Kakri nodded and continued to fiddle with the parchment, sliding it open as the door shut gently once more. Her eyes scanned the words on the page her power swirled around her in a growing torrent of wind as she read further. Several tables and desks moved to slam into the walls from the force of the wind and her hair whipped around her face though she kept reading. “TEACH ME A LESSON!” she bellowed, her voice echoing off the walls. Lighting flashed as the wind fueled by rage conjured a storm in her workroom. “What in the name of the Underworld and all that is dear to us, is he playing at?” She paced, not remotely caring of the further damage she was raining down on her belongings. Glass shattered, as various bottles broke, books tore as they were ripped from the bookcases. “What game is he playing? What does he have to gain?” She re-read the letter causing the wind to grow stronger. “Teaching me a lesson? He plants the idea and accuses me of it being necessary in teaching me a lesson. Why?”

She was half tempted to fly over to Ahiel’s home and barge through forgetting the consequences for entering that way to demand answers. She knew though that she would get nothing, if he was even there at all since he seemed to be lying low and was only willing to offer this letter to her as any explanation. She re-read it a third time, the wind calming around her as she focused on the meaning of the words instead of riding the emotions they came to her. By the end she threw herself in the only upright chair, the objects still caught in her power crashing to the ground some breaking in the small pieces as they landed.

She let the parchment flutter down to join them as she leaned her head back, allowing her hair to fall over the back of the chair. “So that’s your game and why you warned me. You thought I was getting too attached so you decided to show me how expendable mortals are, how manipulated they are. For someone who warned me of getting too involved you forced my hand. I was going to stay mostly out of this and let it play out with little meddling to ease things. Let her prove that humans are fine and strong though they faced all this. She would have done that easily. Now though that your lot is getting help

from you and everyone researching to prove your point that things don't change then so will mine get my help." She glanced outside the window. "And I better hurry before the others have orders to keep me busy."

Smiling she walked over to the door, and then turned back and the mess registered to her. *I'll worry about it later.* Opening the door she saw three attendants including the one who delivered the note hovering, almost cowering in the hallway. "Relax, little ones; I got upset but I'm calm now. Is anyone up for a trip though? We'll be staying long term in the mortal realm." They nodded. "Get a few more of the others to come with and get those who are staying in the main hall. Off you go now."

She shut the door as they flew away, locking it behind her though it might be ages before she returned she would leave the mess for later. Hurrying through the halls she stopped in the main entrance starting to activate the safety features of her home in preparation for leaving. Slowly the crowd behind her swelled and divided into those who were staying and those were accompanying her. At last the lead attendant nodded signaling that they all were there.

"Okay listen up, I'm going away for a while to the moral realms. Don't worry we won't live among them for long- they can't handle that ruckus- but we'll be there for a while. Apparently one or more of my siblings have decided that it's fun to play with mortals and their affairs and set up the new ruler of my realm for failure. So, I'm going to stay close to keep an eye on things. Those who are staying know that the house will be barred from others entering, my strongest protections will be in place. Let no one know what is going on, simply say I went on holiday and you don't know where. No doubt they'll guess but we can make ourselves hidden when we want." She looked around. "Understood?" They nodded. "Good, now take care of yourselves, we'll try not to be long." She dismissed them and approached those who stayed. "Last chance to stay here where you'll be more comfortable." They shook their heads. "Good!" She motioned for them to follow her out, they hurried down the path. Behind her she could feel the safeguards activate once she was far enough away.

Soon they were flying over the realm toward the gateway; it was oddly quiet since usually someone was about going somewhere even at night and often used methods of air travel. Kakri looked at all sides

to make sure they remained safe and undetected. She could feel the eyes on them but they remained hidden. Soon the lights of the portal were in sight and she ushered them fast through knowing that once they were clear their chances of detection would be a bit less due to their being in the mortal realms. Once clear she paused near the mountains and sized up the sky. "There!" she pointed slightly south from them. "That will suit us, it'll be a bit smaller than what we're used to but we don't need that large of a home." She rose up and landed on the cloud she was referring to. Allowing the power to flow she shaped the cloud and built it up until she had a miniature replica of her home in her native realm before her. It only had a few rooms but it would be cozy for her and the handful of attendants that had come with her.

"Now we set sail for over Ravenwood," she told them looking around. "Might as well get comfortable, this will take a bit since I don't want to go fast. It'll be a matter of time before they realize where we've gone. They'll probably think I'd fly to Ravenwood as fast as I could but I won't let them trace me that much."

It took them two weeks to make the distance with occasional strong winds conjured by Kakri. When they arrived they came to rest above Ravenwood palace. She could see traces of Ahiel's work in the city, tensions seemed higher and there were a lot more skyward glances than should have been. Frowning, she quickly eased their fears, though those directed at one another refused to ease entirely as they rushed around to get out of the cold as fast as possible. Patience giving way to her wanting to simply know the situation she found the nearest unlocked door and entered not caring to remain invisible or not. As she walked the corridors she received a few looks at her wispy, light gown in winter weather. Spying someone who appeared to have enough rank to get her answers she cornered them. "Can you direct me to where I might find the Queen?"

"She's in a meeting," the man looked disgruntled at being stopped. "Or at least she will be when I get there."

"Oh good, I'll walk with you then?"

"Who in the Underworld are you? I've never seen you around."

"I've been around. The name's Kakri, I have a holding out east. I'm pretty new to court on a regular basis, however."

"Ah, one of the upstarts," he took a step forward then offered

her his arm. “Pardon me, I’m still getting used to seeing women in court and having more of an interest than just social ties.” Kakri took the offered arm. “Since you’re new let me warn you, this Queen’s different.”

“How so?”

“She lets even the lowest in here sometimes to get them heard directly. She takes the oddest stances on things we try to do too, especially if they benefit ourselves more than they might others. If you want to convince her of those things, best have allies.”

Kakri heard the subtle hint and had to stop from laughing. “Allies are useful,” she agreed instead. “It is an odd way to run a court, but I imagine views with the general public are high.”

“Yeah they are,” he admitted, though he sounded like he wanted to do anything but. “Still can’t make a heading in anything with things like this. Bad for someone like me who wants to one day advance their holdings or gain larger ones. But of course, you have yet to deal with that I imagine this being one of your first days here and still a newcomer to it all.”

“Quite true,” Kakri replied. Around the next corner they joined the throng making their way inside past two armored men on both sides of a double door. Joining the end of the overall well groomed line up she studied them with somewhat disinterest. “I must thank you for your escort and advice in dealing with court. It made the trip much more enjoyable.”

“It was my pleasure Lady Kakri.”

They were just about at the doors now, in between the others Kakri could see each noble pausing to bow to Liz who was at the head of the table before taking their seats. “Oh how rude of me, I never did ask the name of my savior to make sure I arrived on time.”

“No problem at all, call me Lucas.”

“My thanks, Lord Lucas.”

They were just at the front of the line so Kakri turned her attention toward the Queen. Liz was dressed in a deep purple gown today, much simpler than what Kakri had seen her in during the coronation festivities. Her eyes widened at the sight of Kakri with her human nobles, during her curtsy she met Liz’s eyes and gave a slight wink.

“No need to mention who I am,” she told her on a slight gust of wind that ruffled Liz’s hair while Lucas paid his respects. “We’ll chat

after, for now just treat me as though I'm one of them.”

Liz inclined her head in acknowledgement as Lucas escorted Kakri to a seat. Kakri gracefully lowered herself and studied the others closer for the first time. Some looked to be trouble, old hands at court games and used to dealing with a whole other set of rules and laws. Their gazes were calculating of both their fellow nobles and ruler, trying to see who would be best to ally with as Lord Lucas had put it. He had a similar gaze in his own eyes but at the same time it was less, he didn't want to stand fully against his new ruler she guessed. He was comfortable where he was and didn't want to risk it too much by getting on her bad side until her measure was gotten and he wanted a good relationship with her.

“Now that we are all here,” Liz began, taking her seat. “What concerns do we have today?”

Kakri listened as some lesser nobles like what she was posing as expressed concerns over food. Durj had apparently taken too much and even with some autumn preparation they were still running low. These were quickly allotted for with some provisions from what little could be spared.

Some of higher rank wanted to expand as Lucas had mentioned. Liz considered it for a few moments and it almost seemed as though she was going to decline the requests. She agreed though under the condition at first it be used to grow food and then turned over to whatever purposes desired after a few years. It was a wise agreement in Kakri's opinion given the issues they were having now with food though some tough months ahead were sure to be had.

They didn't appear too happy with the delay but the promise seemed to please them. Next to speak were the nobles with the largest communities under their care; they told the assembly about bandits raiding as they posed as refugees stealing valuable supplies probably for later sale.

“Simply put, your majesty, we need more coin to pay for the extra troops to stop this menace,” one of them spoke directly to Liz.

“I am sorry, but there is none to spare. You will have to pay the extras out of your own purses.”

“I have no extra funds!” another Lord protested.

Liz eyed them curiously. “Your city is one of the largest out there, Lord Rukin. Only just behind what Ravenwood -when it is fully functioning- and Briar's Port make in trade profit. If you are out

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of gold than I best see the city in pristine condition with gold lined streets next I visit!” He winced under her gaze. “I thought it might not be the case. Pay your own troops, while I am willing to send more to patrol the roads near your city I will not pay for the protection within. There is simply no more gold after helping everyone after Durj’s tax and ensuring food for those who need it this winter.”

“Makes you wish we had that treasure now, huh?” someone else spoke up. “Are the Eire still going on about that by the way?”

“Last I heard they were, probably want it for themselves,” someone else replied.

Kakri bristled at the disrespect glancing over at Liz who seemed a bit lost at how to regain control. “Take care of your holdings,” she continued softly.

“That treasure would be nice,” Lord Rukin said ignoring her. “Solve this in a heartbeat with no one’s pocket being hit. Isn’t that what the royal family used it-“

A gust of wind roared through the room sending parchment sailing through the air, causing some to close their eyes to protect them from the debris. It only spared Kakri and Liz both of who sat there until the room fell silent once more and the wind started to quiet. “I think her majesty was trying to finish a point,” Kakri said in the stunned quiet, her voice almost a whisper.

As the wind died completely the wind swept nobles gapped at one another, several trying to tidy their disheveled hair and clothing. Liz shot Kakri a grateful look before speaking again. “Thank you. As I was saying, the main treasury has been all but exhausted with the basic needs and helping out with those as well as helping recover from what Durj had done. The security of your holdings is your responsibility so the cost comes from you, we cannot afford to help pay the bill every time you need to add to your rosters.”

“Your majesty we’re beggared after everything though, after Durj’s tax especially.”

“Like I said, that tax was repaid mostly in full.”

“We have needs! A certain level of living we’re used to!” someone else shouted.

“Tell you what, and I bet others will do this too. If you have some extra food and wood already cut for the winter I’ll buy them off you for a fair price negotiated among our peers. Then you can use my

coin since it'll be extra for you to pay for your troops." Lord Lucas offered from next to Kakri. "Is that fair?"

"Sounds like a perfect solution, though it would be best if it was not just you, Lord Lucas, who is paying." Liz said. "It also might help ease the pain of the food shortage since larger holdings and smart farmers might have had time to prepare as we saw in Rinette."

Several of the Lords and Ladies muttered to one another, seeming to come to an unofficial agreement to meet to settle this matter. Kakri grinned inwardly at the sight of the humans coming together after just a small wind. *Still, it is odd they mention this treasure with their sights on it. Perhaps it is wishful thinking for it to be the solution to their problems or they think it will give them means to challenge Liz.* She tuned out the meeting lost in her observations. Now that their immediate concerns were met they appeared a lot more at ease and listened to Liz address how they should set examples and work together. Kakri glanced over at Lord Lucas who was studying his new possible trade partners and wondered what else he might be trying to get from them in private. *Whatever it might be I will see soon no doubt.* He offered her a small smile which she returned and then shifted her focus back to Liz.

"I think that will do for now," she was saying to the nobles. "We have overall gotten a lot of ground covered."

She stood and they followed suit, many offering her a bow before starting to leave the room. Kakri started toward her when she felt Lord Lucas grab her wrist, causing her to turn toward him. He had such a tight grip it was all she could do not to slap him. "Yes?" she offered with a curt tone.

"Are you going to talk to her majesty?"

"Yes," she replied. "Is there something you needed?"

He glowered. "Be careful, not sure how I trust that one. How'd you manage a personal appointment with the Queen anyway?"

"Just lucky I suppose," Kakri replied. "And I had to call in several favors to do it. Best not to waste it," she yanked her hand free. "I will find you after."

"Good luck," he replied.

Kakri stalked away toward where Liz waited with the red haired woman Kakri remembered from the coronation. "Thanks for the save," Liz greeted trying to maintain appearances and yet be respectful to the Goddess.

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“Not a problem,” Kakri replied, waving her hand curtsying. “Let’s get away from prying eyes shall we before we continue this? Who’s your friend?”

“This is Terra,” Liz replied waiting for a door that was behind her to open so she could pass through and leave the crowd behind. Terra and Kakri followed just behind but drew even with the Queen as they entered the corridor. “Terra, meet the Goddess Kakri.”

Terra bowed, “It’s my honor.”

Kakri grinned in response then looked around at the still emptying corridor. “None of that right now. Just pretend I’m one of you.”

“Why are you back and posing as a noble, if you do not mind me asking?”

Her grin widened. “What better way than to see what one is dealing with?” Kakri looked around the rather busy corridor. “Is there a very private place we can chat?”

“Lass, maybe I should...” Terra began shifting uncomfortably.

“Nonsense!” Kakri said, pulling Terra close. “The more to weigh in on this matter, the better.”

“We can use this room here,” Liz said pulling open an inner door and smiling at a passing servant and guard patrol. “It has no use right now and people rarely come in. We should have plenty of time before Kellin comes to see where we are from sitting with Cat.”

“How is she doing?” Kakri asked as Terra closed the door.

“As well as can be expected,” Terra replied curious as to why a Goddess was asking about a mortal’s health. “Sadly her eye had to come out.”

“Damn,” Kakri replied. “I was hoping... not that I can get help in that regard right now anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Liz asked.

“Let’s just say that the gods are having a bit of fun in earnest now. I plan on shocking them with an undisguised display of staying one step ahead and helping you out down here though.”

“What?” Terra demanded.

Kakri danced around the room. “Some of me and mine have come to this realm for a vacation of sorts. We’re going to help you find this treasure, whatever it is or end the debate once and for all of its existence. Seriously, not sure what Ahriel was thinking besides playing some game with me.”

“A game with you?” Liz asked.

Kakri blushed. “As I told you, mistakes led to what this realm had to endure for over half a century. As a result I’ve been trying to not allow it to happen again, and have become more involved. Others think it’s going to happen regardless so why bother?”

“So now this treasure we keep hearing of and are pressured to find, is the result of this battle of wills?” Liz filled in and Kakri nodded. “So it might not exist?”

“It does exist, or at least there are plenty of references in legends to it. The question is if it is obtainable at all or is it long lost? Ahiel believes it doesn’t exist at all, so he’s letting this play out to cause us all trouble. Thanks to his wording to the Eire though some appear to think it might be possible to use it to usurp you from the throne.”

“What is the damn thing though?” Terra wondered. “Some item of power?”

Kakri shrugged, “Exacts don’t exactly exist. That’s partly why I think Ahiel thought it would be safe to play with, to toy with me.” She looked at a lamp sitting on a table that was mostly filled with oil curiously. “Court games that the Eiren play were learnt from the best, in other words, us. Not all the world was cut off from us, though some like myself chose to stay away from them as well. They’re so stuffy- and is that lamp shaking?”

“What are you talking about?” Liz asked, studying the lamp too.

“It’s very slight, but watch the oil.”

The three women stared at the lamp for several moments. Slowly, the shaking became more apparent and more violent. Some knickknacks on the table started to skirt across, bookshelves swayed against the walls. They turned around on spot, looking as the movement kept going.

“What in the name of the Gods?” Terra whispered. “No offense, Lady Kakri.”

“None taken,” she replied, eyes widening at the sight.

The ground jolted beneath their feet, causing them to stumble. Around them things came crashing to the ground like paintings, wall decorations, and tables. “I suggest we get out of here,” Liz shouted over the noise as the ground protested again. She started leading them toward a door, stumbling. Just as she was about to reach the door handle the three women were pitched to the floor. As they fell Kakri saw part of the ceiling in front of the door crash to the ground

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giving them a blast of cold air from above. Coughing, she picked herself back up and helped the other two to their feet, glancing around the room. “Looks like this is our only way out,” she called, pointing to the back of the room trying to stay upright.

As they worked their way through the debris toward the door at the back of the room they could hear distant crashes, screams and constant rumbling that was almost deafening. Terra yanked the door open to reveal a small closet that had a few old cloaks in it. “Now what?” she asked, voice quaking slightly.

More of the building, this time right next to them came crashing down, but the door remained open. Kakri glanced around them, knowing that if the force kept up the room wouldn’t last much longer. “Get in,” she ordered. “Cover yourselves with the cloaks. I’ll try to keep the debris off as much as I can. We’ll get through this.”

Terra made sure Liz was tucked away before concealing herself in the mass of cloaks. Kakri joined them in the darkness, forcing her power to swirl around them to toss the debris away as it started to constantly reign down. It was stuffy under the cloth, suffocating. Kakri winced as tiny bits of debris made its way through the small tornado Kakri was making around the women, covering them. *This is the least safe option in an earth shaker.* She looked over at the other two who were tightly embraced, the material tucked tightly as possible around them. *They’re trusting in you Kakri to get through this. You can’t let them down.* Closing her eyes, she focused her entire being at keeping the rapidly crumbling building off of them. She could hear several larger chunks slam into others next to them, the wall in the back completely collapsed causing all three women to press closer together. Kakri poured all she had into her safety measures. The noise was deafening, a loud crash came from high above and in seconds Kakri found herself plunged into complete darkness.

CHAPTER 4

Kakri opened her eyes to pure blackness, with barely a speck of light to be seen. Reaching out to her sides, her fingers groped for anything they could see how far she had to her sides in case the wind had just delayed part of the inevitable; a complete collapse. Reaching as far as she could, she finally met the sharp edge of a board. Moving upwards slightly, she felt the start of a solid wall of debris. As her eyes slowly readjusted to darkness, she could barely make out the ceiling with just enough clearance to crawl through. Allowing a very ungoddes-like sound to escape her lips, Kakri pushed herself to her knees and tried to dust herself off a bit. “Liz?” she croaked. “Terra?”

She heard a groan off to her right and in front of her somewhat. “What in te name of te Underworld happened?” Terra moaned.

“Earth shaker,” Kakri replied, crawling as best she could toward her. “Stay low, there’s not much clearance in here.”

“Thanks for te warnin’. Where’s Liz?”

“I’m not sure; you’re the first I found.” Kakri smacked into her, rubbing her head she heard a quiet noise off to their right. “Shhh!”

They fell silent for a moment as the shifting of stones grew louder. “Liz?” Terra called.

“I am here,” the reply was a ways away from them. “Wherever here is. Are you okay?”

“We’re fine, might be bruised up a bit but I think that’s the worst. You?”

“About the same, though if it was not for the wind you brought

up I think it would have been worse.” There was the sound of more shifting rocks.

“What are ye doin’ over there?” Terra demanded.

“Standing.”

“How? I can barely kneel!”

“A better question, Terra. How are we breathing this well under this much debris?”

“You’re right,” Kakri breathed. “The air, depending on how long it has been should be running short, even with the small openings I see here.”

“I don’ care how we’re doin’ it, I’d just rather get out of here soonish.”

“Nervous, Terra?” Liz teased.

“Well te be honest I don’ like small spaces.”

“You were fine in that cave between Rinette and Caya.”

“It was a lot larger!”

“Well we’ll get you out of here as soon as we can,” Kakri said kindly. “Think you can manage to crawl with me toward Liz?”

“That I can at least do. Why go toward her?”

“She can stand meaning it is more open, hopefully the earth shaker didn’t collapse that section too much.”

The two women started to slowly make their way toward Liz. “There is an odd thing though,” Liz said making idle conversation to help guide them in the darkness. “How it is so open over here, I was next to the wall I thought.”

“Maybe it just collapsed oddly?” Terra suggested. “Lady Kakri did have that wind goin’ pretty strong.”

“Call me simply Kakri, Terra,” Kakri huffed. “We’re crawling along the ground together in the dark; I think we can be without titles.”

“Doubtful,” Liz replied. “From what I can tell, it seems too uniform on this side. I wish I had some light to see more.”

“Can’t ye make light Kakri?”

“I wish. My power is mainly air related sadly.”

“It was worth a shot,” Terra said sympathetically. “Ow!”

“What?” Liz asked.

“My knee caught a rock, nothin’ te major.”

Kakri could hear the swishing of fabric nearby. “I think we’re close to you Liz.”

“Good, I was hoping it would be soon. I keep feeling around for something suitable in case this is not part of the palace, but no luck.”

“Think we’ll find some nasty surprise?” Kakri asked.

“It is a possibility. I’d rather be safe than sorry, but these stones are too brittle.”

Kakri’s hand found the side of a wall. “Yes!” she shouted.

“Finally!” Terra exclaimed. “I was beginnin’ te think we’d never make it.”

“Now where exactly are you, Liz?” Kakri asked, reaching out her other hand. She reached blindly until she felt contact with flesh.

“Okay so you managed to get on the other side of this somehow.”

“There should be an opening; I climbed through on accident when I was trying to get up.”

“There it is!” Kakri exclaimed. “You through first, Terra.”

“Gladly.” Terra slithered through the opening and flopped rather ungracefully, on the other side. “Much better, I can breathe again. One perk te being stuck in here with te Queen and a Goddess. Someone’s bound te find us soon. Won’t they?”

“Hopefully your people aren’t too overwhelmed.” Kakri replied sliding through. “And rescue can come soon. I plan on having us out of here before that though if I can. We have plenty of air here; it must be coming from somewhere.”

“So we seek it out,” Liz said. “It will hopefully be close and somewhere within the main palace.”

“Hopefully,” Kakri reaffirmed. “I’m guessing you’ve lost the palace schematics, but any idea if there might be something over here?”

“Yeah we did,” Liz confirmed. “I tried to find them, but no luck so far. So yes, we are in the unknown.”

“I doubt they are still around.” She turned slightly as she stood up. “Shall we?”

“Yeah might as well. They know where we are about,” Terra said. “They’ll find us.”

“Let us just not go too far,” Liz cautioned. “We do not want to end up in a maze of rooms, or somewhere unstable because of the earth shaker.”

“Good point,” Terra stopped suddenly causing Liz to crash into her. “Should we even be goin’?”

“We won’t know until we get there, we’ll take it slow. If the floor

starts to crumble we backpedal carefully.” Kakri grinned in the dark. “It’ll be fine.”

“Famous last words,” Liz muttered. “Cannot tell you how many times Cat has said those very words to me, and then gotten us into trouble.”

They blindly started forward, Kakri in the lead carefully navigating the cavern. She led them along the nearest wall to use it as a guide. Luckily, the cavern was mostly vacant of debris; a few large boulders were the largest obstacles caused a couple areas of the passage to be narrow for them to squeeze past. Some ways down the passage, the ground shook again sending a cascade of dirt and smaller rocks down on the three women.

“I’m sure this is what ye meant by it bein’ alright te come down here!” Terra bellowed over the noise.

“It is weaker though,” Liz yelled back. “Hopefully it will be done soon.”

“Come on!” Kakri shouted. “We should keep going as best we can in case this turns out to be one that is long lasting.”

They picked up their speed; rushing past as part of the opposite wall came crashing down. Kakri’s heart beat fast in her chest, *it’s been ages since I’ve done this!* Up ahead she saw light streaming from an opening, grasping Liz’s hand tighter she pulled the two women along with her. As the light became brighter and brighter, the ground pitched again, almost sending them crashing down into a sprawl but they managed to stay mostly upright. *Enough of this*, Kakri thought before pulling herself back to her feet. “Hang on tight!” she shouted putting out her free hand and willing enough power to launch all three of them in the air and past the debris.

They sailed just under the roof of the cavern, almost hitting their heads. Behind her she could hear Terra screaming, as they swung wildly due to her rather inaccurate aim and the fact that it was more than she was used to accompanying her. They landed just outside the entrance to the cavern, and she squinted in the bright light as the earth continued to quake beneath her feet once they returned to solid ground. The tremors were much less, almost to the point of stopping it seemed.

“Never... again...” Terra wheezed, from just in front of her sprawled from her landing.

“It got us clear, did it not?” Kakri smirked.

Liz shook her head, and looked around as she pulled herself back to her feet. “At least we can see again, but where is here? I do not recognize this place.”

Kakri took a step toward the edge of the cliff they stood on, her eyes widened at the sight before her. “I think... there is more to the area your palace is in, than meets the eye.”

“What do you mean?” Liz joined her at the edge, almost falling back over in shock. “Gods above,” she breathed. “And present,” she quickly amended.

“Yeah, definitely more to this place than we knew,” Terra agreed joining them, her emerald eyes as wide as saucers taking it all in. “So what now?” she asked.

The area before them reminded Kakri of a valley tucked among mountains. The entire bottom was water except for some narrow stone paths that rose clear of the water separating them into ponds. The paths were lined by trees with bright purple foliage, which seemed to carpet the ground enough to turn it purple as well. Kakri looked off to the side of where they stood, taking it all in; there was a gentle sloping path down to the base of the valley, joining with the path below. “I think we go that way,” she said. “Shall we explore?”

Liz looked around considering the question. Kakri followed her gaze, above them the sides of the cavern rose high almost joining to form a dome that was completely enclosed except for a small opening which allowed the light to come in. “Is it safe, you think?” she asked at long last.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” Kakri asked smirking. “I think that going forward is our way out though, unless you plan on staying here or chancing a cave in.”

“Seems wrong though,” Terra squinted at the ground below. “Purple plants?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

Terra eyed Kakri critically. “Not sure if they’re like that where ye come from but they aren’t from here. Doesn’t seem natural, probably poisonous or somethin’.”

“You mortals,” Kakri shook her head. “See something new and always think it’s out to hurt you somehow. If it was going to, I think we’d feel it by now.”

“Let us go then,” Liz said. “The sooner we are back in what we know the better.”

Kakri: A Birthrights Secrets Story

The ground at least was still as they began their walk down to the bottom of the cavern, Kakri leading the way; it was peaceful. Terra brought up the rear of their group with Liz in between to provide enough protection to the Queen. Kakri found herself taking in this hidden area in wonder, a rare and wonderful feeling to her after years upon years of what she deemed a stagnant existence. Realistically, she understood their hesitation to explore more of this place but what was life without chances like this? The air around them was unseasonably comfortable despite being exposed to the elements. Beside her she could see the other two pulling at their necklines, trying to get a little relief from the warm air in their heavier clothing. A slight breeze skimmed the surface of her skin; she listened to it to see if it offered more information about this place. Silence was her only response.

“So, you think this has been here the entire time?” Liz spoke up at last.

“How’d no one notice though?” Terra shot back. “That hole up there looks mighty big to go unseen.”

“You’d be surprised,” Kakri shot back. “People tend to be blind to that which they never want to see. Something I think they picked up on from us. This is new to me too, but I imagine it’s been here for a long, long time based on how big these trees are.”

“At least there is no shaking,” Liz said.

“For now,” Terra argued.

Kakri drew them to a stop as the path smoothed out and faced open water. From this angle, they were able to get a better view of the cavern, and it was spectacular. Opposite where they stopped, stairs ascended the wall steadily with a waterfall tumbling under them in three tiers, intertwining as it split and roared down into the nearest pool of water. Glancing at the top of the stairs, she saw more smooth rock peeking over the edge of the very top of the waterfall; for a moment she was tempted to rise up and confirm her suspicions. The thought was quickly disregarded though; she was with mortals so they were going to do this their way, after all she had a point to prove.

“Those stairs are where we need to go I think,” she told the other women.

“Seems promising,” Liz agreed eyeing it, then looking around at the other walls for a moment. “And it appears there is no other way out besides those and the way we came.”

The path across the water was wide enough for them to walk side by side. Silence overtook them once more as they went across; the only sound was the rushing of the waterfall. Kakri's curiosity overtook her and she glanced down into one of the pools for a moment. The water was crystal clear and quite deep, giant fish compared to what she expected to see in pools this size swam serenely through the water. Their fins rippled, flashing bright colors as they went past. Kakri tore her eyes away from the fish, taking the pools in with a much different light. Did they have another purpose and the fish came in as time allowed it to go wild? As they rounded a few corners, Kakri continued to ponder this. Maybe it was some moat that had been overgrown or was simply something that was natural. No, it couldn't be- paths like this seemed too precise to be natural, there had to be something more she was missing.

She glanced over at her companions who were sharing her awe of the scenery if not more struck by it. She had to stop from laughing as they paused under a tree and Terra glared up at the purple foliage. Liz knelt down by the edge of the path leaning close to the water. She cupped a hand in the water and lifted it, allowing the fluid to fall between her fingers and back into the pool. Kakri watched as she did this several more times before finally bringing the cupped palm up to her lips to drink.

"Are ye nuts?" Terra shrieked causing Kakri to start. "That could be dirty water or somthin'!"

"We do not have a choice, and it is clear," Liz replied. "We do not know how much longer we have to walk, get something to drink now."

Kakri took a few steps away, drew to a stop and stared at the steps which now loomed overhead. The view from the opposite side hadn't done them justice; they were massive with several places it seemed, for rest areas as one made their way up but remain safe and out of sight. *Seems oddly like fortifications, but why in this secluded of a spot?* she thought. Water splashing behind her, drew her out of her pondering of the alcoves. And she heard soft footsteps stop next to her.

"Problem?" Liz asked. "You seemed awfully pensive."

"No, there's none," Kakri quickly replied, turning to smile at her. "Ready?"

"Yes, I think so."

Kakri: A Birthrights Secrets Story

Kakri turned back and started forward again, this time walking slightly ahead of the other two. *It is probably not needed but just in case. I'm probably looking for adventure where there's simply an abandoned part of the building*

"I will say this," Terra said as they neared the stairs and she almost slid into the water due to the leaves. "This does make a mighty good deterrent to travelin' this way, unless ye have yer footin'."

"Rest easy, I think the rest should be solid ground," Kakri assured her. "Though I hope you're up for the task."

She heard Terra moan behind her, "Can't ye just carry us up?"

She laughed, "No, we have to do this your way."

The stairs were carved, though time hadn't been so kind to the carvings. They were worn and at times almost as smooth as the stone on top. To Kakri's eyes some appeared to be words, but they were so gone that it was hard to make out to be sure it just wasn't part of the design. "And you were worried," she joked to Terra as they climbed. "This place has definitely seen use."

"Doesn't... mean... it can be... trusted..." Terra huffed.

"I'll give you that," Kakri agreed.

"How're ye even... just sprintin' up this thing?" Terra demanded, stopping.

"She apparently has mastered things us wee mortals have yet to," Liz teased.

"How're you holding up your majesty, this must be difficult for you too now?" Kakri teased back. "All those meetings and such."

Liz laughed. "I admit, I am not as used to exerting myself, but I am fine. I wonder if I can use this area once we get out to sneak off to exercise or just get away."

Kakri chuckled, "I doubt that will happen."

Liz frowned as they started back up, "I suppose I can always dream."

CHAPTER 5

At long last, they reached the top huffing and puffing for breath. Liz leaned against the natural wall to catch her breath, while Terra simply flopped on her bottom and then back to lie against the stone ground. Kakri smiled at them then turned her attention ahead and about stumbled from shock. In front of them was a massive building, as large, if not larger than the palace they had left. The landscape up here was wild, a sharp contrast to the overall natural grooming they had seen so far. Large bushes and flowers exploded from beds lining the area. She could see slightly off to the side, a smooth path lined by more alcoves leading down at a slightly different angle. The earth shook again, causing her to grab the nearest wall as she went to try to see where the smooth path went; as the end came into view she saw a tumble of rocks seal the option away entirely as the smooth opening closed. Sighing, she returned to the mortals, both looking startled at the sight before them.

“What is this Kakri?” Liz asked, raising her voice enough to be heard over the rumbling the shaking was causing.

“I don’t know,” Kakri said honestly. “I caught a glimpse of it before, but thought it was just an exit that didn’t have use. I had no idea it was... this.”

“Where do we go now?” Terra asked.

“Well we have two choices I think, we can either sit here and wait for someone to break through, or we can see if this building as an outlet. The other one down there,” she pointed where she had come back up the smooth path. “Filled up by the looks of it, at the

very least it's too much for me to want to risk going in."

The other two considered it for a moment. "Can't we just go back? Why go in at all?" Terra asked.

"Chances are that path might have collapsed more as well," Liz pointed out. "So far this has held up very well."

"Yer right," Terra said. "All this shaking has gotten te me I swear, I'm not thinkin' at my best."

Liz smiled from where she was holding herself up. "Do not worry, I am not either."

Kakri staggered forward a bit toward the building to investigate it more. There were three bridges that were partly crumbled, spanning the water before it fell over the edge and into the pools below. Each bridge was wide enough for a cart or carriage to go over it when it was in better shape. A circle drive was on the other side with decorative bushes and flowers and a grand staircase. She felt a hand on her arm as Liz steadied herself. "I might redecorate my palace like this," Kakri told them. "There's a certain charm in a building like this." She considered it for a moment. "Rustic. So what did you decide?"

"Let us go," Liz said. "It is going to take them time to find us anyway."

"Way to look on the bright side of the situation." Kakri linked her arms through both of theirs, and led them across the water. They climbed the stairs and stared down the large doors that loomed overhead. "Think it's unlocked?"

"One way to find out," Liz said pushing against it. "It appears so. Security must have been the least of their concerns."

The door creaked open gradually due to the weight. Liz took the first steps inside, followed close by Terra, apparently not letting her friend out of her sight while Kakri spared the outside a final glance before following behind them. The interior was dusty from disuse but looked lived in. Vases sat upon tables that dotted the corridors as far as the eye could see. "Not as disused as I thought," Kakri commented.

"But why is it empty?" Terra asked peering down both directions next to her.

"That- is the question," Kakri took a few steps forward and opened the closest door. Inside was what looked like a receiving room of some kind. Couches sat around a low table covered in dusty

decorations. She stepped inside eyes moving around constantly. She heard the others following behind her, as she reached the table and picked up a picture frame. The painting was faded somewhat with time and was covered in thick dust. “Odd,” Kakri whispered.

“What is?” Liz asked from across the room.

“Nothing, it’s probably just a coincidence. Let’s keep going.” Kakri set the frame back down and went toward the inner door and peeked out. “There’s another corridor down here, anything leading to where we need to go will probably be an interior hallway.”

Kakri paused in the center considering for a moment. The light was much dimmer here growing darker as the corridor went to their right, almost ominous looking. Despite this Kakri started toward the darker section rifling through drawers for any type of light source. She opened a few of the side doors to quickly see what was promising before slamming them shut once more. As the hall grew darker and darker she felt more and more frustrated since if she wasn’t too careful she would be leading them through complete darkness again. Finally, out of a holder in a wall she saw the faint outline of a torch sitting there. Yanking it out she turned back to the others. “Anyone have a way to light this?”

Liz looked around and saw some of the stone in the wall crumbling in large pieces kneeling she examined it more closely then sighed. “I wish I had some metal with me, this stone might work to get a spark off the metal if I formed it into a blade or something that was shaped just right.”

“Why don’t you just form a weapon and try it?” Kakri asked then continued as Liz stared at her questioningly. “You’ve never tried to just make weapons at all?”

“It does not work that way, I need something of substance to form the weapon out of.”

Kakri smirked and shook her head. “That’s how it typically works, yes. You never tried to experiment with your power before though?” Liz shook her head looking confused causing the goddess to sigh. “Ever simply make a weapon from seemingly nothing in the heat of a battle?” She watched as the Queen’s brow furrowed in concentration as she tried to jog her memory before she shook her head again. “You’re a member of my House, which means you can draw on sources that don’t make sense to a more logically grounded yet. I didn’t mean for it to happen like that but the Eiren personality

somewhat drove me to it because it confused them and was really funny to watch.” She smiled at the memory of the looks on their faces as she sat in the branches high above when Essarnis had done that trick partly to impress his future wife. Terra coughed behind her and brought her out of the memory and back to the puzzled mortals staring at her. “Anyway, you can shape your weapons out of anything so long as you have the strength to hold the shape, what it is doesn’t matter as much as your own will. It’s like your Eiren friend healing, or the Inarni doing their magic. The only thing holding you back is your own limitations and somewhat imagination.”

“Imagination?” Terra echoed. “What else can she do?”

“In this case it might be an expression only,” Kakri shrugged. “She’s not all powerful but I’ve said too much already. Try it,” she urged to Liz.

Liz’s doubt was apparent even in the poor light but she closed her eyes and held out her empty hand. For several moments they stood quietly, the only sound their breathing. “Nothing is happening,” Liz protested. “If anything I can feel it starting to affect the stone.”

“That’s because you’re used to it having to,” Kakri said. “Hand Terra the stone and then focus.”

Relieved of the stone Liz closed her eyes once more. For the longest time nothing happened and Kakri found herself panicked that for some reason she wasn’t able to do it. Maybe it was too much pressure due to the situation and need for her to be successful. Glancing as quietly as she could she looked around for a possible other source of a spark. She was about to just turn and go in search of one when Terra squealed in delight causing her attention to fall back to Liz. A small blade in comparison to a normal dagger was resting the palm of Liz’s hand and she was looking down at it frowning. “You’re still getting used to it,” Kakri offered gently. “That should suit what we need it for.”

Liz took the stone back from Terra and turned it in her hand to find the best position to strike, Kakri brought the torch up to be close enough to spark. “Hopefully it’ll cooperate,” Terra said wandering a little ways away from them to investigate some other doors.

“Should be,” Kakri said. “This area was sealed enough to have kept them in decent condition.”

Liz struck the metal repeatedly, building up force as she went. Small sparks shortly started to appear but didn't catch. A couple times it appeared hopeful they would have luck but the embers faded and died just as fast as they appeared. "We might need to try another one," Liz sighed at last pulling the metal and stone away.

Kakri looked around and darted toward another torch that was a couple doors further into the darkness. Terra walked out of a room a bit farther down and walked back toward them. "I swear these people loved to meet, or somethin'. They definitely left easy enough, there's really nothin' left beside furniture-" As Kakri lifted the new torch from its holder the floor opened under Terra causing her to plummet below.

"Terra!" Liz screamed, running forward with Kakri right beside her.

The opening was completely dark; Terra's terrified yells echoed until the floor closed once again looking as innocent as it had before. Queen and Goddess stared at it in shock for a few moments.

"Where does it go?" Liz demanded.

"I don't know but we'll find her," Kakri replied calmly.

"How did this happen?" Liz knelt desperate groping for anything that might have triggered the trap.

"I'm not sure," Kakri looked back. "All that I saw was the floor open after I removed the torch." She walked over and picked it up from where she had let it fall and placed it back in. "Let's see if it triggers again."

Liz moved back slightly and sat back as she pulled the torch once more from the holder. Kakri tried it a few more times, before giving up and letting it fall against her leg. Looking back up she saw Liz kneeling there with her head down. Walking up she placed a hand on her shoulder, she felt the tension beneath her fingers. "We'll find her, she's here somewhere." Kakri pulled her feet up. "Come on, let's get this lit so we can find our way the fastest."

In almost a second a larger blade was in Liz's hand, the stone was in her other one and she was bashing away. Kakri quickly brought the torch into position as the sparks flew, though they quickly died. A few strikes caused some small pieces of the stone to fly through the air, spraying across Kakri barely missing her face. Liz's pace picked up almost causing Kakri to call her to stop and they would find another way to Terra as it seemed her desperation

mounted. Finally the torch burst into flame almost making Kakri drop it in shock.

“Let us go,” Liz said vanishing the blade and dropping the rock on the floor. “One of these doors or openings must lead to stairs.

“That’s likely. The question is which one and hope its close.”

They walked on; opening the doors as they went each taking a turn while the other watched their back mindful of everything they touched. Kakri opened one and about stumbled over the side. The floor here didn’t exist, but looked to be on purpose. Far below she saw a garden and what appeared to be the bottom of the building enclosed but a tall wall that bordered the ponds they had seen on their way here. It was here that seemed most promising for her thought of getting them out of this building as it joined with the cliff once more. “Well there is our target,” she said.

Liz joined her in the doorway. “It appears so. If this building is this large why was it left?”

“I wonder if it is because of traps,” Kakri quipped closing the door once more and starting forward. “Odd features for a castle to have. Though I might add some of those to my own palace as well, keep out meddling gods.”

“Surely it is not that bad,” Liz said opening the next door.

“That is for the eye of the beholder.” Kakri replied. “Oh dear, these torches seem a bit beat up.”

The light was low, simply flickering as Liz disappeared behind another doorway. “In here!”

Kakri stepped inside there was a long spiral staircase with some unlit torches along the walls though they weren’t needed. Long, wide windows lined the stairs providing plenty of light to see by. “Well, at least we can get down now. We will figure out how to get out of this area then.” She eyed the torch along the wall. “Do I dare?”

“If you do not then we will have to redo the whole process and could be risking it in an area that is much worse.” Liz pointed out. “As you said, the more light we have, the faster we can reach Terra.”

“Brace yourself for anything then and here it goes.” Squinting Kakri pulled the torch from its holder fast, and quickly held it up as the last bit of flame on the one already lit as it threatened to die out. The fresh one caught instantly and she beamed at Liz. “Apparently we chose lucky to switch them out.”

A grinding, shifting noise caused them to start and look around

frantically. The stairs under their feet slid to be smooth causing them to lose their footing and go sliding down, around and around they went. As they slid the torches flew from Kakri's grasp causing a little light to be shed as they rolled with them but quickly flew over the edge of what used to be stairs. Both women yelled as their speed seemed to grow faster and Kakri wondered when it would stop. Yelping she started as the windows disappeared and they slid into darkness once more.

CHAPTER 6

Kakri heard groaning as the sliding came to a stop but not before it sent her gently colliding into a wall. She opened her eyes, not sure when during their trip down the stairs she had closed them. Liz was sprawled rather ungracefully nearby and was lifting up to her knees. “I do not care how dark it is, apparently all these torches are rigged,” she said. “Let us not get any more.”

“I’m inclined to agree.” Kakri looked around, “Looks like we don’t need them now though.”

“You are right,” Liz said, eyes wide as she looked around. A flickering light came through the open door. Kakri stood and walked over to peek around the opening, the corridor was clear; torches lined the walls washing the place in light. Across the hall there was a room that was open to the corridor, iron bars obstructing the opening. Looking at the door to the room they were in, it was solid wood except for an opening barred by metal as well.

“If I had to hazard a guess, I would say we’re in a dungeon.” Kakri told Liz who joined her. They took a step into the hall.

“Why did we end up here though?”

Kakri started down the hall. “We triggered some sort of anti-intruder mechanism I expect.”

The hall was sparsely decorated and lined with more barred rooms, some with what looked to be crude beds or benches in them. The only other thing in their path was a couple chairs; it was oddly clean of dust, causing Kakri to be slightly worried as to why. They rounded the corner to a much larger corridor, in the center the carpet

looked torn and wore away. Liz raced over, and knelt next to it examining it close. “What do you make of it?” she asked, looking up at the Goddess. “I have never seen anything like it.”

Kakri joined her down on the floor. “Do you mind if I rip part of your gown off?”

“No, but why do you need it?” Liz tore at the hem with all her might tearing a long strip off.

“Mine probably won’t work, it’s not from this realm, but yours is.” Kakri took it and wrapped part of it around a hand allowing the loose end to hang free over the damage, slowly bringing it down to touch. There was a sizzling sound, as the end met the area and the smell of burnt fabric hit their noses causing them to wrinkle in response. Kakri quickly lifted it up and they watched as more was eaten away, falling in small pieces that was meshed together into a blackened mess. “Imagine if we had touched it.”

“What made this?” Liz asked, her voice was calm but her face betrayed her panic.

Kakri stood up and looked around. “I’m not sure but let’s keep going, quickly.”

They raced down the hall almost running, wanting to put as much distance between themselves and the substance. Kakri slowed to a stop as Liz broke away slightly, and went toward a wall reaching up for something. “What is it?” Kakri asked.

Liz slowly pivoted toward her with a hand outstretched. “I think we are on the right track for Terra.”

Kakri couldn’t help but feel guilty at the sight of the torn piece of skirt left behind, which matched Terra’s. It was in a similar state to the rag she still clenched in her hand. “Come on,” she said renewing their pace. *There’s still a chance.*

Exploration was a long forgotten goal, now getting the mortals out alive was Kakri’s entire focus. They burst through the next room, and found themselves facing a small hedge. “Damn,” Kakri cursed in a breath. They had two options to go but no clue on which was the correct one. Kakri’s fury filled her, and she lifted off the ground as wind whipped around from nothing. As she reached the top of the hedge, she stared and felt her frustration increase. The hedges formed a maze but the path couldn’t have been less clear due to the overgrown nature and that many of the hedges intertwined overhead shielding where a break or turn might be. Sighing, she lowered herself

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back to the ground and next to Liz who was shielding her face from the debris and dirt that was being kicked up.

“Honestly sister,” a voice came from above, causing both women to look around frantically. A cackle soon followed.

“Show yourself Ahiel, I should have known that you’re behind this.” Kakri demanded.

The laughing increased in volume. “Demanding from me now?” He appeared high above as the roof disappeared, and shadows fell completely across the room. It felt stifling, almost hard for even Kakri to breathe. For Liz it seemed even worse as her breathing became hitched as she struggled with the normally simple task. Kakri’s power quickly flew and encased the Queen in a bubble of sorts, though it was difficult to push off Ahiel’s power as he bore down with all he had. “How funny,” he chuckled.

“Enough of your games, Ahiel. I’m not sure what creature is down here so we don’t have time for this.”

“You have plenty of time.” Ahiel’s tone went from amused to disgruntled almost instantly. “Because I say you have it.” The walls of the hedges enclosed around them making a neat square, and the door they came through slammed shut.

“It’s an illusion, that’s all his power is.” Kakri muttered then blasted the hedge in front of her with a cone of wind. It broke through for a second then quickly regrew as though she had done nothing.

“Do you not get it? I control this area.”

Kakri continued to blast at it. “You idiot! There is an innocent life at stake because of whatever ‘s here!”

“The Esaira will not do anything until commanded.”

Kakri’s eyes widened. “What is an Esaira?” Liz asked.

“It can’t be that.” Kakri ignored her, trying to keep from shaking. “Those died out centuries ago!”

Ahiel laughed. “Most did due to human interference but one survived, in my care.” He landed on the edge of the building high above, his robes completely indistinguishable from the shadows he created. “And it is about to have one of the best days of its life.”

“You unleashed it here? Kept it from the rest of us? Why?”

“No one would approve of my plans or trust me.” Ahiel replied. “Not without raising questions I did not want.”

“Which are?” Liz demanded.

“The same one Kakri is asking now. Since neither of you will make it out to tell anyone I will tell you. To preserve the land that should have been mine I needed to take certain measures. Those measures meant getting us mostly out and to let nature take its course.”

“Nature? How was anything that happened after that mistake nature?” Kakri’s voice cracked slightly, as gale blew around her.

“Humans were always going toward this end. They’re too young, too impulsive; most anything civilized about them is borrowed from the Eiren race. They would have weeded themselves out in time, but then this one,” he pointed at Liz. “Had to fix it back to where it might have been with different guidance.” Kakri’s shield around Liz flickered, as Ahiel applied more pressure. The air was alive with power as the two gods held their battle of wills.

“Give it up... Ahiel, we don’t have time to spend eternity at this.” Kakri said.

“Impressive, usually you yield so fast. If it was not just right now that you actually grew a backbone I might be impressed.”

“So you planned on making Segennya fall into chaos,” Kakri said ignoring his jibe. “What is the point of all this?” She waved her arms around to the hedges that surrounded herself and Liz. “What’s with all the traps?”

“Oh, those were crude but effective means that were already here. As for the other... you have not figured it out yet? Thinking like these humans has truly polluted your mind.”

Kakri considered for a few moments. *It can’t be that... I suspected something when I saw that it was a whole palace that looked intact, as though the occupants had plenty of time to get out. They left their pictures and other mementos here... but... no ...* She looked back up at Ahiel, even with the shadows he was casting, she could see a smirk across his face. “Really? You’re the cause of this place being here like this?”

“Of course, I had to make assurances it and my plan would stay hidden. My Esaira was able to live here undisturbed and thrive; I had to open it though, once you started to interfere. Now you are to spend eternity within the earth alone, after the Esaira has her way with the mortals.”

Kakri blinked not sure what to think on it, glancing over she saw the crestfallen look on Liz’s face. “Do what you need to get out of here,” she said in a near whisper. “I will find some way to get Terra

and myself out.”

“First wise words a human mortal has spoken. Yes Kakri, listen to her, all you need to leave here is to give this up. Stay in our realm alone and not touch Segennya again. Just let it be and observe at a distance until the end.”

“In other words be like you,” Kakri scowled.

Ahiel shrugged. “We are not meant to be this involved in the world. I proved that at long last.”

“We are meant to be here, Ahiel, to guide as well as let them on their own paths. Much like parents with a child and as such you proved nothing!” Kakri considered for a moment. “Well, maybe not nothing. You proved what a misguided idiot can do if kept unchecked.”

“You dare?”

“I dare,” Kakri growled.

“Make your choice, Kakri. Stay here alone, or leave,” Ahiel said. “Before you try my patience to much and I just destroy both mortals.”

Kakri glared at him. A small part of her wanted to agree to his terms, to go back to what was comfortable and what she knew. Her fists clenched and she looked at the ground, not daring to look at Liz though she could feel her trying to urge her towards safety.

“Look mortal,” Ahiel said quietly. “She is considering it.”

“She would be silly not to,” Liz shot back. “Instead of being stuck in whatever twisted game you are doing here. Answer me this, if you caused the chaos then you are responsible for the death of my father, right?”

“I cannot take credit for that sadly. Something else was playing the same game.”

“What was it?”

Ahiel laughed. “That... I will leave a mystery. Yes, the great goddess Kakri, mistress of the wind, always so carefree, not so much now. Choose.”

Damn him for doing this. I'm the Goddess of the entire realm though; it's my job to protect the future of it, just as much as any mortals at times. It's our job... but he won't see it... Kakri slowly lifted her head, fury burning in her eyes as she stared at the god she called brother at one point.

“You called me uncontrolled, weak and young because of how I act.” The wind blew around her revealing ears that were just as pointed as

his, as her hair tossed around her face. “When will you learn that the strongest can seem the weakest? Having compassion and being among them is not a weakness. It is strength...and that is why my answer to you is...” She lifted a hand with outstretched fingers pushing her power at him with all her might, causing him to have to jump up in shock to avoid being more than clipped by the blast of wind. “No!”

“Your choice then!” He rose higher and higher disappearing from sight. Kakri felt a crackle of power overhead, where the opening to the outside world was. “Enjoy your solitude Kakri, and I would hurry. The Esaira will not wait forever, if you can reach there at all.”

His voice, its echoing, dark laugh faded leaving them in silence. Kakri deactivated her shield and with the same outstretched hand blasted at the illusion wall again, it remained still. She turned and faced one that at one point led to open path and blasted once more. The hedge opened easily and she grabbed Liz’s hand. “Come on, time is of the essence.”

Liz followed automatically, though she struggled to keep up as they raced through the paths. “You should have left,” Liz said at last. “He has set us up to fail.”

“He thinks he has,” Kakri corrected. “Typical Eiren arrogance, where do you think they get it? They seem to get a lot from him actually, now that everything is clear.”

“Still... I do not see a way out.”

Kakri stopped and whirled around, grabbing her arms. “I will get you out of here if it takes all that I have. He forgets though I might not act it at times, I am much older than he is and possess a good amount of power myself.”

“I do not doubt that, but will this not put you at odds with the other Gods?”

“I am always at odds with them, some days more than others. At the same time, when he put that force field up he just told them that something is here. No doubt soon someone will be along to examine it.”

They went around another corner, and then had to double back as it dead ended. “Did they not side with him on withdrawing from the realms?”

“Yes, but even they would not agree to this. Not overseeing

everything they are fine with that isolation. Outright meddling to speed along a possible extinction or pushing events like that, however? We are order; though we do have some chaotic needs, we need that balance. What Ahiel is doing is outright chaos.”

Liz seemed to be considering this, as they sped down a long path and around yet another corner. “What about this creature he is talking about, the Esaira? You seemed almost frightened by it.”

“It’s a creature that was driven to extinction long ago by your father’s ancestors due mainly to its quite aggressive nature. It has a body of a spider, with a torso and head of a humanoid with long, claw like arms as well as normal human-like ones. That acid we saw is exuded by barbs on its arms, as well as with its bite. It uses silk, like most normal spiders do to catch and hold its prey, though their silk due to their size was quite prized at one point for clothing.” She sighed and stopped, looking both directions before blasting through a hedge with her power. It opened but quickly attempted to shut again. She quickly pulled them both through and to freedom from the hedges. “That is better.” She said as she allowed Liz to catch her breath. “Vicious creatures though Liz, that is what they are. He acted as though it was humans that drove them off, but really they forced them over the course of years to kill them by attacking any human settlement. And then, not helping their cause, the area they thrived in dropped into the sea.”

“So how do we face it now?”

“I will handle it,” Kakri said. “You grab Terra and get out.”

They pushed the door open and looked down the next corridor. The hall was washed in the glow from torches and lamps, almost welcoming. Kakri pointed at the ground. “We know it came down here at least,” Liz said.

They wandered in silence, not wanting to think about what might be waiting in one of the chambers ahead. Kakri was still fuming at Ahiel’s actions and didn’t want to make much conversation. The area here was a bit more decorated with paintings and other pieces. Instead of stone floor, carpet reappeared cushioning their footsteps occasionally dotted by more of the substance from the Esaira. The two women came up to closed tall double doors, Kakri stopped Liz before reached for the handle to open it. “Listen,” she whispered.

Inside they could hear the banging and occasional crash of

something moving within. “This cannot be this easy, can it?” Liz asked. “What is our luck of this being the room this Esaira is in?”

“We are dealing with a God who lives for his games, Liz. Nothing is easy with him so it is doubtful.”

“Well, shall we see what is in there then?”

“It appears we have no choice,” Kakri replied. “On three?” Liz nodded. “One...two...three.”

CHAPTER 7

A giant library opened up before them, it was two stories tall and lined from floor to ceiling in books. “Wow,” Liz whispered next to her, the danger of the moment forgotten. “The Inarni would be jealous if they could see this.”

“I can imagine,” Kakri said. More crashing came from the depths of the room. “Stay alert though.”

They crept along the wall to the nearest set of bookcases and then down them, hoping to go unnoticed under the second level’s floor. The crashing grew more and more frequent as they went, occasionally tables and a few books along with loose pages flew over the edge and crashed into the ground below. A low growl came from overhead causing Kakri to draw them up close to the bookshelf behind them. The shelves dug into her back as a tail swung wild over the edge and struck out at anything that might be near. It had a long, sharp needle-like point that glistened in the light as though it were moist. As it lashed out Kakri found the tail reminding her of scorpions that favored the desert climates, famous for the poison in their stinger. *You really want to make us suffer don’t you, Abiel?*

“Move as calmly as you can along the shelves,” she muttered to Liz. “It just thinks we’re here but doesn’t know for sure.”

Almost painfully slow, they crept along keeping as flush to the bookcase as they could. The tail continued to swing toward them, but stayed stationary as though whatever was on the other end couldn’t see that its prey was on the move. After several minutes of failed attempts the tail disappeared and they could hear scraping and

skittering as whatever was on the other end moved above. Kakri breathed a sigh of relief and edged away from the shelves trying to stretch her aching back. She smiled seeing the door it appeared they needed to use to leave and continue on. A crash above drew her to a dead stop; it came from ahead of their current position.

“Please tell me that was not where I think it was,” Liz breathed.

“I wish I could.” Kakri jumped as a table flew through the air and crashed into the door they needed to go through. A bookshelf soon followed effectively blocking their exit. “How is this thing so smart?” Kakri demanded.

“If I was to make a guess, I would say your fellow God is giving it instructions or has made it more intelligent than most of its kind.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.” Kakri considered their options. She slid back to where the bookshelves on the bottom level split trying to see other exits, only to find none. “Of course not,” she muttered then rejoined Liz. “Okay, here’s the plan. You try to get that debris off the door, I will distract it.”

“Will you not be faster though using your powers?”

“No doubt Ahiel means for one of these obstacles to kill you, I’m going to lessen that chance.” Kakri replied. “Also he probably has something in place to prevent my abilities to get us out of this situation that easily.”

“You are right,” Liz glanced at her as she walked to get in position. “I know you are a Goddess and all but be careful.”

“Of course.” Kakri’s physical form faded away as she became one with the air and a breeze blew up. She darted forward causing several books to fall from the shelves in her wake and up the stairs. The beast easily was as large as one of the bookshelves it flung so easily through the air. Kakri rose higher then became solid dancing on currents of breeze she set in motion under her to keep her aloft as she blasted her power at the creature. “Over here!”

The creature roared as the wind struck its hard outer skin with a loud crack. Throwing the table it held in its claws it then charged at her. Kakri quickly darted across the upper story so it wouldn’t catch sight of Liz already busy below trying to open the exit. She hid slightly behind a bookcase. “Is that the best you have?” She let loose with another blast of wind striking it in another part of the shell.

The tail lashed out in response, extending, causing her to dodge fast and land atop a nearby case as the one she was on fell over.

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Picking herself up she saw the tail coming at her again, causing her to roll to the ground to avoid it. She flung a table at him and then darted on foot back across as fast as she could, pushing off and back into the air so she had a slight advantage. As the creature threw the splintered wood off of itself she could see Liz had made some significant progress on the door but it was still slow due to the heaviness of the bookcase. Reality hit her like a brick as she was clipped by the sharp edge of the creature's claws. She narrowly avoided the full impact, moving at the last possible second. *I'm going to feel this tomorrow*, she thought bitterly. *Oh well, my attendants always complain I do too much for myself, I will just let them baby me.* She soared and darted in a breeze around the creature, keeping just solid enough for it to maintain interest but not enough to allow it to land a strike.

Whirling, darting and dancing on the air Kakri and the creature spun in circles, as it lashed out and tried to land a blow. Occasionally it would knock into one of the few still standing shelves, chairs and tables. Once in a while it would take too much interest in the noise that came below so Kakri blasted it once more; aiming for areas she had already struck so she didn't damage it too much more. After all she was only meaning to distract and not kill it. The creature staggered more and more as their dance continued, it was like the old saying of playing cat and mouse and Kakri was feeling more and more like the mouse by the second, staying only one step ahead of the creature. It let out a low groan as it tried to shake its head to clear its vision after a particularly bad collision with a bookshelf, staying still for a moment.

Another indication that it is not alone in its actions. Kakri thought, pulling away a little but staying in her state of semi-corporeality. Floating there she saw the god she once called brother reflected in its dark eyes, almost as though he was using them for his own vision. An odd sensation came over Kakri and she felt the pressure of his power coming over top of her. *Damn it, he's trying to force me out of this shape.* She fought back, the two warring powers locked in a stalemate filling the room with pressure and more destruction. The creature seemed to strain under the weight of their battle. Luckily it was centered on the upper level of the library so Liz appeared unaffected as Kakri spared a glance over at her. *All I need is to simply keep him off just long enough so we both get out of here or he grows bored.*

"Kakri!" Liz yelled. "Come on!"

Kakri's feet touched the ground as Ahiel gained the upper hand in their struggle, her teeth clenched as she strained against it. *It's the only way.*

"Kakri!" Liz called again.

Taking a deep breath Kakri pushed with all her might against Ahiel and launched herself in the air, once she was out of the creature's grasp she became solid again and started down toward Liz and the door. Just as she reached the stairs she felt a sharp pain wrack her body and something sent her careening through the air toward the door and past it. She came crashing down on the opposite side against the wall. As she lay there dazed she faintly registered that Liz had slammed the door shut and began to turn toward her. Kakri lifted her upper body trying to focus on the Queen rushing toward her before her eyes fluttered shut again.

Sometime later her eyes opened to see Liz's unique eyes staring down at her concerned. Feeling under her she was on some sort of soft cushion. Blinking she cleared the dots from her vision and groaned at the pain in her body. "How long?"

"Not too long, I am surprised you are up this soon actually." Liz sat back to allow her to sit up.

"I'm a bit more resilient than your lot." Kakri replied, holding a hand to her head as she rose from cushion.

"I would have thought your lot was immune to getting knocked out," Liz teased.

"Most things won't, but that thing in that library had help." She swung her legs out to sit up fully. "Where are we?"

"A nearby room," Liz looked around. "Closest I could find that seemed like a safe bet to lay low for a while if it broke out. Unless of course, Ahiel has any other tricks or super abilities up his sleeve."

"No doubt he has this place significantly monitored," Kakri leaned her head back against the wall behind her. The coolness seemed to help with the ache.

"I found this interesting thing." Liz said, crossing the room to where a desk stood. "Something had me concerned since we started opening doors and finding furniture left but no sign of quick exits or combat." She turned back to Kakri, a book in her hand. "This sheds some light on it."

"What does it say?" Kakri asked, watching out of the corner of

her eye.

“Apparently this palace was plagued by odd occurrences, and creatures began to make their home here taking the lives of many guards that tried to dislodge them. Shadows appeared in the corridors and rooms not fading for days if they left at all. It became so disconcerting that the entire court decided to leave and sealed off this place. The only thing was they had no choice but to leave behind the royal’s fortune as well because one of the creatures had called that section home. Any attempts to enter and retrieve it were unsuccessful.”

“What creature?”

“It is not named but is described as a large spider like creature with highly deadly and dangerous poison.”

“The Esaira,” Kakri said.

“That would be my guess as well.”

“My, my you certainly had this planned out for a while Ahiel. I commend you on that part at least.” Kakri stood and shook her head. “Not to mention knew all along where this was that you taunted so many with.”

Liz set the book back down on the desk and walked over. “Are you feeling well enough to continue? Who knows what in the Underworld he is going to throw at us next.”

“We’ll deal with it then.” Kakri strode to the door and looked both ways down the hall. “Now which direction did we come from?”

“Left.”

“So we go right,” Kakri started down that way. “I think I like the more structural obstacles over creatures any day.”

“To that end I think we can both agree,” Liz said. “Does this seem to be sloping downward to you?” Kakri held out a hand and grabbed an unlit candle from a holder on the table and set it down on the floor. It rolled and bounced as it hit snags in the carpet. “That answers that I suppose.”

“I just hope this means we are getting close,” Kakri said. “If what you found in that book is true than chances are where the Esaira made its home is probably more secluded given what it holds.”

“Probably,” Liz agreed and they turned down another corridor. This time it was her turn to stop them. “There is something wrong...”

“What is it?”

Liz's eyes swept the corridor focused on the walls and floor. Kneeling she eyed the floor critically placing her face along the carpet and looking down. "Thought it looked odd," she muttered. Dusting off her hands she stood. "Watch your step there are pressure plates along the floor mostly under the carpet. Given what we have seen I imagine they are not meant for a pleasant surprise if activated."

"So how do we navigate this?"

"Follow me and step pretty much where I do." Liz replied stepping forward with her feet at an angle. She walked with wide steps, each foot resting on a brick of its own before going onto the next in the same fashion. Step by step they made their way across, Kakri careful to try to match her foot positioning since the carpet made the switches difficult to make out. It was a precarious journey across this stretch of floor almost like learning the world's most intricate dance with precise positions for the participants. Several times Kakri almost toppled over due to the angle she had to stand at while waiting for Liz to move. "Sorry," Liz apologized softly moving her foot to the next. Kakri swayed again and attempted to regain her footing but slid off position just so much.

Click.

Kakri quickly shifted and put her foot in the correct place and felt the coldness of metal as she swayed trying to regain her balance. She managed to turn just enough to see giant spikes that intertwined in the center jutting from both walls. "I think we just saw what these do."

"We are almost out thankfully." Liz took a step forward to where carpet disappeared from the stone floor. "This might be an issue."

"What," Kakri cocked her head to see over Liz's shoulder then looked down and her face fell. The carpet was folded over as though something had kicked it but as a result it obscured where the next switches were. "Terrific. This game of his keeps getting better and better."

"Well- it appears beyond this we are clear at least for a little bit once we are past this last piece."

"You go; I'll ride the breeze and be over in a flash."

"Alright then," Liz nodded and focused on the path ahead. "Ready...go!" She took the step and Kakri instantly launched into the air. The force activated a portion of the switches behind her as

she used the same trick she had on the creature in the library. She pushed past as Liz hit the switch in her hurry to get across the rest of the carpet. Behind her more of the metal spikes came at one another, this time from both the sides and above. In the safe zone Kakri retook her form and pulled Liz farther away from the danger though most had already past. "It appears," Liz sighed, "That we will have to find another way out."

"Won't that be fun?"

The corridor went down a little ways and then fell mostly in shadow once more. Liz and Kakri exchanged a nervous glance. "What now?" Liz asked. "Is he here waiting?"

"I doubt that, right now I think he's more interested in seeing things from a distance. He only helped out that creature in the library because I was tiring it out."

"So, do too well and he wants to stop it. Otherwise he is content to see you struggle."

"Pretty much." Kakri sighed and shook her head. "Maybe I should go ahead, I have a feeling that we are nearing the end of this, at least where the Esaira is."

"Why go alone?" Liz demanded. "That is what he wants, is it not?"

"I'm a goddess," Kakri said. "I doubt he will try to kill me, it is you and Terra he has no feelings of compassion for. It is you two I am most worried about."

"It becomes clear," Liz murmured. "When you and I met you were there to bully me into keeping the throne, why?"

"To protect a future I knew was coming," Kakri whispered. "Your father was known as the Great Uniter, before him the Eiren race were as isolated as they were before your adventure. When he married your mother and assisted the Eire with their problem it changed."

"What problem?"

"The first sign of the mistake."

Liz waited for her to elaborate but Kakri remained silent. "Still, I am not my father and in fact could be the worst guide for this realm. Why get me to stay?"

"For this exact conversation, Ahiel doesn't realize it but that is your strength. You question and doubt, for all its troubles it makes you not act on the other things like greed or power when it so easy to

do so. You are good in heart and that is what this realm needs, it is what Milinna noticed when you met, what the other leaders among your towns and cities noticed as well.” Kakri took Liz’s hands. “With all that you will lead Segennya to a bright future, a future it should have had long ago had Ahiel and the mistake not happened. It is that, I need to protect.”

Liz looked at the goddess confused; she spoke as though the mistake and Ahiel weren’t the same and Ahiel said the death of her father was someone else’s fault. There were still unanswered questions and she intended to be there when the end came so she could ask them. “We need to protect it,” she said at last.

“You’re staying here.”

“No. Terra is my friend and if you were not before you definitely are now. I will not let my friends risk their lives for me.” Liz released her.

Ahiel’s laughter crackled overhead. “Touching moment, well, you seemed to have pieced so much together.” The shadows grew but lacked that oppressive burden they had felt in the maze. “I suppose you forgot all about your supposed friend being the Esaira’s plaything, so quick to forget if whoever is not directly in front of them.”

“No!” Liz cried.

“Do not fall for his tricks,” Kakri said. “Outright killing is not his style; the Esaira is probably under direct orders to not touch her until we are there as well.”

“You sound so certain. But how do you know?” Ahiel asked almost lazily.

“You have a certain style Ahiel, a murderer you are not. If you were you would have just been done with whatever caused this ages ago instead of setting this elaborate trap for the possibility of it being sprung.”

Liz took a step forward taking Kakri’s arm, “Enough of this. No doubt we will see you.” She charged into the shadow, dragging Kakri along with her.

The shadows lessened slightly as they rounded a corner and the whole atmosphere seemed a lot lighter. Kakri looked around a bit alarmed as she saw spider webs hanging quite visibly in the corners. “We’re getting close now.”

Liz glanced up next to her. “Indeed it seems we are. Think he

will stay away for now?”

“More than likely.”

“I thought you said someone would notice soon what he was doing.”

Kakri shrugged. “They will soon enough I imagine, right now though he has to be careful so I doubt a lot is being revealed.”

Liz looked around and critically eyed a corner where a beam was overhead as they passed. A large web hung from it looking particularly ominous in the light. “This place is giving me the creeps,” she confessed. “Reminds me too much of some hidden areas we discovered shortly after we took over the palace. It looked like a mad mage’s laboratory.”

Another closed door loomed ahead; it looked different than the others, almost like the dungeon doors though it was solid. It hung from large hinges that looked even blacker than they were due to the light. A large knob waited for one of them to turn it next to a hole that drew Kakri’s eye to it. Going closer she examined it, at first glance it just an opening barely wide enough for a finger to fit into. Kakri looked up at Liz and indicated wordlessly to the knob, Liz nodded and she gave it a turn. It refused to move. Wondering if time had taken its toll despite the use of the area or Ahiel meant it to be difficult to turn she gave it a good twist. It still refused to even give in the slightest.

“It’s either truly stuck or simply locked,” Kakri made a rude noise.

Liz took a step back and examined the door at large while Kakri examined the opening. As her fingers skimmed it there was a mechanical noise as a piece of glass jutted out from the door, locking into position as though waiting for something to be placed on it. “Kakri,” Liz called, drawing her attention away from it. “Look at this.”

Kakri took a step back and looked where Liz pointed. Slightly faded there was some sort of writing along the edges of the door casing. “The light is horrible though,” Kakri said turning and frowning at the nearest torch. “What are the chances of this causing trouble?”

“High,” Liz said then she quickly raced over to a nearby table, turning it over and breaking off a leg. “Surely my ancestors will forgive a broken piece of furniture for something like this.”

Kakri smiled and took it from her holding it up to the flames. For several minutes it refused to do more than smoke heavily. While they waited for it to catch light Kakri handed it back to Liz examining the nearby wall closely. "This is odd," she said squinting.

"What?"

"It's in an old form of your common language, changed ages ago. It's basically a warning for thieves or those that would attempt to be one."

"What does it warn about?"

"The dangers of the passages to and from here. Even if this place is reached apparently one still has to go through their own nightmares to get out, the common fears that most everyone has."

"Well the ones we faced are made by Ahiel. So what are they referring to?"

Kakri's brow furrowed in concentration. "The spikes...chance and death. The prison, while a more practical purpose is loss of freedom. I think though those were the only parts of the path they refer to. The others seem too off to be part of it."

"What about the maze?"

"It might have been there," Kakri winced as the leg of the table finally exploded into flame bathing their faces in a bright light. "But Ahiel did some improvements to it. If it is part of their design I would say it symbolizes the unknown and probably was more for confusion than anything."

They turned back to the door and Liz raised their makeshift torch. The words were in the same runes as the wall. "Roughly," Kakri translated. "Those of the blood can enter and claim what is theirs."

"How can it determine that?"

Kakri's eyes fell back to the door; the glass glinted in the fresh light. "That!" She pulled Liz toward the door a bit more excitedly. "Just a bit crude though."

Liz frowned knowing what was expected, she handed their light to Kakri and shut her eyes as she had above. In moments a dagger appeared in her hand and she slid the tip across her palm tipping it to allow some droplets to hit the glass.

"You're getting better," Kakri approved.

There was a loud clicking noise as the lock disengaged. Kakri reached for the knob while Liz ripped some of the cloth from her

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skirt to staunch the wound she made. The knob turned easily and the door swung open with a loud bang.

“Well let’s see where this brings us.” Kakri said steeling herself for more hidden secrets.

CHAPTER 8

The room was bathed in an eerie green glow; it lacked decorations of any kind. “This is interesting,” Kakri said taking casual steps through toward the next door that was straight ahead. “No spider web either.”

“A little concerning might be more accurate,” Liz said. “The lack of the webbing is a small blessing I would say.”

Kakri swung the leg around in front of her. “There is more writing up ahead.”

“Can you read it?” Liz asked.

“It refers to a password.”

“First a blood offering and now a password...” Liz sighed.

“They truly do not want anyone getting in here even their own kin.”

“We don’t know it though,” Kakri pointed out stopping.

“Can we just bust down the door?”

“Let’s look around here and see if there are any clues given their habit of jotting down other information in these rooms.”

They split up examining the walls carefully; barely an inch was left unchecked. Kakri thought it was hopeless and was about to suggest they try the first option when she saw Liz examining the door once more. “My birthmark,” she whispered then turned around fast toward the opposite wall a blade appeared in her hand.

She’s getting quite quick with it. Kakri approved.

“What is there?” Liz demanded. “Show yourself!”

There was a soft sliding noise and a rattle. Kakri looked around her confused trying to figure out where the sound was coming from.

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The sound echoed, making them hard to pinpoint even with her hearing. Liz shifted around revealing a second blade as the sliding noise continued and then a wall opened up. Kakri took a step towards her as a giant snake lunged out of the opening, its fangs bared at them. Liz backed away while Kakri sent a blast of wind at the creature to stop its charge. Out of the corner of her eye she saw more movement as another opening appeared. Liz darted toward the second snake before she could act, slashing it with her blades. The beast recoiled slightly and slithered toward the door effectively cutting off their only exit. Meanwhile the one that Kakri had dazed against the wall slithered back up and poised for another attempt.

Liz shoved Kakri out of the way as it struck, using one dagger to catch a fang and push the head away from being able to strike and sliced through the head allowing it to fall with a splat. As it fell away she saw that Liz now held a sword in one hand instead of a dagger. The wounded snake creature hissed loudly and the rattling noise increased. It ducked into another hole causing silence to fall once more around them. Liz pivoted in place, weapons raised and ready, Kakri backed toward her keeping her own gaze moving around constantly. “Maybe it went away,” Kakri said. “I somewhat doubt these are part of Ahiel’s traps.”

“Wishful thinking, I believe they are not part of his plans as well but more something my ancestors placed here. You cannot go through unless you have the birthmark after these creatures are driven off.”

“I doubt they killed them every time they came down here,” Kakri pointed out.

“I doubt it as well. They must have trained them to obey a password but these lack that training growing wild. The mechanisms though still work, they were built to last and provided them shelter...”

“And probably had some help with upkeep and food from a certain someone,” Kakri muttered as a hiss came from the walls behind her.

The snake was back and ready to try again. It reared back, fangs fully extended with its long tongue darting out tasting the air. In a moment it lunged at them, Liz quickly slide up and at the creature landing a small blow along the side before turning and bringing the sword down and slicing through, spraying blood across her arm. The creature fell to the ground with a final protesting hiss that continued

to echo long after it landed. Liz cleaned off her arm while she watched Kakri go around and check to see if the openings were clear of any more of the snake creatures. Once her arm was cleaned she lifted it where the most light was coming from the room and aimed the birthmark toward the ceiling. Kakri gapped at her as she did it.

“What in the name of all the Realms are you doing?”

“Look,” Liz said pointing with the blade in her other hand.

Kakri turned until she saw it, tucked in a partly shadowy corner of the ceiling was a mirror. It was placed in such a way that it would easily catch what was shown where Liz stood but where it would take time and careful searching to see. The door to the next section slid open and Liz lowered her arm. She vanished the remaining blade and turned to Kakri, “Onward?”

Kakri nodded and allowed her to go first admiring the change within the queen. From following the superior being’s lead to leading instead and sitting on equal footing. Like most magic in Segennya it reflected directly in how her power acted; changing from dagger to sword with little thought when just levels above them she had struggled to even form a blade with the same method. *Not exactly how I intended on teaching this lesson to her.* Kakri smiled as she stepped through the door but it fell from her face just as fast.

A narrow path spanned a dark, tall chasm; barely skimming the path was long swinging blades. Kakri looked down to see how deep it went. The bottom was obscured completely from view. Next to her Liz picked up a small pebble and let it go over the edge. It plummeted with a whistle until even that wasn’t heard anymore. Liz gulped and eyed Kakri nervously, “No other way I suppose?”

“Doubtful,” Kakri said. “The spikes close those options to us right now, remember?”

“Damn,” Liz studied the blades with increasing apprehension.

Kakri too eyed them though it was more for pattern than actual concern. “If we go after the first one and keep running without letting up we should be fine and reach the other side.”

Liz nodded, casting another apprehensive glance at the side. “I cannot.”

“Don’t give up now!”

“That is not what I mean; I mean that I cannot cross this. I am... I am... afraid of heights.”

Kakri’s eyes widened but she didn’t laugh. “We don’t have

another choice though.”

Liz backpedaled slightly away from the edge with wide eyes. “I do not think... I cannot...”

Kakri caught her hand, “Tell you what, you go first. I’ll tell you when and just don’t look down.”

“Easier said than done,” Liz muttered.

Kakri pulled her back toward the path then stood right behind her almost to block her escape. Putting a hand on each shoulder she squeezed them tight. “You can do this,” she repeated.

Liz took a step forward then instantly took a step back. She took a deep breath and then retook the step. “So go when the first one is where?”

“On the left.”

Liz’s entire body clenched with tension under her hands. “Okay... here goes nothing!”

As the first blade swung just clear of the left side of the path Liz darted forward. She cleared the first five easy but slowed suddenly and stopped. “What’s wrong!” Kakri shouted.

Liz twisted her hair blew slightly at the force of the blades going back and forth on either side. “I cannot make it!” she called back, voice shaking.

“You looked down, didn’t you?”

“I lost my footing and had no choice!”

They fell silent, Kakri trying to figure out how to motivate Liz to finish the crossing since she couldn’t cross yet without her being across. “You stood against enemies that were much greater than you, this should be easy! Underworld, you even stood down a god! No doubt we are close to Terra now!”

Kakri watched as she continued to stand there like the fear was freezing her though she seemed focused on the blades. Kakri tapped her foot impatiently as the lack of response was rather disconcerting and annoying. She was about to pull out more vicious material when Liz darted forward after the blade cleared the path and didn’t stop until she was clear of the next set of five. Kakri beamed at the sight and then quickly flew over herself, the mortal now safe. Liz was leaning against the wall farthest away from the edge breathing hard. “You could not have done that before?” she huffed.

“Takes too much strength to take passengers,” Kakri confessed. “Also I would think Ahiel would have measures that would not allow

me to simply take you and essentially blow past all these traps.”

“True.”

Kakri walked past her and faced the door. It was intricate in design, carved with pictures of days long past. Each carving was painted but the paint was chipped and faded; a couple were completely wrecked with giant gashes across them. Instead of a turning door it had giant ringed handles and a large keyhole. In the corners of the door and extended down the floor she saw thick pieces of the webbing that filled the hall earlier. “We’re here.” Kakri said.

Liz pushed off the wall, walking to stand next to her and studied the door as well. “It appears so.”

Kakri took a step over to stand next to her. “Are you ready?”

“As I ever will be.”

“You’ve done well so far, and I mean that with my entire being. Most would have completely frozen on the bridge and not moved but you did.”

“Most probably would have been smarter and not told a God to shove it either,” Liz smirked.

Kakri’s shoulders shook as she tried not to laugh. “True, but he deserved it.”

The two women fell back into silence and Kakri wondered why it felt like they were facing a battle that couldn’t be won. She knew it could be. After all humans had dealt with the Esaira long before now and with much cruder tools than what they had at their disposal but she couldn’t justify shaking the feeling. She hesitated because she honestly didn’t want to go in though Terra was likely within the chamber. To do so would bring the truth she had tried not to think about until now.

“Are you ready?” Liz asked quietly.

Was she? Could she face the final step in Ahiel’s hatred of humans, half of those who looked to her for guidance in their times of need and when lost? It was easy when she could say that they could simply save Terra and walk out after defeating the last monster in this labyrinth. Entering this room would break the illusion of who was the master of the creature, who arranged most of this. It would destroy the fact that after they got out she couldn’t face Ahiel as the same brother she always had.

Regardless she nodded, “As I’ll ever be.”

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Together they walked side by side toward the door, giving each other one last glance they reached out and pushed the door open. It groaned as they pushed with all their might, slowly parting. Inside there was a dim glow that almost appeared to be coming from the webbing that was visible. Long pillars could be seen just inside showing how massive of a room it was. Taking a deep breath Kakri attempted to calm her nerves knowing they had officially reached the point with no return.

CHAPTER 9

The room grew brighter as Queen and Goddess past the first set of pillars and opened wide. The ground shifted slightly as they walked but not like before, more bouncy than anything. Glancing down Kakri saw the entire thing was coated by the glowing web. She turned her head left and right looking around apprehensively. The chamber was suspiciously silent; Ahiel wasn't even waiting in the center for a final gloating session. She had to stifle a laugh; that would be such a mortal villain thing to do. At the same time he would do it, if only to comment on how disappointed he was in how the game turned out. Liz turned around to check behind them as they continued forward toward the center of the chamber. Looking up, Kakri stopped as the light glinted off a giant thing hanging from the ceiling draped in the webbing like the rest of the room.

"I remember," she breathed.

"Do you think we are in the correct room?" Liz asked over her shoulder

"Definitely," Kakri replied vaguely, keeping her eyes on the thing above them.

"How do you know?"

"Look up. That if I remember right that diamond is what became known as the Blessing of the Goddess, my gift of esteem to your family."

"Does it have any properties?"

"It meant good for them; it meant that things would be better. If they chose they could have used this to buy most anything in the

realm.”

“Instead they kept it safe and in a place of honor by the looks of things.”

“Exactly.”

A loud skittering noise was heard from overhead and a pale form lowered itself from near the diamond. It fell elegantly from a long strand of silk, its arms, both claws and humanoid extended in almost a welcome. It was female, with long dark hair that looked rather unkempt all around its head with dark eyes that blended with the shadows. Its body was nude but covered with almost armor along the torso leaving only the head and arms bare. Kakri reached out with her powers as it descended to find Ahiel’s presence absent. Next to her she saw the glint of metal as Liz formed two daggers in her hands and slashed a slit in her skirts for more mobility, ready to attack when needed.

“I’ve been expecting you,” the Esaira said, almost pouting. Its voice was graceful, unlike its rough appearance, streaked in dirt and grime. “Because of you I couldn’t play with my new toy or eat.”

She waved her hand behind her vaguely and another piece of silk lowered. In the center of which Terra rested unconscious, her head rolling next to her chest as the silk swung and the Esaira reached behind her.

“Terra!” shouted Liz.

She glanced at them laughing at the concern on their faces. As the web swung like a pendulum one last time she flung out an arm and webbing shot out effectively sticking Terra to a column near the floor. She hit with a loud thud which caused her head to bounce off the stone. “She lives,” the Esaira said softly. Its face twisted in a menacing smile. Her tongue flicked across pointed teeth. “For now- but I’m awfully hungry. You two seem to be good to start though.” She extended her other hand and shot webbing out at the women; they leapt opposite ways and rolled to avoid it.

“Oh, don’t struggle. Your friend learned the hard way about that, part of her arm got burned.” She laughed as Kakri looked alarmed at that news remembering the cloth. “Oh please, my Lord was quite specific on what I’m allowed to do. It didn’t eat much flesh.”

The Esaira charged at Liz, Liz swept underneath and slashed at a leg, the weapon bounced off. The Esaira roared in laughter rising to

almost a shriek as her mirth grew. “Lord Ahiel was quite generous to ensure my survival. That means my outer shell can’t be touched by my mortal weapons.”

Go to Terra, Kakri ordered silently. I doubt he would have thought of two people being here. Once she is free, go to the doors and get clear of this room.

Liz gave her a small look as though wondering what she was going to do, Kakri grinned at her. “Ahiel, I know you’re here!”

“Why would Lord Ahiel answer to you?”

“Because I am his equal and his superior at the same time,” Kakri replied. “Unless he’s lost all sense, he’ll answer.”

“You won’t deny me my food,” the Esaira cried. It lunged toward her but not before flinging webbing at Liz. Kakri quickly pushed her power around the queen and caused it to fly throughout the room, landing in splatters as it fell. “You won’t deny me!”

Kakri pushed off the ground causing more webbing to split to avoid the claws coming at her. In the damaged area she could see the glint of gold. “Of course. It is why that entry said that the room was unreachable. You’ve lived here the whole time,” she said to the Esaira.

“I’ve adapted to my preferences, for instance such a waste that pile upon pile of gold. It became part of the floor.” The Esaira swung again, the claws snapping. Kakri launched back again toward the door. She could see Liz now reaching Terra and starting to work on webbing that was trapping her friend.

Just need to keep it busy a bit longer. Kakri rushed to the opposite side and landed atop a pillar that had separated from the ceiling. The Esaira followed the bait, launching more webbing up to the side and raising itself up. It threw out more directly at her, Kakri didn’t try to avoid it, and instead she activated a similar shield that she used to protect Liz. Once more the webbing was thrown all over even some hitting the Esaira itself. Kakri then took her hands and launched a cone of wind at the Esaira causing it to rip from its perch and fall back toward the ground. In a panic the Esaira quickly tossed more silk at the bottom of Kakri’s shield to keep itself from being damaged from the fall.

On the ground it assessed the damage; part of its torso had the exoskeleton cracked. “How?” it demanded.

Kakri grinned from her perch. “You said mortal weapons couldn’t hurt you thanks to Ahiel. Well, I’m not mortal.”

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The shadows grew over the width of the room; they could feel the fury emanating from them. Some smaller creatures seemed to move about in around them and Kakri could see Liz move to brace for an attack. *It's not real; he's trying to worry us. Keep going with Terra I'll deal with him.* Below her she could see the Esaira trying to patch up the damage. She sent another blast of power out, striking it where humanoid and spider met. It reared on its legs, screaming in fury and pain. As it lowered, she could see more of the shell damaged. The scream was joined by a deeper yell and the shadows seemed to swoop in and gather around the Esaira. Kakri watched from above, as the shadow caused its form to disappear from sight as they swirled around. Ahiel was so busy tending to it he didn't notice that Liz had freed Terra and now was going behind him. As the shadow disappeared it streamed into the wounds covering them in a morphing skin that wavered constantly.

Kakri smirked, "I must have damaged her more than it appears. But then, she's meant for unchallenged meals, isn't she?"

"You would destroy life, sister?" The Esaira's voice was its own but also had a male quality to it, giving it harshness. "Drive this species to extinction like your precious humans did?"

"To save lives, yes." Kakri was pushed down by the force of Ahiel's push of power, she quickly recovered and used hers to go further into the chamber and draw him away from the door. Ahiel raised the Esaira's claws and humanoid hands flinging power at her in constant bursts. Shards of stone sprayed as they impacted the walls and floor beneath the webbing. Kakri was on the defensive entirely unable to attack to stop his host from being a vessel for him anymore. That was fine though, as long as the mortals were out of danger she could keep going for as long as was needed.

"So this is what you are trying?" Ahiel sneered. He swung the body back toward the door and waved his hands causing the door to swing shut with a loud bang. He took a pillar that had fallen during Kakri's evading and slammed it against the door held in place by phantom holders. He took a step towards them; Kakri could see the ball of energy gathering in both claws. Liz shifted Terra's limp form somewhat behind her and grabbed a large, ornate shield. Ahiel laughed causing that odd voice to shriek and cackle at the same time. "Like that will stop me." He jutted both clawed arms toward the ceiling. "Time to take care of this plague once and for all. Without

you, chaos will reign again and the natural selection will continue.”

“Why do you say that all the time?” Liz demanded, laying Terra on the floor and taking a step forward. “Even throughout the years of chaos and changing leaders there was still good and order.” She brought her one hand back hidden just enough by the shield she held. “Your plans never came true fully. Sure, the races took on old habits but there was no extinction and that was over half a century left alone. What makes you so certain that if I am gone it will happen now?”

“You represent hope and brought it back together, it would easily fall apart.” The ball of power grew until it blotted out the claw.

Liz laughed. “Like Kakri said earlier, you really underestimate humans.” She heaved her arm forward with all her might as it reached the perfect moment she released a blade which struck the Esaira in the chest where the neck joined torso. “Apparently only the shell is mortal proof.”

“Ahiel!” Kakri cried. He turned slightly as the Esaira roared in pain in its voice alone. “Have a token of my regard.” She heaved a ball of raging wind at him striking him in the back causing the Esaira to stagger and fall to its knees. The ball of energy wavered and then disappeared as shadows grew around the body again. Kakri knew she had to make the next blast be the final one so she steeled herself and closed her eyes to gather what strength would be needed to break Ahiel’s control of his host as well as destroy the creature so he couldn’t simply repair it. The damage that Liz had dealt under most circumstances would be near fatal; its previous wounds meant that Ahiel had already used a lot of energy to keep the Esaira upright.

The screaming of the Esaira as it was repaired faded to the distance to her ears as the wind raged around her and her power gathered. Her limbs tingled as it grew she could feel the air bend and contort around her as it filled with her rage, her passion and her fury at Ahiel. Emotions to him were a weakness but her powers thrived on it. For a split second, as she had almost gathered what she could, she swayed and stumbled breaking her concentration.

“Kakri!” Liz yelled.

Kakri looked over where the Queen of Segennya had tucked herself and Terra since the way out was cut off. Terra had regained consciousness though she looked quite dazed as she hung onto Liz for balance. *I am fine, little one.* Kakri replied closing her eyes once

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more and gathering her focus the best she could. *Nice to see you awake Terra.*

Several more minutes passed and she could feel Ahiel's unleashed power lessen and become more constricted. *He's stanchd most of the wounds with his illusionary skin technique which is a constant taxing on him.* She informed the two mortals. *Get as far back as you can, when I unleash this it will be quite violent.*

She waited for a few moments to ensure they were able to do as she asked. As her senses came back to the room more she could hear the shifting as the Esaira's body got back on its feet. Her eyes snapped open as Ahiel stared her down, her hair as it whipped around, partly obscuring her vision. She drew her power inward to be released at once, rising a bit off the ground, her dirt covered gown whipping about her feet.

"What is this?" Ahiel asked.

Kakri said nothing, simply continuing to gather her strength and smiled. A moment of panic appeared on the Esaira's face as she extended a hand.

"This ends here Ahiel. It is time for you to rest and consider things. Hopefully you will see the error in this." Pushing with all her might she unleashed all she had in one motion. Over the roar of her wind she could hear them scream. Taking her other hand she manipulated the vortex and intertwined both of them in it. She could feel the faint push of Ahiel trying desperately to hold on to his precious Esaira. She kept pouring her power; wavering slightly in the effort to do so. Her vision narrowed suddenly and she felt her strength wane, try as she might she couldn't hold it anymore. As the ground rushed to meet her she saw the bare form of the Esaira fall to the ground limp with Ahiel's dark form around it in a vapor. *I did what I meant to do.* As her eyes fluttered shut she barely registered Ahiel's safeguards overhead breaking apart.

CHAPTER 10

Liz lifted her hand from where it was over her face and looked at Terra who was doing the same. The debris was still settling slightly but the center of the chamber appeared calm from where they had taken refuge behind the pillar.

“I think we can go out now,” she told Terra.

Terra nodded, “I think so te.” She took in Liz’s state of dress for the first time, the piece of gown wrapped around her hand from where she had cut herself to open the door. “What have ye two been doin’ while we’ve been separated?”

“You do not want to know.” Liz sighed. “But I will tell you later, preferably over a large pitcher ale or something stronger.”

“That sounds lovely,” Terra replied as they staggered around the pillar and toward the center of the room. “Wonder if Kakri might be wantin’ te join us?”

“Ask her when we get there.” They rounded the final set of pillars and looked across the empty space. Right underneath the diamond she pointed out as being her blessing Kakri lay sprawled across the floor, Ahiel and the Esaira not too far away. All three were motionless. “Ye don’ think...”

Liz formed her blade back into her free hand. “Come on, as fast as we can.”

They half jogged the remaining distance, Liz let Terra go and changing dagger into sword once more she extended it and went toward the motionless Esaira. Prodding it slightly she noticed the shell was shredded and completely missing in some areas. Whatever

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Kakri had unleashed, it had done its task. Moving up she saw a giant hole in the torso and lowered her weapon before turning back to Terra and Kakri.

“It will not be bothering us any time soon.” She rejoined them. “How is she?”

Terra looked up concerned. “I don’ know. How do ye tell if a God is dead or alive?”

The door burst open sending the column flying and crashing into walls causing both women to turn in concern and use their bodies to protect the Goddess on the ground. Two bright lights turned into women who strode toward them in long trailing gowns. They were Eiren in appearance but Liz had little doubt to their true nature. She gave them a low curtsy while Terra attempted to do the same. “Can you help her?” Liz asked.

One broke away and went toward Ahiel, murmuring something and then causing him and herself to disappear while the other knelt beside Kakri. “You foolish woman,” the woman muttered. “You should have simply broken the seal instead of playing his game.” She looked up at them, tears filling her silver-grey eyes. “She gave you no warning?”

“Only enough to get back.” Terra replied.

“What did she do?” Liz asked.

“She used her remaining strength to break the creature, remove Ahiel and weaken him as well so we would discover what was going on.” The woman shook her head.

“Then she’s...” Terra couldn’t say the words.

“No, no she is not.” The Goddess quickly said. “It will be a long time though before she has her strength back and is able to visit like she does.”

“Eir.aen...” Kakri stirred, the words were barely able to be heard.

“Yes?” The Goddess, Eiraen asked.

“How bad...outside?”

“Very. The palace is almost gone. Thankfully most got out during the first shaker though. There are some decent injuries but they are being tended to.” Kakri’s eyes opened a sliver and she stared at Eiraen. “I knew you would ask,” Eiraen offered as an explanation.

“Ahiel?”

“He is as weak as you if not weaker. He will be dealt with.”

“How will you deal with him?” Liz asked.

Eiraen looked into her eyes. “He will be sealed up for a century in your years. Unable to leave his home and forced to observe the mortal realms. He will be a good alarm system while Kakri rests.”

“Like he’d warn of anythin’” Terra muttered causing her to get an elbow from Liz.

Eiraen smiled rather grimly. “He will, one way or another. His sentenced is also extended if he shrinks from this duty.” Her eyes fell back on Kakri who moved her hand slightly trying to regain Eiraen’s attention.

“You...know...what ... I want...”

Eiraen looked down slightly as though embarrassed. “You cannot do that right now.”

“You... do ... it...”

“All of it?”

“Entrances... debris...traps...”

Kakri’s eyes fluttered shut once more and Eiraen sighed. “You do not ask for small things, sister.” She stood. “Lona, Lepah, Apoxas, Emasir and Jeleo, come to me my siblings we need to grant our sister’s request.”

More balls of light shot into the room and circled around Liz, Terra, Kakri, Eiraen and the dead Esaira. The mortals could feel the power fill the room as the earth shook once more though it seemed to be less. The balls of light grew brighter and brighter as the shaking steadily increased. Dust kicked up in the room causing both Liz and Terra to hide their faces once more- then all was still. Liz felt a hand on her shoulder. She lifted her face as the balls of light darted back out of the room and gazed around in wonder. The room was clear of the Esaira’s web and the body was gone as though it had never been there. She looked back at Kakri and Eiraen, the latter was gathering up Kakri in her arms and standing, apparently getting ready to depart. “You will find all the native traps reset and clearly marked for you right now so you can document their place. This is your palace now, the wreckage has been cleared and what was able to be saved from your former home moved here as well. We have also, as Kakri wanted, opened both passages clearly; expect your people to find you soon.”

“Thank you, so very much,” Liz replied.

“Thank Kakri,” Eiraen corrected. “She might have a point

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though, even with us among you things still go on as we are not here. Perhaps we will see more of one another but it will be gradual.”

“We look forward to it.”

“An’ Kakri,” Terra said. “She’ll be okay?”

“She will be fine, no doubt right now her attendants are returned to her home and readying for her return. Under their and our care her powers and strength will come back.”

“Good to hear,” Liz said. “Have her visit or send word when she is up to it. And tell her thanks for everything. It was somewhat... fun.”

Eiraen nodded and both Goddess forms faded into a bright light that whizzed out of the room. Left alone Liz took the room in again. The entire floor was littered with coins and treasures of all kinds stacked almost halfway up the wall in some places. She looked up at the ceiling where the Blessing of the Goddess shone in the new light. “So...” Terra began looking around herself. “This is all yers now, huh?”

“It appears so.”

“Whatcha gonna do with it?”

Liz raised an eyebrow. “Probably use some to get these more essential but difficult to fund projects going...” She pulled Terra out of the room, and motioned for her to take a side. Right before they pulled it closed she saw a key sticking out of the keyhole with a gold chain attached. She peered back in the room remembering what had just happened. Smiling she nodded to Terra and they pulled the doors shut, as they clicked she took the key and locked it back up, putting it for now around her neck for safe keeping. Outside the blades were still and a level to turn them on and off glowed slightly, laughing Liz ran across, Terra close on her heels and pressed the switch making a mental note where it was so she could write it down. They wound through the rest of the corridors, eventually arriving back at the same staircase that Liz and Kakri had slid down. Now though other paths to different areas on this level were painfully clear. Climbing back up Liz saw from the windows in the staircase a procession of people starting to trickle out of the opening they had come through high above the water.

“Can ye tell who made it?” Terra asked during one of these stops.

“No, but we will find out soon enough.” Reaching the top floor

they found it much more inviting than it was during their last visit. The shadows even in the inner corridors were gone, much more just a dimness due to lack of light. Despite the weakness in her new friend that was a result of their adventure Liz looked around with keen interest and a lighter heart. The building was still dusty from disuse but it would be easy to remedy. They could make out the footprints where their trip had taken them last time including where the floor fell out from under Terra. She shuttered as she hurried past the spot. "So, what did happen after your leaving us with that?"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

Liz looked concerned. "You sure?"

"Aye, let's just say I'll be havin' nightmares about spiders for a long time."

"I think we both might." They reached the outer doors and stopped for a moment; Liz turned her back to them and peered up and down the halls.

"What is it, lass?"

"Taking it all in one last time before the throngs invade and I rarely get a moment peace to enjoy the beauty of it."

"Beauty?"

Liz chuckled, "Yes, beauty. Despite what happened below it still is a nice palace."

"If ye say so lass. Luckily I'll just be a visitor on occasion."

"Really? So you do not want to beat Cat in picking out a suite to use when you stay overnight?"

"Of course I do!" Terra protested. "One that overlooks the water would be nice. Actually let me go look." She wandered back down the hall.

Liz grinned as she watched her walk off. *That is one way to help ease what just happened.* Still grinning she opened the door to see Kellin, Cat and William attempting to calm the masses. They saw her approach and she heard several gasps at her appearance.

"What happened to you?" Cat demanded as she reached them.

"What are the casualties?"

"Mostly banged up, we got out before the whole thing went," Kellin replied, pulling her close.

"But now it's all gone!" Cat shouted.

Liz pulled away and smiled. "I know, but we have the replacement and it did not even cost a copper."

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“Which is?” William asked.

Liz waved her arm behind her. “Turns out this has been here the whole time. It’s already defensible, but will need cleaning.”

Cat shifted and looked around, “Wait, where’s Terra?”

“Inside looking for a suite to claim.”

Cat bristled and looked like she was going to ask. “Go ahead; just don’t touch anything on the walls or looks off.”

“Why?”

“Let us just say this place is very defensible even on the inside.”

Cat bounded off and William shouted the news starting the flood of people inside repeating the warning several times and sending guards to help baby sit the eager nobles to see the new palace. “Why do you not follow Cat, William?” Liz suggested. “I have a feeling she will be in trouble soon.”

He gave them a bow and left them alone as a slow trickle of people still came past. “So what’s this place really?” Kellin asked.

“Our new home,” Liz pulled him close and kissed him repeatedly before pulling back and leading them up the stairs. “Let us just say this has been in the family for generations and provides means we did not have before.”

“You’re gonna tell me what happened, right?”

“Eventually,” Liz grinned. “Now come on, before all the good suites are taken!”

The door swung shut and a bright light hovered as more people walked past and marveled at the sight of it at the end of a prism of color that spanned the waterfall on the opposite side of the cavern. The colors never faded though the light did, ages on it became known as Eirean’s light, another blessing of the Gods.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tiffany Cherney is a stay at home mother, wife and college student finishing up her Bachelors in International Relations. In December 2013 she released her debut novel, Vengeance of Segennya, the first in the fantasy series Birthright Secrets. She lives in Michigan with her son, husband and two furry “kids” that just happen to have four paws and be puppies. When she’s not writing she enjoys reading other people’s books, gaming and essentially all things geeky. She is currently working away on the future books of the Birthright Secrets series as well as other projects.

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