

A woman in a crown and ornate dress with her hand raised against a blue background. The woman is shown in profile, wearing a crown and a dress with intricate patterns. Her right hand is raised, palm facing up, with fingers slightly spread. The background is a deep blue with a textured, grainy appearance. The text is in a stylized, serif font.

< A >  
SWEET, BITTER  
POISON

A NOVELLA OF  
THE WOMEN'S WAR

JENNA GLASS

# CHAPTER ONE

BRYNNA RAH-MALRYE SIGHED and hugged her knees to her chest as music trickled up the stairway from the ballroom below. Under the music was the low murmur of conversation and the clinking of glasses as guests toasted the happy couple. Spontaneous bursts of laughter—sometimes overly loud and long after too many drinks—stirred the hint of resentment Brynna had tried unsuccessfully to banish.

It wasn't fair that she couldn't be there. She was not a child anymore, even if she wasn't out yet. She was old enough to sit at the dinner table, to help her mother entertain visitors, and to wear stays that squeezed the breath out of her. But not, apparently, to attend her own sister's engagement party.

If her parents found out she was sitting out in the hallway in her nightclothes, she would spend the rest of the week confined to her room, but the party was bound to stretch into the early hours of the morning, and there was no reason for anyone in the family to venture up the stairs before then. The housemaids who'd spotted her had done no more than give her disapproving frowns, and she was confident none of them would report her. Tonight was one of the most significant nights in her sister's life, and Brynna was determined to share it with her in any way she could.

Brynna turned her head when she heard a door close at the far end of the hall. It was only the servants' stairway, and she expected to see nothing more than another scurrying housemaid. She jumped to her feet, her mouth dropping open when she caught sight of the figure who'd just slipped through that doorway.

"Marly!" she said in something between a hiss and a shout as she started down the hall toward her sister.

"Shh!" Marly answered back with a glare that would have looked far fiercer if it weren't for the twinkle in her eyes, and Brynna found herself grinning in return. Marly in a good mood could charm the stars from the skies, and the warmth that radiated from her was like the comfort of a crackling fire on a cold night. Brynna leaned into that warmth, which was all too rare in this household. As, unfortunately, were Marly's good moods.

Malzarlys Rah-Malrye was almost four years Brynna's senior, and she was the very center of Brynna's life, her moods setting the tone for each day and night. When she was sparkling and bubbling like this, it was easy to forget the brooding, weeping heaviness of her black days. Brynna couldn't imagine her life without Marly, and she wondered if her sister's fiancé had any idea what he was getting himself into. Up until now, their parents had carefully managed the few meetings between the couple, finding excuses whenever Marly was in one of her moods. Brynna could only hope that—like Brynna herself—he would find Marly at her best was worth tolerating Marly at her worst.

Marly was not a great beauty. The hooked nose and thin lips she'd inherited from their father made her look severe even when she was smiling, which was something she had done far too rarely since the engagement. On this, her big night, she looked resplendent in a midnight-blue gown accented with gold lace. No one could argue that her figure wasn't pleasing, and the low, square-necked bodice showed the swell of her breasts to best advantage. The pearl-and-sapphire pendant her husband-to-be had given her as an engagement present flashed in the low light cast by the dimmed luminants in the hall. In each gloved hand, she held a crystal goblet filled with dark red wine.

"What are you doing here?" Brynna demanded when she was close enough to be heard without shouting. How Marly had managed to slip away from her own engagement party without being noticed was a mystery—especially with Mama and Papa keeping a close eye on her for any sign of an embarrassing bout of melancholy.

Marly grinned and handed one of the goblets to her. "I would share a toast with my little sister on the night of my engagement!"

The flush in her cheeks and the ever so slight slurring of her words told Brynna her sister had indulged in several glasses of wine already this evening, which might explain why she seemed so uncharacteristically cheerful on a night when Brynna expected tears and withdrawal. When Marly was unhappy—which was frightfully often—she was uniquely skilled at letting those around her know precisely how she felt.

Brynna took the goblet but regarded her sister with suspicion. "Just how much wine have you drunk already?"

Marly waved a hand carelessly. "Who's counting? Now, let's have that toast!"

There was a gleam in her eyes Brynna didn't like, and her stomach twisted with a knot of anxiety. Ever since Marly's intended, Darald Rah-Kaisol, had first come to call, Brynna had had a bad feeling about him.

No, that wasn't quite right. It wasn't Darald himself who gave Brynna that feeling. He seemed like a perfectly nice young man, if perhaps a little dull. But Brynna's

stomach felt funny every time she thought about him and her sister together, and she knew her mother felt the same. There was just something about the pairing that felt . . . wrong. Unfortunately, Papa had no patience with what he sneeringly called “women’s intuition.” Mama had explained repeatedly that the gift of foresight ran strongly in the women of both her own family and Papa’s, but to no avail. He had no intention of letting “silly superstitions” influence his decision. He had found an outrageously perfect match for his eldest daughter, and nothing would dissuade him from the arrangement.

“Since when have you wanted to toast this engagement?” Brynna asked. Marly had certainly made no secret of how vehemently she opposed it. Although Darald was an impressive catch as most of the nobility would measure it, he hailed from the island kingdom of Khalpar. Not only would Marly have to sail across the Wellspring Sea to her new home, she would have to learn a new language and new customs. And Marly did not like the new or the unfamiliar. Just the thought of leaving her home and her family could send her spiraling into a black despair that was painful to regard.

Marly shrugged, that nearly manic grin still on her face. “My fate is sealed. What’s the use in moaning about it? Papa will never change his mind now that the engagement’s gone public, so that is that. Let us drink to a blissful union.”

She clinked her glass against Brynna’s and took a long gulp of wine without awaiting a response. At fifteen, Brynna was officially considered too young to drink wine, but she’d drunk watered-down or spiced versions before, so when she took a cautious sip she was not completely shocked by the taste. She still didn’t know what to make of her sister’s mood, and she knew better than to trust it. However, she had to admit it was nice not to have to be the pillar of strength her sister so often needed. The tears and the sighs and the gloom could be positively exhausting, and since neither of their parents had much patience for her moods, it always seemed to be Brynna whose shoulder Marly sobbed on.

Marly reached up and caressed the pearl and sapphire pendant that adorned her neck. It was a truly kingly engagement gift, and Brynna fought down a pang of jealousy. If only she could have traded places with her sister! The idea of moving to Khalpar, of living someplace new and exotic and fascinating, made her heart beat faster. But she was fated to marry a man of her home principality of Grunir. Her dowry was much smaller than her sister’s, so the search for a husband would be more localized.

“Darald will be a good husband for you,” Brynna ventured, despite the twisting in her gut. “He picked out that pendant because he knew you liked sapphires.”

Rubies were the more traditional engagement gift, and Brynna doubted any of her sister’s other suitors would have paid enough attention to notice her preferences in

jewelry. Most of them had seen only the generous dowry Papa had put aside in hope of enticing bachelors who would otherwise disdain a girl with a homely face and a melancholy nature.

“I have nothing against Darald,” Marly said. “If we were going to live in Grunir, then I would be happy to marry him.” She smiled with what looked like genuine warmth. “He has a good heart.”

Brynna fought down a surge of impatience. Her sister was about to enter into a marriage many women would kill for. Her husband was only five years older than she, he would one day inherit his father’s dukedom and the substantial assets that came with such a title, and he was good-hearted to boot. And yet Marly could do nothing but sulk and complain and cry about it.

Brynna felt immediately guilty for her less than charitable thoughts and gave her sister an impulsive hug. She wished as fiercely as her sister did that their father had found her a husband closer to home. The manor house was going to feel cold and dull and empty when Marly was gone, and despite her petty complaints, Brynna knew she would miss her sister terribly.

Marly returned the hug, squeezing hard and not letting go. “Don’t be angry with Papa,” she said as Brynna began to squirm in her too-tight grip. “He honestly believes he’s doing what’s best for me.”

“I know he does,” Brynna responded, and Marly reluctantly allowed her to pull away. Papa believed that once Marly had moved to Khalpar, she would make new friends and put down new roots, and that she would adjust to the new situation and eventually find her way to happiness. “And he’s probably right,” she added, though she couldn’t meet her sister’s eyes while she uttered the lie. Neither she nor their mother had said a word to Marly about their own misgivings. Marly was unhappy enough about the marriage already.

“I have to get back to the party before I’m missed,” Marly said. “You should go to bed.”

As if on cue, Brynna stifled a yawn. “I will,” she promised. She’d had her fill of sitting in the hallway listening to the distant party. “Thanks for the wine.” She set the glass down on the floor, sure a housemaid would come by and pick it up. The yawn fought its way through her defenses, and Marly giggled and ruffled her hair as if she were a little girl. Brynna swatted her hand away with a mock glare. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

The smile faded from Marly’s face, the expression in her eyes turning grave and earnest as she once again drew Brynna into a hug. “I love you, little sister,” she said. “I

can't properly express how much you've meant to me over the years—and how much I appreciate you.”

Brynna returned the hug, though her body tensed as she sensed the storm coming. She'd allowed herself to hope that the wine would keep her sister's spirits up and prevent a crying jag, but there was a dangerous quaver in Marly's voice.

“Don't get maudlin on me,” Brynna said in what she hoped sounded like a teasing tone. “It's not like you're leaving for Khalpar tomorrow!” With the groom's father being a duke, it was almost certain that the Sovereign Prince of Grunir would wish to attend the wedding, and accommodating his schedule could prove a logistical nightmare. The plans could easily stretch out for a year or more. There would be plenty of time for sentimental parting words.

Marly pulled back, and there was a smile on her face despite the shimmer of tears in her eyes. “I know. But I want to make sure I don't forget to say it. I know growing up with me has not been easy, and I wanted you to know that you've been the best sister anyone could ever hope for. I don't tell you that often enough.”

Brynna shifted uncomfortably, glad Marly couldn't read her mind and know how many times she'd struggled against annoyance and impatience when her sister was in one of her moods. Sometimes she wanted to yell at Marly to just snap out of it, to stop expecting life to be so perfect, but—unlike their parents—she'd managed to keep all those unworthy sentiments to herself. It was hard to feel like a good sister when she was so aware of the ugly thoughts that were never too far away.

Marly reached out and laid her palm against Brynna's cheek, smiling softly. “I know, Brynna. I *know* I'm difficult. You wouldn't be human if you didn't get irritated sometimes. I love you and . . .” She sighed and shook her head. “I'm sorry. For everything.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Brynna said, the words rising from her throat almost reflexively.

“Yes, I do,” Marly said, her voice so soft Brynna could barely hear it over the music from below. “But I really do have to get back to the party now.”

The transition seemed abrupt, and Marly's movements were hurried as she quickly turned away and strode down the hall to the door from which she had emerged. Brynna sensed there was something wrong, something Marly wasn't saying, but it was well past midnight, and Brynna was too tired to try to unravel the puzzle at that moment. In the morning, she would parse out everything Marly had said and look for clues and hidden meanings. But for tonight, it was time to go to bed.



Brynna was snuggled comfortably in her bed, awake but not yet ready to push back the covers and rise, when she heard the screams.

She scrambled frantically out of bed, covers grabbing at her ankles and tripping her. She caught herself on her hands and kicked the covers away, flinging herself toward the bedroom door. Her heart slammed against her breastbone, her breath coming short, as she careened into the hall. A part of her had already determined where the screams were coming from. She might even have guessed the cause, though her conscious mind was not yet ready to admit it.

Throughout the manor house, there were cries of alarm, doors slamming open, and the heavy footfalls of running feet.

Brynna came to a halt in the doorway to Marly's bedroom.

A housemaid had collapsed to her knees before the bed, her head down and covered by blood-smeared hands as her shoulders heaved with sobs.

Marly lay on the bed, still dressed in her stunning blue gown from the party, the sapphire at her throat catching the morning light. Her sleeves were pushed back from her wrists, exposing the gaping wounds that traced up the delicate skin of her forearms. A knife rested on the coverlet beside one limp hand.

Brynna swayed dizzily and put one hand on the door frame for support as her mind struggled to make sense of what she was seeing.

So much blood. It soaked the coverlet and dripped down to the floor, the iron tang of its scent making her stomach turn over. There were more screams and cries coming from behind her as servants gathered in the hallway to gape at the scene. Then someone—she was too stunned and horrified to even know who—took firm hold of her shoulders and turned her away.

## CHAPTER TWO

BRYNNA EYED THE VIAL on her bedside table. Papa had gone down to the Women's Market at the Abbey of the Unwanted and had bought out their entire supply of sleeping potions, doling them out to everyone in the household—even the servants. The heavy silence in the house told Brynna that most of the household had taken advantage of the generous gesture. But though she had not had a good night's sleep since Marly's death, she couldn't quite bring herself to down the potion.

She did not deserve to sleep. She'd *known* something was wrong with Marly on the night of the engagement party. She'd *known* not to trust the seemingly cheerful mood, and if she'd only allowed herself to pay attention, she would have noticed that her sister was saying goodbye. Mama insisted there was nothing she could have done to stop Marly from taking her own life, but Brynna was sure she could have talked her sister out of it . . . if only she'd recognized the threat.

Leaving the potion on the nightstand, Brynna slipped out of her room and padded down the hall toward the parlor. It was so quiet even the fall of her feet on the carpeted hallway sounded loud, yet the parlor was brightly lit. Either the servants had failed to extinguish the luminants, or Brynna was not the only person awake in this house after all.

Brynna peeked around the corner of the parlor, hoping to remain unobserved. Although the house was filled with relatives who'd come to town for tomorrow's funeral, there was only one person whose company she could bear. Some strange instinct told her the occupant of the parlor would be that person, but she wanted the option of retreat in case her guess proved incorrect.

Grandmother Oonvin, her mother's mother, was still wearing the high-necked black gown she'd worn to dinner, having apparently made no attempt to go to bed. She was sitting in a wing chair beside the fireplace, facing the parlor door. She held a glass of brandy cradled between her hands, and the decanter was resting on the table beside her. She raised the glass in a mock toast when she caught sight of Brynna, taking a hearty swallow before setting the glass aside.



“Come in, come in, child,” she said, making an impatient beckoning gesture. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Brynna’s mouth dropped open in surprise. Intuition had suggested the occupant of the room was her grandmother, but she certainly hadn’t expected Gran to be *waiting* for her.

Gran lived in the countryside on her late husband’s estate near the Aaltah border. When Brynna was growing up, Gran had been a frequent visitor, but age and infirmity had put an end to that. It had been almost two years since her last visit. She had missed Marly’s engagement party thanks to a bout of illness from which she was still recovering. Brynna had been longing to see her, but she never imagined it would be under these circumstances.

Brynna stepped into the parlor, examining her grandmother’s face. The grief was plainly visible in her shadowed eyes, but she was the most naturally serene person Brynna had ever met. Unlike Mama and Papa and Brynna herself, Gran was only saddened, not shattered, by Marly’s death.

“Did you know Marly was going to kill herself?”

The words left Brynna’s mouth before she had a chance to think better of them, and she immediately slapped a hand over her mouth as if she could somehow shove them back in. She expected Gran to stiffen in outrage at the accusation, but Gran didn’t look even vaguely annoyed.

“No, sweetheart, I didn’t. The Mother would not give me visions of something I had no power to change.”

Brynna took a deep breath and tried to calm the restless energy that buzzed in her veins. Gran was her only source of knowledge about foresight and visions. While her mother had apparently inherited the gift that ran strongly in her family, she had shown little inclination to explore its possibilities. Not only could she not teach Brynna how to use their talent, she actively forbade her to speak of it. A certain amount of “women’s intuition” was acceptable in polite society—even as polite society scoffed at it—but actively pursuing visions, and using magic, was strictly forbidden. Gran had never let those restrictions limit her, but Brynna’s mother would rather die than risk social censure.

“You said that the next time we met, you would teach me how to trigger a vision,” Brynna said, thinking of that time two years ago when Gran had taken her aside and explained . . . so many things.

She *should* be thinking about Marly, cloaking herself in the grief and guilt that was her due, not taking advantage of Gran’s presence to satisfy her own curiosity about

the mysterious power of foresight. She half expected a sharp reprimand—the kind her mother might have delivered—but she should have known better.

“Come sit down,” Gran said, patting the chair beside her. Then she reached into her reticule, which had been hidden by the folds of her skirt, and pulled out a rectangular wooden case, which she opened to reveal three small stoppered vials.

Bryinna’s eyes widened, and her heart skipped a beat. She’d only been thirteen last time she’d seen her grandmother, and while Gran had explained that visions could be triggered by drinking a magic-infused poison, she had declared Bryinna too young to take such a risk.

Gran pulled out one of the vials, holding it up to the light as Bryinna sat on the edge of the seat Gran indicated. The fluid was dark and viscous, and Bryinna couldn’t suppress a small shiver.

“Is that . . . ?” she started to ask, but her voice died in her throat.

Gran nodded, putting the vial down on the side table beside the decanter. “The poison. Yes.”

Bryinna swallowed hard. As excited as she was to finally learn this mysterious women’s magic, she eyed that vial with no small amount of trepidation. “Could it kill me?”

“Of course. Only a lethal poison will do.” Gran leaned forward and put a comforting hand on Bryinna’s arm. “I would never lie to you, child—even to lessen your fears. Triggering a vision is never entirely safe, especially for someone in possession of so great a natural talent as yours.”

Bryinna shook her head. “You can’t be *sure* I have so great a talent.”

Gran smiled and touched her own breastbone. “I can feel it here. Besides, I know my own talent, and I know how talented your father’s mother was. You cannot help but be gifted, with those bloodlines.”

Gran had explained that foresight ran in families and that it was also tied to magical aptitude. As a woman, Bryinna was forbidden to use magic, but there was ample evidence of magical aptitude on both sides of her family. Her father was an Adept—the highest of magical ranks—and her late grandfather had been as well. And whether her mother acknowledged it or not, Bryinna had seen ample evidence of foresight in the women on both sides of her family.

“The poison will not kill you,” Gran finished with a nod of certainty. “Not once we’ve added the proper elements.” She pushed the vial of poison across the table toward Bryinna.

It was all Bryinna could do not to recoil. “You mean for me to do it *now*?”

Gran raised her shoulders in a faint shrug. “You should have guidance your first time, and I doubt you and I will have much time alone with each other in the days to come. Yet no one will disturb us at this time of night.”

Brynna chewed her lip as fear knotted her belly. It was one thing to contemplate drinking a vial of poison sometime in the hazy future, but doing so *now* was a whole different animal. “Shouldn’t I wait until . . . I don’t know, until I have something that I specifically want to see?”

Gran snorted softly, a wry grin playing on her lips. “The Mother will show you what She thinks you need to know. What *you* might want is irrelevant.” The grin faded. “You have no control over what vision you will be granted. All you will know is that you have the power to change it—or cause it to happen. The Mother knows whether you will want to ensure or prevent what you see, and by taking what action you see fit, you will be doing Her will.”

Brynna squirmed. Her family was not a particularly religious one, but this almost heretical talk of the Mother made her uncomfortable nevertheless. The Mother was meant to be revered, but it was the Creator whose will must be obeyed.

Gran had no trouble reading her discomfort. “It’s all right, child. You do not have to believe the visions come from the Mother for the spell to work. All you need do is decide whether you wish to become a true seer or not.” She gestured toward the vial of poison. “It is dangerous, and it has the potential to be a terrible burden. But it also has the potential to grant you a measure of control over your own life, which is all too rare for a woman.”

Brynna’s heart constricted in her chest as she thought of her poor sister, who would still be alive if their father hadn’t tried to force her into a marriage she didn’t want.

“Then why couldn’t Marly save herself?” she asked in a hoarse whisper.

“Malzarlys sat exactly where you are sitting now and chose not to drink.” Gran reached out and gave Brynna’s hand a surprisingly strong squeeze. “I loved your sister more than I can say, but she did not have your strength or your will. I’m not sure, even if she had seen her future, that she would have had the wherewithal to change it. But you do, dear one. You *will* see a future, and you will either make it happen or make it *not* happen. And though I cannot say it is *safe* for you to drink the poison, I am positive it will not kill you.”

Brynna picked up the little bottle, swishing its contents around. According to Gran, the stronger the poison, the stronger the vision would be. And the greater the seer’s talent, the stronger the poison she could tolerate without dying.

“How strong is this?” she asked.

“Very,” Gran responded. “I myself would not drink it, as my talent is not as strong as yours. But you will drink it and survive.”

Bryнна imagined putting the bottle down, imagined telling her grandmother that she didn’t want to risk her life for the knowledge such a vision would grant her. But she knew if she did that, Gran would never again offer to teach her, and that without Gran, she would never have the knowledge—or courage—to learn on her own.

Which frightened her more? The risk of poisoning herself? Or the risk of never exploring her talents?

There was no contest.

“What do I have to do?”

“These vials contain poison,” Gran said, “but it is not yet *seer’s* poison. To make it *seer’s* poison, you must add some elements. Open your Mindseye.”

Bryнна took a deep, steadying breath. Since she had come of age and her Mindseye had developed, she’d had the lesson hammered into her that it was *never* proper for a woman to open it. Magic was for men—and for the ruined women of the Abbey of the Unwanted—not for respectable ladies. Women were not even permitted to light their own luminants, though Bryнна was certain she was not the only woman to have done so when she was certain no one was looking. Opening her Mindseye—even in front of her own grandmother—felt about as proper as stripping off her clothes in public.

She did it anyway, allowing her worldly vision to film over as the elements of magic shimmered into existence in front of her eyes. The air was alive with round motes of varying sizes and colors. Pure white Rho—the element of life—was by far the most abundant. Sprinkled among all those white motes, however, were myriad other varieties that Bryнна could not name, because women were not educated in magic. What she *did* know was that a man’s magical ranking was based on the number of different elements he could see, and that if she were a man, she would rank as Adept. Looking around the room, she could see dozens of different elements—almost all of which were useless to her because she could not identify them and didn’t know what they did.

“You will need to add two motes of El and four motes of Grae to create the *seer’s* poison,” Gran said.

The opening of her Mindseye left Bryнна’s vision hazy and uncertain, but she cast a concerned glance in Gran’s direction. “Which I’m sure would be simple if I had any clue what El or Grae looked like.”

“Grae is an olive green with light and dark spots in it. There are quite a few motes of it in this room, and it’s distinctive.”

Bryнна’s gaze darted around the room and the overwhelming sea of elements, quickly finding that Gran was right and the motes of Grae were fairly easy to pick out. She plucked them from the air one by one, gathering them into the palm of her hand.

“Now what?”

Gran picked up the bottle of poison, holding it up close to Bryнна’s face so that she could see it through the haze of elements. With her Mindseye open, she could see that the bottle contained several motes of an aqua-and-silver element along with the liquid. “Push them into the bottle,” Gran said. “The motes you see in there already are Zin, which is used to bind elements together. It occurs naturally in many poisons.”

Bryнна did as she was told, and it seemed like the Zin motes drew the others inside, holding them all trapped within the vial.

With Gran’s help, Bryнна found the two motes of El she needed and added them. Then Gran directed her to activate the poison by added Rho. Shivering in an imagined chill, she closed her Mindseye and took the vial from Gran’s outstretched hand.

“Now all that’s left is to drink it,” Gran said.

## CHAPTER THREE

BRYNNA UNSTOPPED THE VIAL and gave the potion a delicate sniff. The first scent that hit her was alcohol, which was hardly unexpected, but it failed to mask the bitter, acrid undertones of whatever poison the vial contained. She recoiled in instinctive reaction, her throat closing.

Gran smiled faintly. “It’s a rare poison that smells or tastes *good*,” she said. “We could pour it into a glass of brandy, and that would dampen the flavor some. However, you’d still taste it, and you’d be tipsy on top of all the other effects.”

“What other effects?”

Gran shook her head. “You’ll find out soon enough. But the Mother does not want us prophesying unnecessarily, so she has made the process unpleasant enough to discourage overuse.”

“Wonderful,” Brynna said, giving the vial a baleful look. She pinched her nose shut, then tipped the vial into her mouth and swallowed convulsively.

The first taste her tongue detected was an overwhelming, cloying sweetness that made her want to gag. It was quickly followed by a mouth-puckering bitterness that was even worse, and it was all she could do to keep the poison from coming right back up. She shuddered as the liquid burned its way down her throat, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. This was nothing like the normal burn of alcohol or healing potions. It felt like she’d quaffed boiling water and it was searing its way through her chest. She put her hand over her breastbone as if that could somehow calm the fire.

Her heart beat loud and hard, and her body was suddenly drenched in sweat. The burning sensation continued and intensified. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes as she gave Gran a desperate look. She tried to beg for help, for an antidote. Tried to say she’d changed her mind. But no words would form.

Gran’s eyes held a hint of sympathy, though her tone when she spoke was matter-of-fact. “Your body is reacting to the poison,” she said. “I’m afraid it’s going to get worse before it gets better. There’s nothing you can do now except let it run its course.”

Brynna tried to rise from her chair, as if she could run away from the pain and misery, but her legs wouldn’t hold her and she collapsed to her knees, her breath sawing loudly in and out of her lungs. She clutched her throat with both hands. The burning continued to spread through her chest and into her belly, the pain so great that black spots began to dance in her vision.

Everything she knew about foresight, about triggering visions, she had learned from Grandmother Oonvin. It had never for a moment occurred to her that her trust might be misplaced, that Gran might not actually know what she was talking about. Was it possible Papa was right, and all this talk of women's intuition and foresight and family talents was just superstitious nonsense? Had Brynna just blindly, stupidly drunk a poison that was in the process of killing her?

The black spots multiplied and swarmed until they became so dense she could see nothing through them. Brynna could no longer feel her body, could no longer feel the floor beneath her knees. She wasn't even sure if she was still *on* her knees or whether she'd collapsed entirely. The pain was still present, but it seemed distant, no longer so important.

Then the sea of blackness before her eyes parted like curtains, forming a circular opening like a window at its center. Through that window, Brynna looked down as if from a great height and saw the inside of what appeared to be a massive temple. It was larger than any temple she'd seen in Grunir. So large, in fact, that she was certain it was located in one of the Seven Wells rather than in one of the smaller principalities like her home.

On the ground floor were countless rows of ornately carved wooden pews, each filled to capacity with lords and ladies in formal attire. On the second floor were even more pews, still beautifully carved, but simpler. The folk sitting in these pews were also dressed in formal attire, though the fabrics were plainer and there were far fewer jewels and furs. Minor gentry, at a guess.

At the front of the temple was a raised dais at the top of three velvet-covered steps, and on that dais was a magnificent gilded throne with a smaller but no less ornate one to its right. The view was from too great a height for Brynna to make out the figures who were seated on those thrones, though she could see that the king's velvet mantle was draped over the sides of the throne and the queen's train was pooled at her feet.

There were very few ceremonies that would require the level of formality that Brynna viewed below her, and when she saw a lord climb the three stairs and kneel on the dais before the king, she was sure that this was a coronation she was seeing. There was a line of lords off to the side, each waiting for his turn to mount the dais and bend a knee to his new king.

Brynna suffered a moment of vertigo as the dais seemed to move closer to her—or she closer to it—and the figures on the thrones became more distinct. The king was an imposing man, tall and barrel-chested, with a commanding presence Brynna had

no trouble discerning even from a distance. Here was a man whom others would obey without question or demur.

As the view grew closer, Brynna appreciated this man—this *king*—even more, seeing that he was young and handsome. She did not know who he was or what kingdom he ruled, but he was every inch her ideal of a monarch. He had a few words to say to each one of the lords who knelt before him to pledge his allegiance and loyalty.

When the final lord had left the dais, the king turned to his queen, and Brynna was finally able to drag her eyes from his face.

But her breath caught in her throat when she saw the woman who sat on that throne beside him. Because although the woman was a good deal older than Brynna was now, her face was unmistakable.

*That's impossible*, Brynna thought to herself—and if she'd had any sense of her body, she would have been shaking her head. Marly's engagement to the son of a duke had represented a major social coup for a family of the minor nobility. It was a match considered by most to be well above her station. To think that *Brynna* might marry a king was well nigh absurd!

And yet there was no denying the identity of the queen who smiled at her husband with what looked like genuine warmth and love.

It was herself. Older, but herself. Queen Brynna.

She remembered everything her grandmother had told her about these visions when last they'd met, and she knew what she saw was not an immutable future. It was but one possible future, and by her own actions she could steer herself toward it or away from it as she saw fit.

At fifteen years old, she had not yet put a great deal of thought into her marriage prospects. With a flush of guilt and shame, she realized that her disinterest was in no small part influenced by the relative size of her dowry. Her father had thought it necessary to add to Marly's appeal with an outsize dowry, leaving little left for Brynna's own marriage. Her mother had assured her that, with her pedigree and her beauty, she would marry well despite the modest dowry, but Brynna had always assumed her marriage would be a disappointment in comparison to Marly's.

But now Marly was dead, and all the money set aside for her dowry could be put toward Brynna's instead. If she *could* make this vision come to pass, she would not only have the glory of becoming a queen, but she could also escape the memories of Marly that she was sure would haunt her as long as she remained in her homeland. She could barely stand to *look* at her father after he'd so steadfastly ignored Marly's pleas, and though her mother had tearfully assured her that the pain would lessen in time,



Brynna did not believe it. If she could have left her family and her home on the day after the funeral, she would happily have done so.

Even with her now-substantial dowry, Brynna didn't see how she could end up marrying a king. Yet if it was indeed within her power to bring about such a fate, she was prepared to do everything she could to make it happen.

## CHAPTER FOUR

BRYNNA ENTERED HER FATHER'S study and took a seat before his desk, folding her hands primly in her lap while she looked studiously at his right ear. As she was not due for her formal debut for another six months, she could think of no reason why he might ask to see her unless it had something to do with her future marriage. Ever since Marly's death, Brynna had been hard-pressed to treat her father with the love and respect expected of a dutiful daughter, and it was always to her advantage to keep as much distance between them as he would allow. A part of her knew that she was being cruel—Papa had aged what seemed like ten years in a little over eighteen months—but she could not look in his eyes without thinking that, if he had only listened to Marly or Mama, Marly would still be alive today.

Papa let out a heavy sigh, the sound so loud Brynna was startled into momentarily meeting his eyes. There was pain in his expression, but also a stirring of anger. He was not one to countenance disrespect from anyone—and least of all from his daughter.

“You wanted to see me, Papa?” she asked in what she hoped was a polite tone. But her eyes slid to the side once more, resting on his ear in a way that she knew communicated her true feelings.

“Will you never stop punishing me?” he asked, rubbing his eyes and shaking his head.

She tilted her chin up stubbornly. “When Marly comes back to life, I will be your doting daughter once more.” Not that she'd ever *doted*, exactly. Her father was not the kind of warm, loving figure who inspired that.

Papa waved her words away. “Your sister was a very unhappy woman, Brynna. You can't—” He interrupted himself before she had a chance to. They had had this argument too many times since Marly had died, and there was no point in having it again.

“Why did you want to see me?” she asked, doing away with the careful politeness in hopes of ending the interview before either of them drew verbal blood.

“Because I've had an offer for your hand.”

Brynna blinked in surprise, for though she'd guessed this conversation would have something to do with her marriage, she hadn't expected to find an offer already on the table. "But I'm not out yet!" she protested.

Which was not to say she hadn't met plenty of eligible bachelors. Grunirswell was hardly a teeming metropolis, but it was the capital of Grunir and therefore its largest city. Though she did not yet attend balls and formal parties, she knew the adult children of most of her parents' circle of friends. And more importantly, they knew her. Because of Marly's earlier debut, the gentry of Grunir were well aware of the dowry that would come with her hand. It was no surprise that some enterprising gentleman would come sniffing at her skirts before her formal introduction into society.

Anxiety twisted in her stomach as she realized what her father's words might portend. "Please tell me you haven't already accepted!" She still clung to that vision she'd seen with Grandmother Oonvin—the vision of her marrying a king. A little research on the temples of the world had identified the one in the vision as being the Temple of the Creator in the Kingdom of Aaltah. The current king of Aaltah was too old to be the man in her vision, but he had a son in his late twenties who seemed to be just the right age. But that was not the man who'd made the offer, she was certain of it.

Papa grunted in annoyance. "As you said, you are not out yet. So no, I haven't accepted."

She took a slow, deep breath to calm her pattering pulse. Gran had told her she had a hand in her own fate. If that was the case, then it seemed her first priority was to avoid the marriage her father was currently contemplating. "Who is it?" she asked, only because she would sound childish and stubborn if she dug in her heels without even knowing the name of her suitor.

"It's Darald," Papa said, the corners of his eyes tightening when she recoiled.

"Darald?" she cried, and it was all she could do not to jump out of her chair.

Once upon a time, she'd been jealous of her sister's engagement to Darald Rah-Kaisol, and even now she felt a faint stirring of interest. Not especially in Darald himself—for though she liked him, she couldn't imagine loving him—but in the prospect of living in Khalpar, of cutting as many ties as possible with her home and the memories that resided there.

"So he doesn't care which Rah-Malrye woman he marries, just as long as she comes with a handsome dowry, is that it?" She forgot her usual habit of avoiding eye contact and glared at her father. His ruddy cheeks flushed and his brows lowered.

“You have the grace and the self-control of a five-year-old,” he snapped at her. “If you wish to be consulted about your marriage arrangement, it would behoove you to listen more and speak less.”

Brynna clenched her hands into fists, hurt and furious at the same time. Her breath came short, her ribs struggling to expand beneath her stays. If she didn't leash her temper, she might humiliate herself by fainting. Her eyes burned with tears she refused to shed.

“You can't imagine I want to marry the man who was meant to be Marly's,” she said in what she hoped was a more measured and reasonable tone.

Papa took a deep breath, calming his own temper. “He is as good a catch now as he was two years ago,” he said. “I wanted the best for Marly, and I want the best for you, too. Darald is a good man, and you would want for nothing as his wife. You would be a duchess of Khalpar, and one day your son would be duke. That he still wants anything to do with our family after what happened with your sister is nothing short of miraculous, but you cannot possibly expect to find a better, more suitable husband than Darald.”

Brynna briefly considered telling her father that yes, in fact, she could. Rather than a duchess of Khalpar, she would be the Queen of Aaltah; and rather than her son being a duke, he would be a king. Not only that, she vividly remembered the way the king and queen had smiled at each other in her vision. It was perhaps rash to make a judgment based on one smile, but she had seen love in both of their eyes. *That* was the marriage she wanted.

How she was going to get it was still a mystery, but of one thing she was certain: she couldn't get it if she was married to Darald.

“Why would he want to marry me?” she asked, narrowing her eyes in suspicion. Marly's suicide had certainly not improved their family's standing in society, and marriage to a duke's son had already been a stretch. “Surely he could do better.”

“Of course he could,” her father agreed. “Which makes his offer all the more generous.”

Brynna doubted generosity had anything to do with it. Darald obviously had a keen interest in the dowry that had grown even more generous after Marly's death. “Let's not pretend his proposal is an act of selfless charity deserving of praise and admiration. For one reason or another he has need of money, and marrying me would be a convenient path to obtaining it.”

Papa's face turned an alarming shade of red. “How *dare* you? You are lucky to have any offers at all after Marly disgraced our family! To insult the man who would

make us respectable once more is . . . is . . .” He sputtered, unable to think of words strong enough to express his outrage.

Brynna’s own outrage stirred, and it took an effort of will to keep it contained. As Marly had learned, a woman had no say in her own marriage, and the only way Brynna could avoid a marriage to Darald was through persuasion. A shouting match would only make her father more determined to have his way, and so Brynna forced herself to take a different route.

“Don’t make me marry Darald.” She let her lip quiver and gave him her most imploring look. “I would not take my own life as Marly did, but it would destroy me all the same. Please, Papa. Please.” She dabbed at the corner of her eye, though there was more calculation in the gesture than genuine distress. Later, she would be ashamed of herself for the blatant manipulation, but this might be her one and only chance to have a voice in her own life. When Marly killed herself, she had not only escaped her own unwanted marriage, she had put doubt into Papa’s heart. No longer was he so certain of his own judgment that he would refuse to hear Brynna’s objections.

His anger visibly faded as a haunted expression entered his eyes. He had loved Marly—and though he would never acknowledge it out loud, he was fully aware of the role he had played in her death.

“I will not turn down the offer,” he said, then held up a hand to forestall her objection. “Let it stay on the table for now in case you change your mind later. I will tell him I will not make a decision one way or another until you have had your debut. We can revisit the issue then.”

Brynna bit back the urge to argue. That was as close to a win as she was likely to come, and it was good enough. For now.



“Are you *sure* he’s coming?” Brynna asked Darald anxiously as she curtsied and he bowed to begin the first dance of her coming-out party.

He smiled and took her hand for a promenade around the dance floor. “Stop worrying. He said he’ll come, and I believe him. I like to think I’ve a way with words, and my description of your friend was quite poetic.”

Brynna forced a smile to cover the twinge of guilt at her subterfuge. When she’d discovered that Crown Prince Aaltyn was visiting Grunir in search of a wife, she’d been certain this was her opportunity to make her vision come true. However, it would have been seen as presumptuous in the extreme for a family of such modest rank as hers to

invite a visiting prince to their daughter's debut, and no amount of cajoling had swayed her parents to break with custom. So, determined to engineer a meeting despite their resistance, she'd decided to capitalize on Darald's connections—and continued hopes of marriage.

Because Papa had not yet given Darald the news that she would *not* be marrying him, he had traveled to Grunir specifically to attend her coming-out. As a duke's son, he was also of lofty enough station to attend several parties at which Crown Prince Aaltyn had been present. And so Brynna had asked him to sing the praises of her best friend, Caitred—a girl, like Brynna, whose path would not ordinarily have crossed with his. If Darald was persuasive enough, Prince Aaltyn might make a surprise appearance at *her* party, for a prince didn't need an invitation to show up wherever he liked. She'd traded on Darald's hopes of impressing her, and had not been disappointed.

"Then why isn't he here yet?" she asked, sounding petulant to her own ears. Really it was just nerves. She was *sure* she was meant to meet Aaltyn at this party. She couldn't imagine how else it would happen.

"He won't arrive until he's certain the dinner is over," Darald told her, twirling her around deftly. "Some royals wouldn't hesitate to show up at a dinner uninvited no matter how inconvenient their arrival would be, but Prince Aaltyn isn't one of them."

Brynna tried to curb her impatience. It was true that an unexpected guest at dinner would have been a grave inconvenience, especially considering the time and calculation that had gone into the seating arrangements. Of course her parents would have happily accommodated their august visitor, but there would no doubt have been some tense moments and awkwardness. It spoke highly of Prince Aaltyn's character that he'd been thoughtful enough to wait. But dinner had ended at least a half hour ago, and he had yet to make an appearance.

"Don't get your hopes up too high, though," Darald cautioned. "Caitred is a lovely girl, but her dowry might not be enough to tempt a prince who can have his choice of women."

Was she imagining things, or was there a hint of suspicion in Darald's eyes? Had it occurred to him that *she* wanted to meet Prince Aaltyn herself? She forced another smile and hoped she didn't look guilty. Darald truly *was* a decent man, and if she hadn't had that vision of herself as queen, she might eventually have gotten over her discomfort with his previous engagement to her sister. They might even have managed to build a good life together despite the lack of a spark, and she wasn't entirely proud of herself for manipulating him as she was. She did not like to think of herself as a calculating social climber.

The dance finished with another curtsy and bow. Thinking over her deception, Brynna wondered if it was possible that Darald and *Caitred* might make a good match if she could find a way to push the two together. If nothing else, a little matchmaking between her best friend and one of the most eligible bachelors in all the Seven Wells might take the edge off her guilt.

When the musicians paused between dances, Brynna heard the excited murmurs coming from the direction of the foyer.

Darald smiled broadly. “You see?”

Her heart fluttered with a combination of nerves and excitement as most of the guests turned toward the sound. Moments later, Crown Prince Aaltyn entered the ballroom. He looked exactly like the man Brynna had seen in the vision, except that he was clearly younger. Brynna saw both her mother and her father rushing across the dance floor to greet their unexpected guest. She did not miss the quick, knowing glance her father flicked in her direction as he walked by. He would be furious if he knew she had gone behind his back to arrange for the prince’s attendance, but he was unlikely to scold too loudly when Aaltyn’s presence was such a social coup.

The musicians struck up another tune, but it took a while before anyone could stop staring long enough to begin the next dance. Of course, *everyone* wanted an introduction to the crown prince—and those with eligible daughters were especially eager to make his acquaintance. However, they had to wait until after Brynna’s parents had greeted their royal guest.

“I suppose since I’m the one who convinced him to put in an appearance, I should go say hello,” Darald said. “Would you like me to introduce you, or should I leave that honor to your parents?”

Again she saw that hint of suspicion in his eyes. Of all the marriageable daughters at this party, she was the only one guaranteed to receive an introduction, seeing as it was her debut. So it seemed Darald already suspected her of having used him, but that didn’t mean she had to be so blatant about it—or so heartless as to make him be the one to introduce her to her future husband.

“I’m sure my father will make the introduction at the time he sees fit,” she said. “You should introduce him to *Caitred*. I don’t know if her family will be bold enough to approach him.”

“Hmm,” Darald said—and she wasn’t sure if the sound was intended to convey agreement or doubt.

She looked across the room to where *Caitred* was all but staring at Prince Aaltyn and couldn’t deny the thread of uncertainty that single glance engendered. *Caitred* was

easily the most beautiful woman in the room, with enormous, soulful eyes, lush lips, and a figure so perfect she would probably look just as stunning without the obligatory stays. She was also sweet and funny and bubbly, whereas Brynna had been scolded more times than she could count for looking dour.

It was her own actions that would determine whether or not the future she'd foreseen would come to pass, and she hoped that she wasn't destroying it by arranging for him to meet her beautiful friend first.

Brynna smiled as serenely as she could as Darald crossed to Caitred and offered his arm. The party guests were finally getting over their shock at the prince's arrival and taking to the dance floor. Not wanting to seem overly eager for her own introduction, Brynna allowed herself to be swept into the dance, though she did not give the steps her full attention and practically caused a dance-floor calamity when she tried to go the wrong direction in a promenade. She finished the dance with more attention, half surprised she hadn't dissolved into a puddle of embarrassment at the scene she'd created and praying that the prince had not seen her graceless mistake.

Her father beckoned her over as soon as she left the dance floor, and she could tell by the frown on her mother's face that *she*, at least, had witnessed the spectacle.

"Your Highness," her father said to Prince Aaltyn as soon as she had reached them, "may I present my daughter, Brynna?"

"Your Highness," Brynna murmured as she gave her most elegant curtsy.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," the prince said. He had a pleasantly deep voice, and he was every bit as handsome in person as he had been in the vision. There was an intensity to his gaze as he looked at her, as if she had captured the entirety of his attention. Then again, she had noticed him looking at her parents the same way when he was speaking with them.

"The pleasure is all mine," she said, wondering if she should be saying something more interesting than the standard polite phrases. He had just met Caitred, after all, who seemed to effortlessly enchant everyone she met.

He grinned in a way that suddenly made him look boyish and suggested he had a streak of mischief to him. "I highly doubt that."

Her cheeks heated with a pleased blush. She was not one for false modesty, and while she knew that she could not compete with Caitred, she was nonetheless aware of how men reacted to her. It was not as if she were unused to receiving compliments, yet here she was blushing and stammering—and *after* having made an ass of herself on the dance floor. She wasn't sure it was possible to make a worse first impression.

"Would you do me the honor of a dance?" he asked.



“Are you sure you’re willing to risk it?” she responded without thought, then winced at her own foolishness. The look her mother was giving her should have turned her to stone. She hoped the prince had no idea what she was talking about, but his laugh and the twinkle in his eye told her he had indeed seen her mishap.

He leaned forward and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “If we promenaded to the left instead of the right, who do you think will correct us?”

His laugh was contagious, and when he offered his arm, she gladly took it. The heat in her face told her she was still blushing furiously, but she no longer felt entirely humiliated. Yet she still took a deep breath to calm her nerves, because now that her scheming had come to fruition and she was taking the dance floor with the prince, she found she had no idea how to make herself appealing. She was not the witty, coquettish type, although she would not have described herself as shy. This was her first time dancing with royalty, and with her vision in the forefront of her mind, she struggled against the pressure to shine.

“Do you have an adventurous spirit?” Prince Aaltyn asked her as they stepped onto the dance floor. There was another flash of that mischievous grin.

“An adventurous spirit is considered a serious flaw in a young lady,” she replied.

“By some,” he conceded. They took their places, standing across from each other. He was still grinning.

“But not by you?” she asked with raised eyebrows.

“Follow my lead,” he said as the music began. His eyes sparkled.

“Of course, Your Highness,” she said, giving him the curtsy that began every dance.

He sketched an elegant bow as his eyes roved her face. She could sense him assessing her, and she wondered what he was thinking.

She didn’t have long to ponder, for like most court dances this one started with a promenade. And Prince Aaltyn boldly and with great confidence stepped in the wrong direction, nearly bumping into the gentleman next to him. Brynna’s own move was half a second late, but she stayed with him. Unlike when she’d made her own faux pas, Prince Aaltyn did not immediately scramble to correct but instead continued in the same direction, forcing his neighbor to change direction as well.

Brynna laughed as she followed, giving the lady next to her a gentle nudge to get her moving. Though there were many expressions of shock and annoyance—and a disapproving murmur from the onlookers—the line slowly, reluctantly changed direction. It was so wildly improper—and, to tell the truth, impolite—that Brynna could not stop

laughing. The court would be all abuzz about it the next day, and she was sure there were many ruffled feathers already, but it was ridiculously *fun*.

Several couples left the floor, looking affronted, but most would not risk insulting a prince, even if he was behaving rather badly. When they reached the end of the promenade, Prince Aaltyn resumed the traditional pattern of the dance.

“Enough adventure?” she asked as he led her into a turn under his arm.

“Have I scandalized you, my lady?”

Looking into his eyes, Brynna had the instant impression that if she had given him any reason to think her scandalized, this one dance would have been the sum total of their acquaintance. Perhaps he had a preference for ladies who were slightly improper every once in a while. Which would leave Caitred out of the running, for as warm and witty as she was, she would never willingly break a rule or violate a custom.

“Not yet,” she said with what she hoped was a saucy smile. “But the night is still young.”

“That it is,” he agreed with evident satisfaction.

## CHAPTER FIVE

EXHAUSTED AND IN PAIN despite the dizzying array of potions the midwife had made her drink, Brynna cradled her baby girl in her arms as her ladies finally allowed Aaltyn to enter the room. She'd heard him remonstrating with them numerous times over the long and agonizing night, but for once his royal authority had not gained him the desired result. Still, the sound of his voice had let Brynna know he was there in the antechamber for the entire length of her labor, and that had been a source of comfort.

Aaltyn looked very much like a man who'd been pacing her antechamber all night. He wore the same doublet he'd had on during their quiet breakfast together, when the first pang of labor had struck her. His hair was lank and disheveled, and she imagined him running his hand through it every time she couldn't keep her cries contained. The midwife assured her the potions she drank reduced the severity of the pain, and Brynna wondered how the common folk who couldn't afford potions had the courage to bring new children into the world.

Aaltyn's tired, bloodshot eyes lit with new fire when he saw the tiny infant cuddled in her arms. He approached the bed reverently, and Brynna's heart warmed and swelled. When the midwife had first declared that she was carrying a girl, Brynna had feared her husband would be disappointed. He'd assured her time and again that he was not, and looking into his eyes now convinced her he'd told the truth. He lowered himself carefully onto the bed beside her, his movements so gentle they did not awaken the baby.

"She's the most beautiful creature I've ever seen," he whispered, then darted a quick glance at Brynna's face. "Besides her mother, of course."

Brynna was too tired to laugh, but she managed a smile. "You are such a flatterer. I would not want to see myself in a mirror right now." Her ladies had cleaned her up, wiped all the sweat from her brow, and even brushed her hair, but she was certain her ordeal showed plainly in her face.

"I stand by my words," he said stoutly. "You are the two most beautiful women I have ever laid eyes on, and I will slay anyone who dares suggest otherwise." He reached out as if to touch his daughter, then thought better of it.

“Have you thought about a name?” she asked, for though they’d known for months they would have a daughter, they’d both succumbed to the silly superstition that it was bad luck to name a child before it was born. The superstition could not prevent them from *thinking* about the name, however.

Aaltyn’s eyes sparked with familiar mischief. “I may have a thought or two,” he teased, then turned serious. “I would like to use one of my namesake elements.”

Brynna’s eyes widened. It was common for the firstborn son of a nobleman to bear at least one of his father’s namesake elements in his name, but it was much rarer for such an honor to be bestowed on a girl.

“Your father would have an apoplexy,” she said, trying not to smile. The king was one of the most staid and traditional men she had ever met, and as far as she could tell, he disapproved of just about everything.

Aaltyn made no attempt to hide his own amusement. “Then all the more reason to do it. It is, after all, a child’s sacred duty to turn his parents’ hair gray.”

She shook her head and gave him a mock glare. “Don’t give our daughter ideas,” she said as the baby squirmed in her arms.

Aaltyn drank in his daughter with his eyes. “She is my firstborn, and I intend to spoil her outrageously and give her as many ideas as possible. So we shall use Aal in her name.” He held up his hand to silence the protest she felt obligated to make. “She is a royal firstborn, even though she’ll never wear the crown. She should have a royal name.”

Brynna stared at the infant in her arms. Not only was he going to name her after one of his namesake elements, he was going to name her after the kingdom of Aaltah itself—just as he would have named a firstborn son who was bound one day to sit on the throne.

Aaltyn’s father wasn’t the only one who would be scandalized by the decision, but Brynna’s heart swelled with love for both her husband and her daughter.

“Whom would *you* like to honor?” Aaltyn asked, and since he seemed willing to make risky choices, she answered promptly.

“My sister, Marly. Malzarlys.”

Aaltyn looked thoughtful, and Brynna wondered if her request was pushing a little too hard against the bounds of propriety. Marly’s suicide was a black mark upon her family’s honor, but Brynna refused to forget about her sister and refused to stop loving her.

Aaltyn nodded slowly. “Your family might find that upsetting . . .”

“If it upsets them to be reminded that I am not an only child, then that is their problem, not ours.” She heard the hardness, the bitterness in her own voice, and wished she could have kept her tone more even. Her husband knew her too well not to see the depth of her anger, which had not abated over time and distance.

Aaltyn reached out and caressed her cheek lovingly. “I hope for your own sake that someday you’ll find a way to forgive them. Especially your father.” He looked at their infant daughter and winced. “I can’t imagine how he must feel, even after all these years.”

Brynna reined in the bitterness with an effort. She had no intention of ever forgiving her father, but she was not about to voice such an ugly sentiment on this happy day.

In the end, they named their daughter to honor Aaltyn, and Marly, and Grandmother Oonvin.

“Alysoon Rah-Aaltyn,” Brynna said, trying out the full name. She looked down at her baby daughter, who was beginning to make restless noises.

“Alysoon Rah-Aaltyn,” her husband said wonderingly. He reached down to stroke their daughter’s soft skin. The smile on his face was beautiful to behold, and Brynna sighed with contentment.

Until Alysoon began to wail.

“You have a way with women,” Brynna teased her husband.

“So it would seem,” he said wryly. But the smile did not leave his face, and she would always remember the look of utter devotion in his eyes.

## CHAPTER SIX

BRYNNA SAT ALONE IN her sumptuous bedroom, trying not to succumb to gloom as she sipped the potion her maid had brought her to ease the pain of her monthly. She was almost four weeks late and had been on the verge of asking for a midwife's examination when the first faint cramps and spotting of blood had started, and now it was all she could do not to dissolve into tears.

It had been two years since Alysoon was born, and though the midwife assured her she was fertile and was bound to quicken again eventually, Brynna could not contain her impatience. It was her duty as the future Queen of Aaltah to give her husband an heir—and the sooner the better. Aaltyn claimed he was not concerned and that it wasn't unusual for a three-year marriage not to have produced a male heir yet, but considering how eagerly they were trying, she couldn't help but worry. It hurt that she had let her hopes rise so high only to have them dashed by a bright splash of blood.

Brynna made a face at the sour flavor of the potion and decided to forgo the rest. After those first few pangs this morning, she'd felt nothing, and drinking the potion was more a precaution than a necessity. If the pains began again, she could finish the potion off.

Rising from her dressing table, she paced the room. Both the Abbess of Grunir and the Abbess of Aaltah had examined her bloodlines and Aaltyn's, and neither had found any reason why the two should not successfully combine. Unfortunately, their blessings only guaranteed that it was *possible* for the two bloodlines to produce healthy children, not that they *would*. Nor did it guarantee that any of those children would be male.

From her bedside table, Brynna withdrew the small locked box that contained the vials of poison Grandmother Oonvin had given her. There were still two vials remaining, and she pulled one out and held it up to the light, shaking it slightly to watch the liquid slosh within. Gran had assured her that she would know when it was time to drink them. Practicality said now was not one of those times. She would either bear Aaltyn a son or she wouldn't. No foreknowledge could change that. And yet . . .

The worry had been gnawing at her, growing stronger and more relentless as time continued to trickle past with no new pregnancy. Perhaps if she saw a future in which she had borne Aaltyn an heir, she could finally let go of the creeping anxiety. It would be worth the pain and unpleasantness that came with taking poison if she could finally set her mind at ease.

Cradling the stoppered vial in her hand, Brynna climbed onto her bed, propping up pillows to make herself as comfortable as possible. Her memory of the pain when she'd triggered her first vision was visceral enough to make her break out in a cold sweat. And it was even more terrifying to think that, this time, she would suffer the pain alone, with no soothing words from Gran to help her bear it.

"This is foolish and unnecessary," she murmured to herself, but she opened her Mindseye anyway, adding the motes of Grae and El and Rho that would complete and activate the spell. Pinching her nose, knowing the poison would taste appalling anyway, she poured the vial's contents into her mouth and swallowed through sheer force of will.

"There," she said to the empty room as she put the stopper back in the vial and set the vial on the bedside table. "Too late to change my mind now."

Either the pain was worse the second time around, or her mind had somehow protected her from the worst of the memory. It was all Brynna could do not to scream as the burning sensation in her throat and chest spread and intensified.

Why had she decided to do this to herself a second time? Did it really matter what she saw in her future? What could she do to help herself conceive except spend as much time in Aaltyn's bed as possible and perhaps take a fertility potion if it seemed necessary—both of which she would have done anyway without the prompting of a vision? The anxiety she'd been hoping to avoid now seemed like a paltry inconvenience.

And yet, as she'd told herself, it was already far too late to change her mind. She would have a vision, whether she wished to or not. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she clawed at her bodice, trying to get to her stays to loosen them, knowing full well it wouldn't help.

The room around her went dark, and moments later she was looking through a circular window in the darkness at a snow-dusted courtyard teeming with people whose breath steamed in the obviously cold air. The crowd was made up mostly of well-dressed men, some wearing furs and jewels that marked them as being among the highest ranks of the nobility. There were also servants milling around, as well as some more moderately dressed men and women whom Brynna would guess were of the merchant class.

All around the edges of the courtyard were arranged covered market stalls, and at each of the stalls Brynna could see one or two red-robed women peddling potions and magic items.

Although Brynna had never set foot in the place herself—no respectable noblewoman would, although she might send her servants to shop there—she recognized the place as the Women’s Market, situated in the courtyard of the Abbey of the Unwanted here in Aaltah. The red-robed women were abigails: once-respectable women who had been banished to the Abbey for one reason or another and now were its virtual prisoners. Being already ruined, they were the only women who were allowed to practice magic, and though their magic was considered minor, it was nonetheless always in demand.

Brynna shivered in an imagined chill when her view shifted and moved closer, bringing into sight the large pavilion at the far end of the courtyard. Under a garish red awning was a stage, and on that stage were about a dozen women, wearing only the tiniest scraps of red fabric to cover their breasts and nether regions. They paraded across the stage with varying degrees of enthusiasm—some seeming to drink in the attention of the men who stood before that stage, shouting and whistling and waving money about, others hesitant. One young abigail was openly weeping, trying to hide her face against the shoulder of another, who had a motherly arm around her as a pair of men seemed to be engaged in a bidding war for their services.

Brynna suffered a renewed pang of pain, sharp enough to draw a gasp, as she recognized that motherly abigail who stood half naked on the stage with an expression of fatalistic stoicism on her face.

“No,” she moaned as another sharp pain stabbed through her belly. But there was no denying that, once again, she was seeing an older version of herself. The vision was showing her a future in which Aaltyn had divorced her and banished her—the worst humiliation that could possibly happen to a woman. Because he had not only set her aside, he had condemned her to a life of whoredom and deprivation.

Pain gnawed at her belly as the vision faded and she returned to her bedroom. Her face was wet with tears. The burning sensation of the poison had vanished, but she was still in pain—cramps worse than any she had experienced before. She was too weak and shaky to drag herself from the bed, but she eyed the abandoned goblet of potion across the room longingly.

Then the pain came so sharp she doubled over, and she felt the wet spill of blood from between her legs. She clasped her arms over her abdomen and cried out as she realized these were no ordinary monthly pains.



Someone heard her cry, and there came the sound of hurrying footsteps from outside her door.



Brynna bowed her head in shame when Aaltyn stepped into the bedroom. He must have been hovering in the antechamber, waiting for the midwife to leave. She wasn't sure what he'd been told, how much he knew, but he could certainly draw some of the correct conclusions from knowing the midwife had been sent for.

It was not her monthly that had caused her morning cramps after all. She'd been pregnant with a son, the heir her husband needed. She'd been too ashamed of herself to tell the midwife that she'd drunk a poison—and too terrified that the woman would feel obligated to tell Aaltyn that the miscarriage was verifiably her own fault. Her impatience to know her future had killed their son.

Covering her face with her hands, she wept. She felt the bed dip under Aaltyn's weight, felt his arms go around her and draw her against his chest. She tried to resist.

"I'll ruin your doublet," she protested between sobs.

Aaltyn snorted. "I have others."

She let out a shaky sound between a sob and a laugh as she stopped resisting and let him draw her halfway onto his lap. She rested her cheek against his shoulder, finding a patch of soft black velvet that was clear of scratchy gold embroidery and jewels.

"I'm so sorry," she mumbled into his shoulder.

"It's not your fault, sweetheart," he said, smoothing his hand over her disheveled hair. Her ladies had helped her change out of her bloodied clothes and into a nightdress, but they hadn't gotten around to letting her hair down before the midwife arrived to attend to her.

Brynna swallowed a moan of misery, because it *had* been her fault. Another cramp twisted her belly, and she wondered in horror if her decision to trigger a vision was the very act that would send her plummeting into the future she had seen.

But no. Gran had promised her that she could affect the future she saw, and there would have been nothing she could have done to save the baby once she drank the poison.

"It would have been a boy," she said.

Aaltyn sighed heavily. "Why would you torture yourself by asking the midwife to tell you?"

Brynna lifted her shoulders in a shrug, her face still buried against the velvet. “I figured while she was casting all the other spells she needed . . .”

Midwives—even for the royal family—were recruited from the Abbey of the Unwanted because of their ability to use magic. There were spells to determine the health of the baby, the health of the mother, and the sex of the baby, among others. Thanks to her magic, the midwife had been able to assure Brynna that she had suffered no serious consequences from the miscarriage, that there was no reason she couldn’t conceive again and bring a child to term.

Aaltyn pushed her back so he could look into her eyes, his expression earnest and intense. “You *must* stop worrying about my heir. I am confident he will come when he is ready.” He gave her a hint of that grin of his, though the sadness in his eyes drained it of much of its humor.

“I will do everything I can to hurry him along,” she swore, trying not to cringe at the knowledge that her impatience had already cost them both.

Aaltyn nodded, then opened his mouth as if to speak. Then he thought better of it and shook his head.

“What is it?” she asked.

He licked his lips, and his eyes became abstracted for a moment as he thought. Then he came to some decision, and his eyes focused on her once more.

“I know you drank a poison,” he said, and she gasped in shock and dismay. “You left the vial on the bedside table, and one of your ladies brought it to me.” He held up one hand. “And before you ask, no, I won’t tell you which one. She did what she felt she had to do.”

Brynna flicked a glance at the table where the vial had sat and kicked herself for not thinking of it—though of course she’d been in too much pain and distress when the cramps started to think of much of anything. Her gaze returned to her husband’s face, and she was both surprised and puzzled to see no particular signs of anger or fear.

“I was not trying to kill myself,” she assured him, afraid he would decide that suicide was some kind of dreadful family legacy.

“I know. You are a seer.”

Yet another shock. “How could you possibly know that?”

In her experience, it was a rare man who even believed seers existed—beyond the occasional fortune-telling charlatan, at least. And those who *did* believe that there were women who could genuinely foresee the future believed that every last one of them was locked up in an abbey where she could practice her shameful, dirty women’s magic in privacy.

“Because the Abbess of Aaltah is a seer as well. She had a vision that I would find my bride in Grunir, which is why I traveled to your principality in the first place.” He smiled. “I was actively looking for *you*, though of course I didn’t know that.”

“And the abbess told you that I was a seer as well?”

“No, that was your grandmother Oonvin—though it wasn’t so much that she *told* me as that I was able to piece it together from her hints. And having seen that the Abbess of Aaltah’s vision came true, I have reason to believe your ability is genuine.”

Bryнна gaped at her husband, hardly believing what she was hearing. He had shown a certain disregard for customs and expectations at her coming-out ball and in the naming of their daughter, but she had never dreamed he could be *this* understanding. Not only did he know she had lost her baby because she’d willfully drunk a poison, he also knew she had used forbidden magic. Either offense would be enough in and of itself to send her to the Abbey of the Unwanted. But both together . . .

Aaltyn folded her hand in both of his, squeezing lightly. “Do you honestly think I would condemn you for it, Bryнна?” he asked, and there was a hint of hurt in his eyes.

She swallowed hard, fighting against the image of herself in the Abbey—the image that told her he *would* condemn her, even if she did not yet know how. If she hadn’t seen that, perhaps she would believe herself entirely safe. Still, her heart swelled with love for her husband, and there was no question that love was reciprocated. He was a good man, and though he was fully aware of the political necessity of having an heir, he loved her for herself, not just for the son she would one day bear him. How could she ever believe him the kind of heartless brute who would condemn his wife to the Abbey of the Unwanted?

If she hadn’t just had that vision . . .

“But I killed our baby,” she whispered, tears threatening to surface yet again.

He shook his head. “You didn’t know you were pregnant. And your ladies tell me you thought you started your monthly this morning. The miscarriage had already begun when you drank your poison, and the midwife tells me no healing potion can reverse a miscarriage that has begun so early in a pregnancy. You are not to blame.”

Bryнна closed her eyes, wondering how the Mother could have been so kind as to send her this man. She was sure no other man in all the Seven Wells would be so forgiving. The midwife had given her the same assurances, thinking some of Bryнна’s misery was because she had not called for a midwife sooner. None of it assuaged the guilt that plagued her in spite of everything.

“I don’t deserve you,” she said.

Aaltyn slipped his hand behind her neck and drew her toward him for a kiss that made her insides melt. “I love you,” he murmured against her lips. “I will always love you. Nothing you can do will ever change that.” He stroked some of her tears away with his thumbs. “Will you tell me what you saw in your vision?”

Brynna shuddered and looked away. She wanted to lie, wanted to think of something entirely innocuous that would put this whole incident to rest as quickly as possible. But she’d concealed enough from him already—only to find he already knew—and she owed him the truth after so much deception. And maybe if he knew what she’d seen, he’d be less hurt by her fears.

“I saw myself in the Abbey,” she said, meeting his eyes as bravely as she could.

“Never!” he said immediately and with such vehemence she couldn’t help believing him. “There is no future I can imagine where I would ever do such a thing to you!”

It occurred to her that just because she saw herself in the Abbey didn’t mean he was the one who had put her there. The woman she’d seen in the vision had been about ten years older than she was right now, and a lot could happen in ten years.

“Please forgive my lack of faith,” she said. “I promise you, I will drink no more poisons, and I will trust the Mother and the Creator to grant us the children we desire.”

He kissed her once more. “And I promise you that as soon as you feel up to it, we will do our part to bring that happy future to pass.” He waggled his eyebrows at her suggestively, and she felt as if a great weight had been lifted off her chest.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

BRYNNA HAD JUST RECEIVED the happy news from the midwife that she was once again pregnant with a son when one of Aaltyn's cousins, Duke Draiban, nearly triggered a war with the neighboring kingdom of Rhozinolm. The two kingdoms had a long history of war, and thirty years of uneasy peace were almost undone by the actions of a selfish, spoiled young man who saw no reason that he should be denied anything he wanted.

It seemed that while Draiban was visiting Rhozinolm, he seduced fourteen-year-old Zulin Rai-Chantah and left the girl pregnant. Under ordinary circumstances, the poor girl would have been ruined and banished to Rhozinolm's Abbey of the Unwanted—as if it were somehow her fault she'd been taken advantage of by a man both twice her size and twice her age. (Brynna couldn't help wondering whether the child had been a willing participant in the supposed "seduction.") However, although King Linolm of Rhozinolm had never formally acknowledged her, Zulin was widely believed to be his illegitimate daughter. Instead of sending her to the Abbey, the king demanded Draiban marry the girl. Thanks to a stern talking-to by Aaltyn—and a tempting dowry—the duke had agreed to the marriage.

As a gesture of goodwill—and to help ease any remaining tensions between the kingdoms—Aaltyn traveled to Rhozinolm to attend the wedding. There was no practical reason why Brynna, so early in her pregnancy, could not accompany him. However, the memory of that dreadful vision of herself in the Abbey was still fresh in her mind, and she would take no risks that she might lose this baby.

"You're being silly," Aaltyn scolded her, cross at the prospect of the fraught diplomatic mission and too much time in the tedious company of Duke Draiban, of whom he was not fond. "The midwife said it was safe for you to travel."

Brynna shivered for no good reason. "She said it *should* be safe. That's not quite the same."

Aaltyn rolled his eyes at her, reminding her very much of her father for a moment. She rarely denied him anything he wanted, and she knew if he persisted, she would eventually give in.

“You claimed to believe I was a seer,” she said softly. “Part of being a seer is having premonitions. And when I’ve already seen a vision of myself being sent to the Abbey . . .” She let her voice trail off. She couldn’t say whether her misgivings about the journey were actually a premonition or were just an overabundance of caution. The vision had primed her to be on the lookout for threats to her unborn son—for no matter how passionately Aaltyn declared his love, if she failed to give him a male heir, he would have no choice but to put her aside.

Aaltyn was unusually surly about it, but he did not insist she attend the wedding with him.

Two days after Aaltyn left for Rhozinolm, Brynna almost miscarried. She woke in the middle of the night to bleeding and cramping, reminiscent of her previous miscarriage. Luckily, she had learned her lesson this time. The midwife was sent for immediately and made it to the palace within a couple of hours. The pregnancy was further along, so the potion she administered stopped the miscarriage. If she hadn’t been at home, so near the Abbey, however, she most likely would have lost the baby.

Five months later, Tynthanal Rah-Aaltyn was born—healthy, if a little early. Aaltyn grudgingly admitted that Brynna had made the right choice in staying home from the wedding, and all seemed well again. Draiban had married Zulin, peace was maintained, and now Aaltyn finally had the heir he needed. Little did they know their troubles were just beginning.

First, Aaltyn’s father died—a sudden and unexpected death that put an end to the ongoing celebrations of the royal birth. Aaltyn quietly succeeded to the throne, and Brynna lived in real life the coronation she had seen so long ago when Gran had helped her trigger her first vision.

The grief for the old king’s death and the stress of taking the throne—which Aaltyn confided was something no amount of training and explanation could truly prepare one for—made for troubled times. Brynna was endlessly thankful for her infant son, not sure she would have been able to bear the first few months of Aaltyn’s reign if she’d still been worried about bearing an heir. Aaltyn seemed exhausted all the time, and often when he came to her bed, it was merely to sleep.

Six months into Aaltyn’s reign, Duke Draiban took it into his head that Zulin—still only a child of fifteen—had betrayed him with another man, and he beat her to death in a drunken rage. The moment the news reached Rhozinolm, King Linolm demanded that Duke Draiban be handed over for punishment.

Personally, Brynna thought handing the cruel duke over to face whatever terrible punishment King Linolm and his royal council could devise sounded like an excellent

idea. She had met the unhappy couple only once, and she would never for a moment believe that Zulin was in any way to blame for her fate. And her doubt that the original relationship between the two had been a “seduction” redoubled.

In theory, Aaltyn agreed with her. He actively disliked Draiban, and he pitied poor Zulin. He had every intention of putting Draiban on trial, and there was no question of either the verdict or the sentence. But he refused to turn over a duke of the realm to a foreign king for punishment.

Brynna was in her sitting room catching up on correspondence one day when Aaltyn entered the room unexpectedly. The look on his face was so alarming that Brynna immediately jumped to her feet and crossed the room to him, her pulse racing.

“What is it?” she cried. “What has happened?”

Aaltyn let out a hissing sigh, then seemed to steel himself before he finally met her eyes. “King Linolm has declared war against us and invaded the Midlands.”

Brynna gasped and covered her mouth. She’d known such a thing was possible, but somehow she’d thought they’d at least have more time, that there would be more negotiations. Surely there was some diplomatic solution that could have been reached. How many people from both kingdoms had to die because of one spectacularly failed marriage?

Aaltyn dropped into a chair with less than his usual grace, shaking his head. “It’s not about Zulin,” he said, rubbing at his eyes once again. “And least not *just* about her. King Linolm’s wanted to take the Midlands back from us ever since he ascended to the throne. Zulin made a convenient excuse.”

The Midlands was a swath of land between the kingdoms of Rhozinolm and Aaltah, and was the most highly contested land in all the Seven Wells. It had changed hands countless times over the course of history—even occasionally standing as an independent principality—but it had been a part of Aaltah for the past thirty years, since the end of the last war.

“But we are in a position to hold the Midlands, surely,” she said, the doubt in her voice undercutting the confident words.

“We have more men at our disposal,” Aaltyn agreed. “Grunir will almost certainly send troops to support us, and of course we have kept the Midlands well garrisoned. But the war will cause many more problems for our trade routes than it will for Rhozinolm’s. The longer it goes on, the weaker we will become.”

“Can we not just give in and send Draiban to face justice?” But she knew before the suggestion left her mouth that Aaltyn would never consider it.

“He will meet the headman’s ax as befits a murderer, but he is a citizen of Aaltah, and he is mine to punish. Aaltah will not be intimidated or bullied by a grieving father.”

His body language radiated stubbornness, and Brynna knew he would brook no argument. Besides, he was right. If he turned over a duke of the realm to a foreign king, he would lose the respect of his own people—especially when that foreign king was the King of Rhozinolm. King Linolm had chosen his provocation well, ensuring that he could invade under the banner of righteousness while making it impossible for Aaltyn to sue for peace without losing support.

“Our best hope is for a swift victory,” Aaltyn said. “He’s taken us by surprise, but we will rally. And we will win.”

Brynna shivered, wishing she had her husband’s confidence. “It isn’t right that thousands of soldiers and untold innocents who happen to be in the way should die because two grown men couldn’t settle their differences with words,” she said, angry with Aaltyn though she understood his position.

Aaltyn winced, but he seemed otherwise unaffected by her rebuke. “You’ll get no argument from me, dearest. Some kings, like Linolm, are anxious to flex their muscles and show off their manly prowess at war. I am not one of them.”

“And yet you would prefer this war to handing over a man who richly deserves anything King Linolm and his council might decide to do to him.” Understanding Aaltyn’s reasons wasn’t the same thing as *agreeing* with them.

Aaltyn’s eyes flashed with anger, and a flush of red spread over his cheeks. “Don’t make *me* the villain in all this! It is Linolm who is acting irrationally.” He waved his own point off. “Or not irrationally, really. He knows *exactly* what he’s doing, and his great outrage over his maybe-daughter’s murder has little to do with it. He hungers after the Midlands, and he found an excuse to invade them.”

“And if you had turned over Draiban, he would not have had the excuse. You would have faced criticism, but—”

Aaltyn jumped to his feet and all but snarled at her. “I’ve spent my entire life in training for the throne, Brynna! I know when compromise is acceptable and when it is not. When a man like Linolm wants to find a reason for war, he will find one. If I’d given in about Draiban, he would have found some other provocation eventually. And I’d have lost the respect of my own council and people, putting me in a weakened position. I’m not going to war because I *like* it.”

Brynna bit her tongue and forced another torrent of angry words back down her throat. It seemed to her that men tried to solve too many of their problems with violence



and war, but Aaltyn was clearly not interested in hearing her opinion. And in all fairness, he was likely right anyway.

She rose from her chair and quietly put her arms around her husband. She was too frightened and horrified to offer him an apology with words, but the way his arms folded instantly around her told her he'd heard the message anyway.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ABBESS OF AALTAH was a woman of around sixty-five years with a face so angular it might have been chiseled in granite. The wrinkles around her mouth and eyes gave her a pinched, stern look that surely cowed the abigails under her direction. The red robes and wimple that marked her as one of the Unwanted were meant as a badge of shame, and yet the abbess held her head up high as she entered the private parlor where Aaltyn and Brynna awaited her. Brynna had to admire the woman's nerve, for it was shockingly inappropriate for an abigail—even the abbess—to request an audience with the king. And even more shocking to request the queen's presence as well.

The abbess curtsied deeply, bowing her head and murmuring, "Your Majesties." She waited until the king bade her rise, then dispensed with the show of submission and raised her head proudly once more. Her body language said that she had not been broken by her time in the Abbey of the Unwanted, and if she felt any shame at her disgrace, she hid it well.

Brynna was seated in a straight-backed chair, but Aaltyn had been too restless to sit still and had been pacing the room until the abbess was shown in. Brynna heard him approach her chair from behind, but she did not turn to regard him, instead watching the abbess with unladylike curiosity. She didn't know how long ago the woman had been banished to the Abbey, but to rise to the rank of abbess, she must have been an abigail for decades. And yet her back was straight, her bearing regal, and she showed no sign of being intimidated in the presence of her king and queen.

"I hope you realize this audience is most irregular, Mother Kailix," Aaltyn said, though he didn't sound especially stern or disapproving. Like Brynna, his curiosity had been piqued by the request, and he had just enough of a stubborn streak that he'd ignored his lord chancellor's strident objections to granting an audience. In the eyes of society, the only time an abigail might set foot in the palace was when the queen was expecting and required the skill of a midwife, or when the king summoned her.

"Of course, Your Majesty," the abbess said, briefly bowing her head once more. "But I would not have asked if it were not important."

"So I assumed."

Bryнна felt the slight vibration in her chair as her husband's hands landed on it. She knew he hoped the abbess was coming to them to share a vision—one that would tell him how to extricate Aaltah from the devastating war that was now well into its second year. Rahwell, the capital of the Midlands, had recently fallen to King Linolm's forces, and though Aaltah was not yet in full retreat, the optimism that had buoyed their spirits when the war began was quickly fading. Bryнна had not triggered a vision since the fateful miscarriage. Aaltyn had hinted once or twice that he would like her to look, but he had yet to come out and ask. And since she could only see a future over which she had some control, it seemed pointless to hope she would see an end to the war.

"You have attempted to make peace with King Linolm," the abbess said, her phrasing making it a statement rather than a question, although Aaltyn's attempt to bring Linolm to the negotiating table was not common knowledge. The more warlike members of the royal council had been opposed to making even so tepid a gesture toward reconciliation, and the general public would no doubt have taken the news with even less grace.

"He is not interested in making peace."

Bryнна heard the pain in her husband's voice and instinctively reached up to cover one of his hands with hers. It was an inappropriately tender gesture in the midst of a formal audience, and she smiled an apology up at him. He seized her hand before she could move it away and planted a quick kiss on her knuckles, making her blush.

"I was too stubborn and too proud to make peace when I had the chance," Aaltyn said. "Any hope of a resolution beyond utter defeat for one side or the other died on the battlefield with King Linolm's son."

Bryнна pitied King Linolm for his losses—first, the loss of his daughter, whom he'd finally acknowledged after her death—and now his son in the brutal battle for control of Rahwell. She understood the man was in pain—she couldn't even imagine how she would have felt had she lost her own children—but his pain did not excuse his disregard for the thousands more lives that would be lost as the war raged on.

"What if I told you there was a way to obtain the peace you seek?" the abbess asked.

"If there is a way to make peace short of abject surrender, I would be most anxious to hear it."

Bryнна shuddered despite her best effort to remain impassive. Every night, she tossed and turned as her mind conjured images of what would happen if Aaltah was ultimately defeated and forced to surrender. King Linolm would order Aaltyn's death, both to secure his new throne and to assert his authority over his conquered kingdom.

And Brynna and her children would be imprisoned, potentially for the rest of their lives, though Tynthanal would likely face his father's fate as soon as he came of age.

"The path to peace is far from easy," the abbess warned, her body language suddenly tense and wary. Whatever solution she planned to propose was not something she expected her liege to be happy with.

"It rarely is," Aaltyn said dryly. "Now out with it. I promise I will not throw you in the dungeon if your suggestion displeases me."

The abbess nodded, but Brynna could tell she was still choosing her words with great caution. "If Khalpar were to declare itself an ally to Aaltah, King Linolm would no longer have any hope of a victory. Even with most of the Midlands under his control, he would not have the strength to hold out against the might of two kingdoms."

Aaltyn finally came around and dropped into the chair beside Brynna with a grunt of frustration. "And that is why I have been in frequent contact with King Parstalsan since the fall of Rahwell. I have offered him every inducement I can imagine. And I have tried to paint as clear a picture as possible of how dangerous Linolm would be if he held dominion over the Midlands *and* Aaltah on top of his own territory. There is no reason to think his thirst for conquest would be quenched." He shook his head, his lips turning into something between a smile and a grimace. "While he allowed that I made some convincing arguments and expressed sympathy for my difficult position, he declared himself unable to commit to any military action at this time."

Of course what Parstalsan meant was that, currently, his trade agreements with Rhozinolm were of more importance to him than the fate of Aaltah. Apparently he felt secure that his island kingdom would be safe from Rhozinolm's aggression even if Aaltah fell. He was, in Brynna's opinion, a fool to believe it.

"There is a way you can induce him to change his mind," the abbess said. Aaltyn made an impatient hand gesture when she didn't immediately continue. Her eyes strayed briefly to Brynna, her naturally stern expression softening for a moment before she returned her gaze to the king.

"King Parstalsan has a daughter," the abbess said. "She just turned eighteen, and her father is pondering her marriage."

"I know that," Aaltyn snapped, his impatience getting the best of him. "If Tynthanal were a little older, I might have persuaded Parstalstan into a marriage, but I cannot ask Princess Xanvin to wait fifteen years for a husband who would be young enough to be her son."

"That is not the marriage that I had in mind," the abbess said.

Bryнна barely contained a gasp as she grasped the abbess's suggestion. She remembered all too vividly the vision of herself in the Abbey, selling her body in the pavilion. At the time, she'd been terrified she'd be banished to the Abbey for failing to bear her husband an heir, but now another terrible possibility entered her mind. She shook her head in denial as the abbess cast another pitying glance her direction.

"Spit it out already, woman!" Aaltyn said. The flash of his eyes and angry flush in his cheeks said he had already figured out what the abbess was suggesting despite his show of ignorance. "What marriage did you have in mind?"

Looking intimidated for the first time since she'd entered the parlor, the abbess bowed her head. "Yours, Your Majesty."

Having been married to him for a decade, Bryнна had many times seen her husband angry—especially since the war had started. But she had never seen anything like this.

King Aaltyn rose slowly to his feet, his hands clenched into fists, his teeth clamped together so hard Bryнна could pick out each individual jaw muscle standing out in sharp relief. The flush of anger suffused his entire face, and the malevolence of his stare was such that the abbess took an involuntary step back from it.

Aaltyn was not a man of violence. Bryнна had never once seen him strike anyone, but he looked like he was on the verge of murder just now.

"How *dare* you!" he growled, and Bryнна reached up to put a hand on his arm as if she could possibly hold him back if he were determined to attack.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty," the abbess said, her gaze lowered, her shoulders hunched.

He took another menacing step forward, and Bryнна tightened her grip on his arm. "Aaltyn, don't," she pleaded, and he turned his glare on her.

"Don't *what*?" he shouted, his expression so fierce she was almost afraid of him. "Murder her with my bare hands?" He looked angry enough to do just that.

"I don't appreciate the suggestion any more than you do, but she's only trying to help."

He was so tightly coiled with tension that she could feel the quivering of his muscles under her hand. He tore his arm from her grip and glared at the abbess one more time.

"Never darken my doorstep again," he said, then strode from the room without another word, slamming the door so hard Bryнна felt the vibration in her bones.

A long, awkward silence ensued. Neither Bryнна nor the abbess knew what to do or say.

“I don’t blame him or you for being angry,” the abbess said eventually. “But it was my duty to share my vision. If he marries Xanvin, the war will end. Look into the future, my child, and perhaps you will find a better way.”

Bryнна remembered with a start that Aaltyn had come to Grunir looking for a wife only because the abbess had suggested he do so. *This* abbess.

“It is because of you that the king and I came together,” Bryнна said, fighting tears. “I will not allow you to tear us apart.”

And then she, too, fled the room.

## CHAPTER NINE

BRYNNA LOCKED THE DOOR that connected her bedroom to the king's, although such was hardly necessary when Aaltyn was on his way to the front lines in an effort to shore up the flagging morale after yet another bitter defeat. Slowly, inexorably, Rhozinolm's forces were pushing the front line closer and closer to Aaltah's borders, and it seemed to Brynna only a matter of time before Aaltah itself would fall.

The threat of defeat felt so real that Brynna had steeled her backbone and—with no small amount of dread—asked her husband if perhaps they should reconsider the abbess's suggestion. His answer had been swift and unequivocal.

“Never!” he said, taking her by the shoulders in a grip almost tight enough to leave bruises. “You and the children are the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I will die before repudiating you.”

Brynna's eyes had filled with tears, because he *would* die if they couldn't somehow turn the tide of this dreadful war. “You will die,” she rasped, “and so will our son, as soon as he is of age. And Alys and I will spend the rest of our lives imprisoned. If we're lucky.”

“I won't let that happen,” he swore. “If there comes a time when no hope remains, I will send you and the children away. I have the resources to make you disappear, and you can start a new life under a new identity somewhere far from here.”

“And so spend the rest of our lives hiding in exile, always fearing discovery. And you will still be dead.”

“Better that than the alternative,” he'd said, and it was clear to Brynna that his mind was made up.

She had let the matter drop, and it wasn't only because of Aaltyn's stubborn resistance. In all honesty, she had no great desire to be divorced and abandoned, and there was a part of her that still clung to the hope that there was some other way to save their kingdom—and Aaltyn's life.

And so she had finally decided it was time to use the last of the three poisons her grandmother had given her, hoping the vision would reveal a miracle some action of hers might bring about. Her palms were sweaty and her pulse was racing as she fed the

necessary elements into the vial. She knew beyond a doubt that she was not pregnant this time, but that did not make the prospect of facing the pain any less frightening. Nor did her fear of what the vision might tell her.

Closing her eyes and exhorting herself to be brave, she downed the potion in one great gulp.

The pain was as terrible as Brynna remembered, and she couldn't help the soft whimper that escaped her throat. But having seen the casualties of war, the terrible wounds borne by those who were lucky enough to survive the bloodiest of battles, she could hardly complain about pain that would soon fade and leave no lasting damage. She gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes tighter, commanding herself not to cry.

Even so, her cheeks were damp when the pain eased fractionally and her vision began behind her closed eyes.

Any relief she might have felt at the easing of the pain was instantly banished as she caught sight of herself, draped head to foot in the distinctive red robes and wimple of an abigail. The face in her vision was that of a middle-aged woman, lined with care, and her hands looked rough and callused, with short, broken nails and no jewelry. In front of her stood a young woman wrapped up in a red cloak, her curly black hair unbound and hiding her face as her head bowed and her shoulders heaved with sobs.

They were in a room that looked like some kind of office, with bleak stone walls and narrow windows that showed patches of inky black sky. A simple desk stood against one wall, and a threadbare rug covered the stone floor. At the opposite end of the room was a fireplace in front of which stood a mismatched assortment of chairs with worn upholstery and nicked legs. In one of those chairs sat the abbess, much aged since the last time Brynna had seen her. Gnarled hands clutched a cane, and though her face was turned toward Brynna and the crying girl, her gaze was unfocused, her eyes milky with cataracts.

Middle-aged Brynna took the girl by the shoulders and guided her into one of the other chairs before the fire. The movement revealed glimpses of bare legs hidden beneath the cloak, and the girl hurried to clutch that cloak tighter against her chest as she practically fell into the chair.

Brynna watched her older self put a comforting hand on the girl's shoulder, then gasped when the girl raised her head and revealed her face. The resemblance to Brynna's own was uncanny, and yet it was immediately obvious that the girl was not Alys; her face was more heart-shaped and her hair curlier.

"I can't do it, Mother," the girl said, and Brynna held her breath, hoping the girl was speaking to the abbess. But it was her older self who answered.



“Yes, you can,” she said, her voice hard and implacable. “You *must*.”

The abbess gave her a reproving, if unfocused, glance. “Now, Brynna,” she clucked, “be kind. I told you, the spell will not work correctly unless all involved are willing participants.” She turned her gaze to the girl. “Nadeen, my child, you must lie with this man, for that is your duty as an abigail, and he has lawfully paid for your services. You may choose to drink the contraceptive potion as usual, but we will not again have this opportunity to cross the bloodlines that must be crossed. The daughter you conceive will be the liberation of women and girls throughout the Seven Wells. She will make it possible for you and your mother to change the world in ways no one beyond the walls of this abbey can possibly understand. A way that will give women the world over a chance to truly take control of their lives. And it will give all your suffering—and all your mother’s suffering—a purpose.”

Brynna’s older self looked both annoyed and afraid, seeming to have little sympathy for her daughter’s tears. “How many times have we discussed this over the years?” she asked with evident impatience. “And how many times have you agreed?”

Nadeen dashed away her tears and glared up at her mother. “I agreed *in theory*. But now that I have met him . . .” She shuddered and hugged herself. “I do not want that man’s seed in my belly.”

“He is a pig,” Brynna agreed promptly. “A rapist and a sadist who deserves a long and painful death. And perhaps in a better world—the kind of world we can create if you will only play your part—men like him would face the justice they deserve instead of being free to torment whatever women they choose. Do you think I *wanted* to bear your father a child?”

Nadeen flinched, and Brynna was appalled at the harshness of this older self. She couldn’t imagine speaking so callously to either Alys or Tynthanal.

Then Brynna the abigail sighed heavily. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean it the way it came out. All I meant was that I faced a choice similar to yours. I understand how hard it is. But there is so much that rides on this . . .”

“And it is ultimately your choice,” the abbess said. “Your mother and I can implore you to make the choice we would prefer, but it is you who will decide whether to drink the potion or not.”

“But if I drink it, and I don’t have this child, then you will make my life intolerable,” Nadeen said with a curl of her lip.

The abbess smiled faintly. “I will not be around long enough to make your life intolerable, my child. And your mother loves you, whether she shows it or not. She will understand.”

Nadeen looked at her mother's face, and Brynna couldn't blame her for not believing the words. She wanted to step into the vision and shake her older self's shoulders and yell at her for bullying a vulnerable young girl.

Then the vision started to fade, and Brynna made a soft cry of protest. She wanted to know more—*needed* to know more. Would Nadeen decide to bear that unwanted child? And if so, how was that child's birth going to change the world?

Brynna tried to fight the fading vision, tried desperately to focus and concentrate as black crept in along the edges. Nadeen looked up and said something, but the words seemed to come from far away and Brynna could not make them out.

Then the vision was gone, and Brynna was back in her body once more, shaking and drenched in sweat.

## CHAPTER TEN

BRYNNALAY NAKED IN her bed, arms wrapped around her knees. She shivered and her stomach churned. After her vision, she had tried everything she could think of to convince Aaltyn to divorce her and offer for Princess Xanvin. The thought of spending the rest of her life in the Abbey of the Unwanted, of selling her body to men she didn't want and eventually bearing a child by one of them, induced nightmares. But then, so did a life of terrified hiding, fearing for her life and the lives of her children. And so did the prospect of her beloved husband's beheading—a fate that was seeming more and more likely each day as Rhozinolm's forces advanced, sweeping away resistance and killing Aaltah's soldiers by the thousands.

At least the vision gave her hope that her suffering in the Abbey would serve a greater cause, that it would do some good rather than just prevent some bad. She had, of course, contacted the abbess and tried to ascertain just what kind of spell the two of them would cast to further the lot of women when the future portrayed in that vision came true, but the abbess had claimed ignorance. Either the plan had not yet been made, or the abbess had no intention of sharing it until Brynna was locked behind the Abbey's walls, her fate sealed.

When Aaltyn steadfastly refused the divorce despite her tears and impassioned arguments, she'd tried refusing him her bed. He'd been both angry and hurt, but he was not the sort of man to force himself on any woman—not even his wife. Nor was he the sort of man to give in to the attempt at manipulation. He was hard at work on a plan to spirit her and the children away, and as long as he felt he could ensure their safety, he refused to consider doing the one thing that might save his own life—not to mention the lives of the countless soldiers who were doomed to die in the continued fighting.

And so Brynna had contacted the abbess once more, for an entirely different purpose. She now touched the simple steel medallion the abbess had given her, tears springing to her eyes as she tried to work up the courage to trigger its devastating spell. A spell that was sure to send a dagger through both the king's heart and her own. She would happily endure the pain of drinking the sweet, bitter poison that triggered her visions over the pain she was about to put them both through.

She drew in a shuddering breath and closed her eyes. She had stood by the door that adjoined her room to the king's for the better part of an hour, waiting until she heard him dismiss his manservant for the night. Then she'd unlatched the bedroom window and pushed it open, letting in a wintry breeze that raised gooseflesh all over her body. She shed her nightdress and climbed into her curtained bed. She left the nightdress crumpled beside the bed, alongside a set of men's clothes the abbess had given her specifically for this purpose. Now all she had to do attract the king's attention and trigger the spell.

Still hardly believing what she was about to do, Brynna opened her Mindseye. As with a majority of magic items, the spell in the medallion needed only a mote of Rho—the most common of all elements—to complete it. She grabbed the nearest mote, positioning the medallion on her pillow so she would have quick and easy access when she was ready to trigger the spell. She could barely see the medallion through the riot of elements her Mindseye revealed, so she tried to keep her gaze focused on it as she knelt and put her hands against the headboard. An exploratory push created exactly the creak and bump she expected.

She drew in one more shaky breath, digging deep down within herself for courage. Then she began rhythmically shoving the headboard against the wall, slowly at first, then faster. Her body remembered this rhythm and longed for it to be real, longed for Aaltyn to be beneath her as she rocked. Hated that he never would be again.

She was not an actress, and felt self-conscious the moment the first moan left her lips. And yet she needed there to be enough noise to draw Aaltyn's attention, to cause him to enter the room without any hesitation or polite knock. And so she tried for all she was worth to imagine him beneath her, to pretend she was making love to the only man she'd ever loved, the only man she ever *would* love. It did little to ease her discomfort, and it caused tears to stream down her cheeks, but soon she was making enough noise that Aaltyn couldn't fail to hear it.

He would not believe the sounds. He would tell himself it wasn't what it seemed, that there was a perfectly innocent explanation. But he was nonetheless a man, and he would not be able to resist bursting in to see.

The gasp that escaped her when she heard the bedroom door slam open was not feigned, for though it was exactly what she'd hoped for, already she could hardly bear the pain.

"What is going on in here?" Aaltyn's voice roared.

Hidden from sight by the bed curtains, Brynna could only imagine the expression on her husband's face. Already, she could hear the clamor of palace guards rushing toward the bedrooms, drawn by the shout.

With a sob, she shoved the mote of Rho into the medallion, triggering the illusion spell contained within it. The abbess had explained to her that the medallion contained a modified version of a spell that was meant to be used as a decoy in battle—something to throw off pursuit or otherwise distract and confuse the enemy.

The blurry, indistinct form of a naked man slipped out from between the bed curtains and lunged for the open window. Aaltyn shouted in surprise and rage. Still behind the bed curtains, Brynna couldn't see what happened next, but she imagined Aaltyn dashing to the window in pursuit. The illusory figure would disappear almost instantly after jumping through the window, and the structure of the palace's roof created many possible escape routes and hiding places. Aaltyn would see no fleeing figure, but though the illusory man would have disappeared faster than any real man should have, Aaltyn would find the escape plausible.

Brynna hastily closed her Mindseye and shoved the medallion under her pillow as she pulled the covers up over her nakedness. It was not hard for her to affect an expression of shame and guilt and misery. Aaltyn was still yelling after her illusionary lover, and she heard her bedroom door bang open again as palace guards burst in. She cringed, hating that she couldn't play out this terrible drama in private. But she had to force Aaltyn's hand, so that even if he knew he was being manipulated, she had compromised herself too much to remain his wife and queen.

Aaltyn ordered the guards after the intruder, sending what sounded like two men through the window. Then he fell silent except for the heaving of his breath. She imagined him leaning against the casement, absorbing the pain of her betrayal. She wanted to run to him, to burst through the curtains, take him in her arms, and weep her apology until her voice died in her throat. But she didn't have the strength to face him—not until she absolutely had to. She clutched the sheets tightly against her chest and waited in agonizing silence for him to tear the bed curtains open and accuse her. She deserved it—though not for the reasons he believed.

The silence dragged on forever. He did not bother to open the curtains and look at her when he spoke.

“It seems I underestimated you,” he said in the flattest, deadest voice she'd ever heard. “Apparently, there is no level so low that you won't sink to it to get what you want.”

Even as she flinched from the venom in his voice, she could barely hold back a protest. Why couldn't he see that this wasn't at all what she *wanted*? It was merely what had to happen.

He made a sound of disgust, as if she'd put voice to her protest after all. "Very well, *wife*. If you want a divorce so badly that you would bring another man into your bed to get it, I will no longer fight you. You will relocate to the Abbey tomorrow, and I will begin the divorce proceedings immediately. I never want to set eyes on you again."

She heard the sound of his footsteps crossing the room, then heard the door to the adjoining room slam shut. And life as she knew it was over.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

ALYS CLUNG TO BRYNNA'S skirts and sobbed, putting ever more cracks in Brynna's already broken heart. She stroked her daughter's hair, wishing she could find words that would somehow ease the child's pain. But at nine years old, Alys was too young to understand the complex chain of events that had led to this dreadful morning. Brynna hadn't mentioned her feigned infidelity, but she had tried to explain how the coming divorce and disgrace would end the war with Rhozinolm. She could hardly blame Alys for not understanding. Certainly she herself wouldn't have understood such a thing at the tender age of nine. Alys understood only that her beloved mama was being sent away.

"Shh," Brynna said hopelessly, fighting to keep her own tears at bay. She had also not told her daughter that the divorce would render both her and Tynthanal legally illegitimate. She was trusting that for all of her husband's anger, he would continue to love and care for their children despite their change in status. She could not persuade him to agree with her decision, but she was sure he understood it even so.

"It isn't fair!" Alys wailed.

"I know, sweetheart," Brynna said, hugging her close, wondering if she would ever have the chance to hug Alys or Tynthanal again. Tradition held that women who were sent to the Abbey were cut off completely from their former lives; even their families pretended they no longer existed.

Her bedroom door opened, and the children's governess entered without asking permission. Brynna would have snapped at the woman, except Aaltyn followed close on her heels. His eyes narrowed in an expression that looked like pain when he saw little Alys clinging and crying, though he quickly banished the expression and replaced it with something cold and aloof.

The governess flashed Brynna a look of mingled regret and apology as she approached and put her hands on Alys's shoulders, trying to draw her away.

"Come along, Miss Alys," the governess coaxed. "Your mama and papa need a moment to talk in private."

Alys only clung harder, trying to twist out of the governess's grip. "No!" she yelled, though with her face buried in her mother's skirt, the sentiment was more clear than the word itself.

"Please, Alys," Brynna begged, trying to push her daughter away, fearful of how Aaltyn might respond to the defiance in his present state of mind. "I promise I'll come say goodbye before I leave." *If your father lets me*, she mentally amended. It was hard to read much in his carefully guarded expression, but after last night's drama, she couldn't imagine he had come to her room for a pleasant conversation.

Eventually, Alys was persuaded, with much sniffing and buckets of tears, to let the governess take her away. The moment the bedroom door closed behind them, Brynna found her knees shaking and had to collapse into the nearest chair, her eyes stinging with tears she refused to shed. She bowed her head and stared at Aaltyn's feet. She had clearly foreseen her future in the Abbey, and she was confident the actions she had taken would land her there. But just because she was bound eventually for the Abbey did not mean she would be sent there immediately, no matter what Aaltyn had said last night. It was not uncommon for adultery to be treated as an act of treason when it involved the king's wife.

"Who was he?" Aaltyn asked, his voice as devoid of expression as his face.

Brynna closed her eyes, thankful that she had resorted to a spell to carry out her deception rather than involving another man. She did not imagine Aaltyn would have tried to torture her lover's name out of her, but she'd heard far too many stories of otherwise good-natured men who turned into monsters when jealous. "It doesn't matter," she murmured.

"It matters to *me*."

Brynna raised her head and met his eyes in what she hoped was a challenging stare. "I'm not going to answer that question, so if that's why you wanted to talk to me, you will leave disappointed."

A muscle in his jaw twitched, and he shook his head. "There *was* no man, was there?"

Brynna was so taken aback she stammered helplessly, all but confirming his guess. She had imagined many possible ways the night's events could end, but the thought that Aaltyn might see through the illusion had never occurred to her. The tears she'd been trying so desperately to hold back spilled from her eyes as hope and dread battled in her breast.

Words couldn't describe how badly she wanted to stay exactly where she was, to live out the rest of her life with her husband and her children by her side. To grow



old with the man she had loved since the first time she'd laid eyes on him. But she had no reason to hope such could ever be her fate. If she remained his wife, she would eke out a few more months by his side, basking in the glow of his love. And during that time, soldiers would continue to die in a losing cause, until Aaltah fell and its king was beheaded. She *needed* him to divorce her, no matter how terrible the pain. And in accepting her own fate, she might well change the course of women's lives—maybe even Alys's—by her actions in the Abbey. Whatever that might mean.

It seemed an uncertain promise on which to hang her future, but it was all she had.

"Please, Aaltyn," she rasped. "You *have* to divorce me. There's—"

"You don't have to beg for it," he interrupted. "I have already ordered the papers drawn up." His voice turned hoarse and raspy. "You were careful to leave me no choice, weren't you? You knew I would shout, and you knew the guards would come." He pressed his lips tightly together and shook his head. "You have made it abundantly clear you will stop at nothing to force me to divorce you. I have no wish to remain married to a woman who does not want me."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "You know that isn't what this is about."

"You refuse me your bed and your love, then you humiliate me in front of my guards. I have impressed on them my most ardent desire for them to tell no one about what they saw last night, but I will forever see the pity on their faces when they look at me. Could you not have trusted me instead?"

Brynna rose to her feet, knees steady now as a touch of anger gave her energy. "I trusted you to send me and the children away, but that wasn't enough. I would rather be an abigail than a widow and a mother of orphans. Since you were too proud and stubborn to care what I wanted, I had to take matters into my own hands!"

"Don't you dare rip my heart from my breast and then be angry with me!" he growled, so furious he was practically shaking with it. "I had everything worked out! A new identity for you and the children, and—"

"You would lose your life, lose your kingdom, and let countless soldiers die, all to save you the humiliation of having your ex-wife enter the Abbey!" she interrupted. "I've heard you say more than once that a good king must put the good of his kingdom above all else—even the good of himself and his loved ones. Were those just words, or did you actually mean it?"

Aaltyn's face paled, and his eyes closed in pain. Brynna ached to reach out to him, to take him in her arms and never let go. She had brought about her own fate, knowing full well the consequences, but she found little comfort in that knowledge. Her last vision had shown her that her life would continue after she entered the Abbey. It even

showed her that she would have a purpose there—a cause she clearly believed in with all her heart. She had exercised a great deal of free will over the course of her life, and she'd seen how rare such a thing was for a woman.

She had forced Aaltyn's hand to save his life, and for the general good of the kingdom. But in reality, she had not been moved to act until her vision had given her that tempting hint of things to come. She was doing it for Marly, who might still be alive today if only she'd been allowed a voice in her own life. And she was doing it for Zulin Rai-Chantah, whose death had started a war—and could have been prevented if she had not been forcibly shackled to a violent husband she did not want. But these reasons she did not expect Aaltyn to understand, despite his unusual tolerance for talk of visions.

Brynna stepped forward and put a tentative hand on her husband's arm. He twitched as if to pull away, then sighed and allowed the touch.

"I'm so sorry I hurt you, dearest," she whispered, unable to speak more loudly lest her voice break. "I could not have borne it if you and thousands of others had died when I knew I could save you."

He sighed heavily. "Who would have guessed all those years ago that it was by your decision that we would be divorced?" His eyes were far away, no doubt lost in the memory of the time they had both determined never to let her vision come true.

Brynna remembered Grandmother Oonvin telling her that the Mother tended to dole out visions in small, digestible chunks, that one couldn't always tell where the road one traveled would lead. If Brynna's first vision in the days after Marly's death had shown her how her marriage to Aaltyn would end, would she have married him anyway?

Looking back now, Brynna felt no regret that she had not married Darald as her father had originally wanted. She would not give up the decade she had spent as Aaltyn's wife, nor would she give up the precious children she had borne him. But if she'd known at the age of fifteen where the marriage would lead . . .

The Mother had been right not to show her. If, indeed, the Mother was behind the visions.

"Even knowing it would end this way," she said, "I would still have married you." She didn't know if the assurance would make Aaltyn feel any better, but she found it eased her own mind to say it. "You were the best husband I ever could have hoped for, and I will love you until the day I die."

He finally pulled away from the touch of her hand, his eyes now suspiciously shiny. He looked like a man on the verge of shattering, and Brynna wished she could find some way to ease the pain of this parting for both of them. He opened his mouth

to say something, then shuddered and shook his head. He took a step back, half turning toward the door and not meeting her eyes.

“I will not visit you in . . . that place,” he said to the floor. “I am not man enough to bear it. I am sorry. When we say goodbye, it will truly be goodbye.”

The words hurt—oh, how they hurt!—but they came as no surprise. “It’s probably for the best.” He would not want to see her wearing the red robes, nor imagine her servicing other men; and she would not want to think of him lying with his new wife, maybe even coming to love her.

“You will not hold our children responsible for my actions,” she said, uncertain whether she was making a statement or asking a question.

“Of course not,” he answered with gratifying swiftness. “They will be declared illegitimate, naturally, but I could never stop loving them. You need not fear for them. But then you already knew that.”

She nodded. Aaltyn was a good father. A good *man*. If there were more men like him—and fewer like King Linolm and Duke Draiban—the world would be a better place.

“Goodbye, Brynna,” he said, looking her in the eye, making no attempt to hide his anguish. “I wish . . .” He shook his head. “Goodbye,” he said again with a defeated sigh.

“Goodbye, my love,” she responded. The finality of those words clawed at her heart, and her knees began shaking again.

It was strength of will alone that kept her on her feet and kept her from reaching out to him to beg him to stay as he turned from her and walked to the door. She could read his reluctance in every step, see how slowly he moved, as if hoping against hope she would change her mind. She bit down on her cheek until she tasted blood, fighting her desperate need to cry out, to take everything back and stay by his side.

Then the door closed behind him, and she heard his footsteps retreating down the hall. Her fate was sealed, and before the day was out, she would leave behind everything she knew and everyone she loved.

“Your suffering will have a purpose,” she murmured to herself, clinging to the vision of her future. She *had* to believe that what she’d seen was the truth, that her time in the Abbey would lead to something positive, something that would improve the lives of countless other women in the years to come.

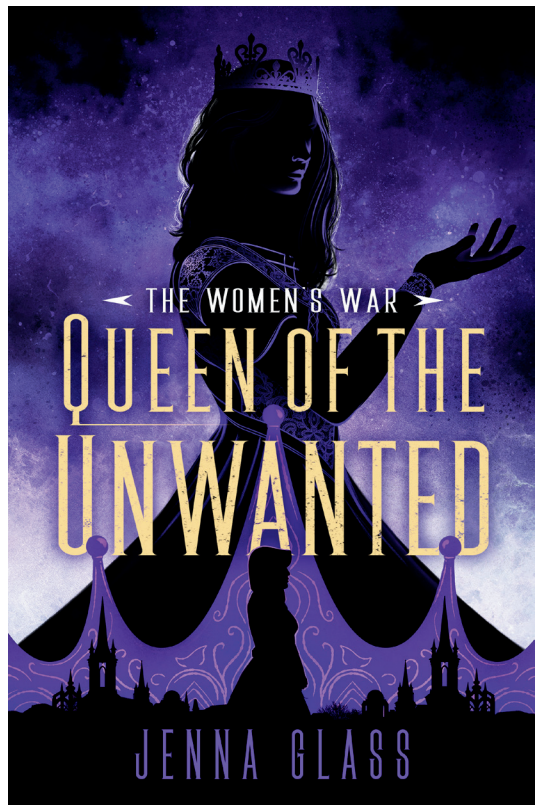
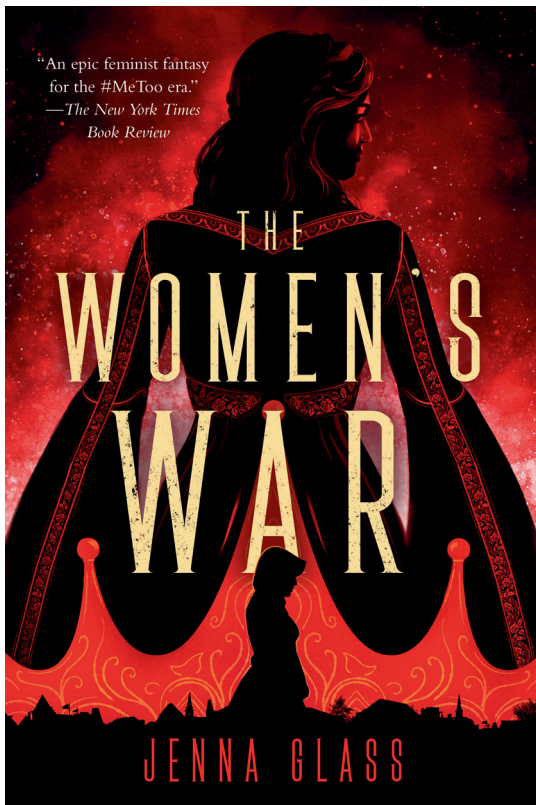
*She will make it possible for you and your mother to change the world in ways no one beyond the walls of this Abbey can possibly understand, her future self had said. A way that will give women the world over a chance to truly take control of their lives.*

She drew in a shaking breath. She'd have felt better about this hypothetical future if she knew exactly what she and the abbess and her future daughter would be hoping to achieve by crossing certain bloodlines. And she wished she knew whether they would succeed.

But for now, hope was all she had.

It would have to be enough.

# THE STORY CONTINUES . . .



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