

The Sovereign of the Cliffs
(First three chapters)

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Prologue

Fog swirled through the red boulders that marked Asylum's boundary, the last tangible reality before the Nothingness Beyond. The boundary created a distinct line of rust-colored rock and the spongy material that made up the Nothingness, but more than the change in terrain, the clearest indication of Goddess's domain and whatever lay beyond it was the buttress of mists. Impenitible beyond the border, thinner on the solid ground, the fog was the only sky many in Asylum had ever seen. Concealed in the fog and crouching among the sacred stones, a red-robed woman examined Asylum's hovels with her cowl pulled up and her gray mask down so her companions—one who crouched behind her, the other bound and gagged at their feet—could not see her face. The first of her companions, a goddess-guard, had a steely resolve though her face belied her underlying nervousness. Goddess had forbidden any to approach the border without approval. The goddess-guard was used to enforcing such rules, not breaking them, but the woman in the cowl didn't heed such rules—it was she who had suggested them to Goddess in the first place.

She had many names, the woman who guided and side-stepped the queen—Architect, Knife in the Night, Second-to-God, Spider—but she called herself Carver.

She had named herself thus because she *enjoyed* carving. Necessary as her other machinations and behind-the-curtain assassinations were, she still had an artist's heart. Nothing matched the satisfaction of a chisel or whittling knife in her experienced hands, instruments she'd cleverly used to shape and cleave stones and fools alike. Carver relished transforming something rough into structure and beauty. Even now, as her hands rested on a giant, unformed rock, she felt the shape it might take: a ferocious serpentine creature, curled in a restful pose. Hers was not the arcane sense of a god, only the subtler, experienced instinct of an artisan. She sighed. Such carvings were not to be. Goddess only permitted her own likeness, and those of her daughter or the Umbral Beast, useful

images to be displayed during the True Sacrifice festival, images to foster fear and awe in her subjects. Carver still carved, of course, but like everything she did, her creations were small, private. Hers was not the grand gesture. All Goddess saw were the works Carver permitted her to see.

For a moment, Carver stopped watching the town and turned towards the mists. No one knew what lay beyond; those few who had ventured more than a rope's length in never returned, and the only thing that had ever immerged was the Umbral Beast, some four hundred years ago. The shadowcats and umbramice seemed disinterested in the border, crossing at will, which told Carver there must be *something* out there, but when Carver had once stepped into the void, feeling the spongy, moist nothing beneath, suffocating on the thinness of the air, blinded by the thickness of the claustrophobic mist, she had not explored further. She was willing to take risks, but she needed to know what the rewards might be. A life in shdow here was still better than death. And yet, she often wondered if those who'd ventured farther had found something better than Goddess offered, more than mere safety, but freedom.

At a sound of skittering stones, Carver trained her dark eyes, still hidden behind her mask, past the gravel field to Asylum, the town Carver called Prison.

The ever-present mists clung to Prison's mud hovels and moss-covered walls. Though the stones and mud were burnt red in bright daylight, the fog gave the whole scene a blue-green wash.

She studied the shadows between the hovels, mentally tracing the outlines of the street, up from the lowest shacks to the top of Prison's central hill where Goddess's estate perched with its derelict towers. She did not yet see the person she watched for, but she could hear his clumsy footfall.

Finally, his tall shadow appeared in the dim. Moonstar stepped out of an alley and crept toward the boulders. He wore the finely dyed antique cloak Carver had supplied him months ago. Vibrant blue in other light, the cloak was vaguely pale among the mists. Wearing the rough moss-

linen made in Asylum, his clothing might identify him as one of Goddess's few elites. But his dark complexion and the black curls tied atop his head clearly marked him as alien, for all those in Prison were as pale as she, untouched by direct sunlight. She watched his path with interest.

She had discovered weeks ago that he'd managed to escape the quarters she'd provided him, and she'd permitted his escapades, interested in what he would do with his freedom. Now she watched, to see where he might go. As she'd suspected, he made his way out of the shadows and through the scattered stones toward the Water Cave, several boulders distant from the one she hid behind. Their lack of a shared language made communicating difficult, so she couldn't know where he had come from, but there were only two choices: He had come from the Nothingness, and therefore new how to cross it to whatever else the mists contained, or he'd arrived through the Water Cave, which meant he had somehow opened the gate therein. As Moonstar slipped into the Water Cave's darkness, Carver turned to the goddess-guard behind her.

The woman's face was wide-eyed. She'd never seen a person so dark. She'd never seen an outsider. Her face showed a mix of anger and fear—she clearly believed the stories Goddess had told, that Asylum was safety, that Goddess had created this bubble of reality apart from the world to keep them safe. If Moonstar was an outsider, he would need to be hunted and killed immediately.

The goddess-guard, named Drazyt—which meant Reckless Ambition, who in her youth had been called Ugly Anger and Betrayal's Advocate—was the latest of Carver's pawns, and it had taken much moving of pieces and many hushed conversations, stroking the girl's ego, to convince her that Moonstar's presence in Asylum must be kept secret for a while longer before he was delivered to Goddess.

“Go,” Carver whispered, nodding to Drazyt. The girl swallowed once with anxiety but then wore her warrior's training like a mask. With her stoic face, the red moss-leather armor, the sacred, serrated daggers on each hip, she looked every bit the killer she'd been trained to be. She stood and

almost effortlessly pulled their third companion to his feet—he was Nameless Except As Sacrifice, decreed so by the Goddess, for he was a traitor. Carver knew his old names, of course, because she had guided and mentored him in his sabatoge. It was also she who had reported his crimes in order to hide her much larger plots. And now, he would serve her one last time, not as a sacrifice for Goddess, but against her. Drazyt would need the sacrifice to unlock the potential of the goddess-blood, a vial of which she had been instructed to steal before meeting Carver among the stones.

Carver felt some small remorse but no regret as she watched Drazyt drag the Nameless Sacrifice noisily across the rocks. He had been a good man and a useful tool. But sacrificing a pawn or two was essential to take the queen.

Carver didn't dare laugh—the night was too still, even with the shuffling of stones—but she allowed herself a tight smile as she watched the pair stomp toward the Water Cave, a deep hollow in the largest of boulders, the only stone that lay directly across the boundary of Prison and the Nothingness. Clean, cold water trickled from its dark recess; the stream emptied into a pool only Goddess and her daughter were permitted to bathe in and from which only shadowcats ever dared drink.

Carver had instructed Drazyt to rough up Moonstar. A small display of violence and, Carver predicted, Moonstar would crawl back to her care with proof that her warnings of a deranged Goddess were true. It was a risk, as Drazyt was known for her overly aggressive style, but should it go too far, Carver would still be pleased: Moonstar deserved whatever punishment he received for leaving the safe quarters she'd provided him. She'd found him injured among the stones nearly a year ago. She'd used her own meager supplies to nurse him to health. If anyone else had found him, he would have been killed immediately. Carver had long hoped Moonstar might be useful in escaping Prison, but she'd yet to see any signs of his usefulness except that he seemed able to escape her quarters, and she'd not yet figured out how. He irked her, unlike the boulders she rested against,

unlike fools like Drazyt, or even the power-filled Goddess, when Carver touched Moonstar, she did not know what form she might chisel him into. That fact alone impressed her, intrigued her, angered her. She was not used to being out-manuevered. She'd grown impatient with honing him and disturbed by his inability or unwillingness to explain himself. Tonight was his test. Prove himself useful or lose Carver's protection.

As soon as Drazyt and the Sacrifice entered the Water Cave, Carver heard Moonstar shout. Drazyt also yelled, a ferocity that echoed eerily amid the quiet stones. But suddenly, everything went quiet. The ground itself seemed to vibrate with the sudden stillness.

Carver waited, the smile slipping from her face as anticipation turned to anguish. For nearly ten minutes, the silence lingered. She had expected a noisy fight. She was not prepared for calm.

Then, Moonstar limped out of the Water Cave, looking around him in dazed confusion, one hand on his head. He turned on unsteady feet to look into the cave's darkness, then shuffled back inside.

Had he killed Drazyt? Carver didn't think that was possible, not with Moonstar's slender frame and Drazyt's ruthless goddess-guard training. Carver crept closer to the Water Cave, moving silently on the stones. She darted behind another boulder as Moonstar emerged again.

Through the distance and fog, Carver could only see that his dark, curly hair was slicked with blood and sweat. His fine cloak did less to warm him and more to impede his progress.

Carver held her breath. She couldn't fathom how her pampered guest could have bested the trained warrior, especially when Drazyt had goddess-blood and a sacrifice to fuel her. Moonstar slipped on the stones, cursing in his alien tongue as he hit the rocks. He lay quietly for more than a minute, his hands struggling to find purchase in the loose gravel. He paused several times, closing his eyes to concentrate, his body visibly shaking. Finally, he picked himself up, rubbing his arms and knees to ease the pain from the fall. Steadied, he shuffled forward again, one hand still on his

bleeding head. She had the momentary thought to follow him, to ensure his safe return to the room she'd hidden him in. If he were useful, then him getting caught would end all her hopes. But if she approached him now, he would know she'd been following him, which would risk the fragile trust they'd established. She sank into the rocks, remaining unseen, trusting that whatever skill he'd used to escape her rooms and explore Asylum undetected would serve him just as well as he returned.

Only when Moonstar had slipped into Prison's shadows did Carver dare leave her hiding spot and approach the Water Cave.

Her slippers feet made no sound on the stones, for she respected them and felt in turn that they would keep her secrets. Just outside the cave, she listened, hearing nothing more than trickling water. She stepped closer, peering inside. She expected to find the sacrifice dead, to see Drazyt's corpse with her own dagger in her throat. She expected tracks, some sign of a struggle.

She found none of those things.

She walked the perimeter of the small cave, finding mere spots of blood on the red stones. The small pool of water at the cave's center looked faintly tinged red, but no bodies. She looked to the back wall, the one that rested exactly where Prison ended and the Nothingness began. After she had circled the pool several times and was convinced there was no trick, she rested her hand against the wall. A familiar, faint outline appeared just under the surface of the stone, a barely glowing line in the shape of a decorative arch.

This gate had many names, all of which Goddess had forced history to forget, less her subjects question the name *Asylum*. But Carver remembered all the door's names: Pocket's Escape. The Wall That Will Not Open. The Forsaken Gate. Cat's Playground. Asylum's Assurance.

Had Moonstar opened the door? That was the best Carver could have hoped for. But if he could open the door, why had he sent Drazyt through and not himself? For a brief moment, Carver

believed Goddess's great lie: the outsiders wanted what they had. Moonstar would take everything from her.

But she had nothing except her mask and cowl, lifetimes of secrets. These were the parts of herself she'd taken up in Prison, and she would gladly shed of that to be free again. When she was free, far from Goddess, she would never need a mask again.

Carver was loathe to admit it, but Drazyt's undetermined fate did concern her. She'd prepared for Drazyt's death—had Drazyt lived, Carver would have seen that she died soon anyway, for the goddess-guard had seen too much—but Carver couldn't rid herself of a body not in her possession. She grudgingly admitted she also felt a seething jealousy that her pawn had managed escape when she had not been able to. Instead, she forced optimism: most of the night had gone better than expected. Drazyt had clearly shaken Moonstar. Moonstar had apparently activated the gate, at least momentarily. And better yet, Moonstar appeared to be, as Carver had long hoped, a god, a tool to rival Goddess herself.

And though an unpleasant certainty remained that she would yet have to deal with Drazyt's disappearance, Carver allowed a giddy hope to infuse her ancient bones.

"Moonstar," Carver murmured toward the door, resting her white, ageless hands on the enchanted stone. Her whole body trembled with anxiety, with hope, with trepidation. "I shall sculpt something of with you yet."

Chapter One

Jasper Goatherd pushed the heavy barn door into place, locked it, then stood up straight, closing his eyes and arching his back as he listened to the bleating of the goats, who were confused about why they were being corralled with so many hours of daylight remaining. Jasper gazed up from the barn, beyond the garden, out over the pastures where the goats and horses usually grazed, past the fields of winter wheat. His eyes followed the curving Shanortown Road through the green of his fields surrounded by deep red cliffs, and farther east, to the Vast Plains. Whoever approached the farm was still too far away to see. He knew the approaching stranger was about an hour away, moving slowly on the road, but that didn't mean he could relax. Just because they were moving slowly didn't mean they would continue to. If he'd wanted a better view of the valley, he might have given himself a task up in the cave house, but whenever his daughter, Anara, alerted them of approaching strangers, he liked to do the preparatory tasks required on the ground, in case the family was caught unaware.

The barn secured, Jasper approached the vegetable garden, where Anara had begun hastily picking any vegetables that could reasonably be picked: raiders three years ago had trampled the garden. Anara didn't need to hear his footsteps to know he walked toward her, and her hazel eyes met his only briefly as he approached.

"The rifles are ready, Pa," his daughter said. "I activated the signal stones, so Cerny and Milne should already know, and I sent Raden back with details. She just arrived at their cabin. Etim moved dry goods up from the cold-cave, he's sorting them now." She rattled off the list of preparations effortlessly, her organized, cool demeanor belying her seventeen years. She hardly looked up from her work as her practiced fingers plucked purple bean pods from their stalks, tossing them into her basket.

The preparations she'd listed were the usual protocol when Anara's natural-born gift—which they all referred to as the Warning—notified them of approaching visitors: they prepared to defend against highway bandits or to host travelers brave enough to venture to the edge of civilization, a month's walk from the capitol, Old Towers. Jasper's family hadn't had problems with bandits in two years, but the semi-annual caravan from Oakworth Hold wasn't due for a month or more.

Many who journeyed this far were simply lost. A few were seeking out the Shrine to the Sovereign of the Cliffs, but most of the intentional travelers were following myths of an abandoned silver mine in Shanortown, farther up the mountain.

There never had been silver in these mountains, though there had once been a mine—Jasper remembered his father coming home dirty and wheezing—but its only treasure was coal. The mine collapsed when Jasper was still a child, the town crumbled as trading stopped, and the mayor was hung for rape; Jasper remembered the event, the first of many executions before Shanortown's residents slowly fled, leaving it nothing but a ghost town. For visitors seeking the nonexistent silver mine, Jasper tried to persuade them to give up the search. Bandits, monsters, and weather made the mountains dangerous even for those prepared.

"Thanks, Annie," Jasper said, stretching his back again. "I think some of the pumpkins are ready enough for a stew. And we could even pick some of the potatoes early, if—"

"I know how to tend a garden, Pa," Anara said, looking up with only a hint of a curve at the corners of her mouth. He loved that smile.

"You know how to get the guns ready, too," he said, "and you know that I trust you to do as you're told, and that you'll forgive a father's nervous ramblings." He wouldn't embarrass her by asking, but he could sense her nervousness. Her gift warned them of the visitors, so she somehow felt responsible for them.

"There's something strange about this one," Anara finally said.

“What’s that, Annie?” He crouched down next to her and plucked greens from the row of spinach and lettuce making a last effort in the fall sun.

“They’re not lost,” she replied. “Knows right where they’re going. They took the turn off the Oakworth-Hainsville Road without even pausing.”

Jasper looked out into the distance as though that might tell him something new. “The Warning’s the same with the caravan. And I suspect many of the adventurers. The road’s easy to find if you’re looking for it.”

Anara stood, placing the basket on her hip. She was lean and tall, her sepia-colored hair pulled into a sensible bun atop her head. Her complexion was still a shade lighter than any one else in the family—likely an inheritance from her unknown father, which, in addition to her height, gave away that she wasn’t Jasper’s daughter by blood—but her face was golden-brown from a life in the sun, nearly matching his own olive tones. She wore her usual loose linen shirt and sturdy cotton trousers, both dusty beige; actual dust covered her red-leather boots. It was an outfit cut from the same cloth as his own, which made him see her age.

Too old, Jasper thought. She looks too old in this worker’s outfit, unadorned by the frivolities of youth. But he supposed it had always been that way for the homesteaders at the edge of the plains. He’d been too old when he was seventeen, too.

“She knows right where she’s going.”

“She?”

“I’m not sure, Pa.” Her hazel eyes looked to the distance then back at the beans, “I get a sense it’s a woman. Can’t say for certain, though. Never had that impression before. It’s not that the Warning tells me as much, just, something about the way she walks . . . can’t shake the feeling.”

"Well," Jasper said. "I don't suppose it makes much of a difference either way, man or woman. We'll have the irons ready in case she's mean and a bed made should she deserve assistance."

"I know, Pa," Anara said. She stepped over the row of greens to the nightlore vines and began feeling their large purple fruits for the softness that indicated they were ripe. He knew what was on her mind, what she wouldn't say. She was hoping this one wasn't a stranger.

"Annie," he said, gazing at his daughter where she crouched, intentionally not looking back up at him. "It's been near fourteen years."

"I know, Pa," she said, turning away.

"We're more likely to find Shanor's silver mine than see your mother again."

"Pa," she whispered, "I said *I know*. I'm not one to water crops that'll never grow."

She stood and looked at him, her basket full of beans, and he chided himself. Her eyes showed no signs of dampness, her face was as stoic as ever. He'd not raised a fool. She was a child of the outer plains, a tough stone of a woman.

"She's moving slow," Anara said, hoisting the basket again. "We've got just under an hour, but everything's ready. Etim just laid some bread and cheese out. Don't be too long." He nodded in response, smiling at her comfort in giving directions back to him. He watched the road for a few minutes longer before following her to the ladders that scaled the red cliffs to their cave house.

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By the time Jasper had climbed the ladders and then pulled them up, his two children had finished their simple lunch and were busy tidying the kitchen. An outsider might have thought the act a typical domestic scene, but he could feel in their movements the nervous excitement. Though they all remembered the lives that had been lost in raids, most visitors recently had been pleasant and interesting.

“A woman!” his son, Etim, said as he stood near the window, trying to catch a glimpse of the stranger on the road. “By Cobat, that’s something. If she’s brave enough to travel by herself, she’s got to be a wizard. I wonder how old she is.”

“What’s that matter to you, Etim?” Jasper said, grinning as he sat at the table, pulling the board with bread and goat cheese in front of him. “Hoping to get kissed?”

Etim blushed and Jasper instantly regretted his chiding. He thought for a moment to apologize but didn’t want to draw attention to Etim’s suddenly red face. Etim had always been a sensitive child, but had become even more so in the previous year, which had been rough on him. About a year ago Etim and Jasper’s nephew, Cerny, had gone to town to find partners. Cerny had returned with a wife, Milne, and they’d started their family immediately. Etim came back quieter than ever. A month or so later, Etim had guided a foolhardy farmhand up the cliffs for a treasure hunting expedition, and the man had disappeared. After weeks of searching, the family presumed him dead. Etim felt responsible, and he’d been even more reclusive since, touchy at any mention of the man, solemn when three visitors in the year since had hired him as escort up the mountain.

Emotionally tender though Etim was, Jasper knew, he remained an able-bodied worker, better in the orchards than Jasper had ever been, gentler and more skilled with the animals. They’d hardly lost a lamb or kid in their flock since Etim had taken over their care five years ago. He might not be as skilled in the cheese cave as his cousins, but they’d had better milk. The few wildcats who wandered this far from the mountains had never gotten near the animals under Etim’s care, mindful as he was to light the torches at night and patrol the region during the day.

Jasper sometimes cursed the gods who’d left him single and aging, alone on the plains with a farm full of youth. But he didn’t think too much about that. His sister—Raden and Cerny’s mother—and his wife had been long dead. The hired help that had once been plentiful on the farm

during his younger years was now infrequent at best. No use complaining about it, especially because his children were good to him.

“Pa,” Etim said. “Pa?”

Jasper looked up. His son was busy clearing the table of scraps and leaning down to take the board.

“Sorry, Et,” he said. He’d hardly realized he’d put any food to his mouth at all. “Thank you. I’m finished.”

By Cobat, he thought as he watched Anara and Etim clean up, each knowing their usual chores so well they almost danced around each other as they wiped platters and opened cupboards. I love my life, Jasper thought, rising from the table, *but sometimes I feel like a lone hen with her chicks.*

He turned and went to the window while the children worked behind him.

“You think she’ll be a wizard?” Etim asked.

“Not likely, at least, not if she’s with the king’s court.” Jasper said, hoping it was true. He had Anara’s magical registration papers in order, but had never bothered to send them to the nearest inquisitor, which was several cities to the south.

“Maybe the Wizard King is interested in the silver mine,” Etim said as he dried a cup. “Or maybe the inquisitors have heard about the Warning and want to test Anara for being a wizard! Would that mean you’d have to wear wizard robes?”

“Like you know what wizard’s robes look like,” Anara said, smirking. “You wouldn’t know a wizard from a butcher’s assistant.”

“Maybe not,” Etim said, “but I know they both dress finer than you.” He dropped his washcloth lightly on her head as though it were a ceremonial hood and stooped in a mock bow.

Jasper almost chastised the boy for his rudeness. He’d never tolerated their being unkind to each other. But his boy was old enough to know his business, and Anara wise enough not to take

offense at a joke she'd started. It was just his habit to correct them now, and the realization made him feel far older than his forty-five years. So he ignored his brood as they clucked at each other, and he looked outside, his eyes following the road.

Their home was built high on steep cliffs, and from the kitchen window, he could see far into the east. Immediately below the house, their little circular valley nestled against the semicircle of steep red cliffs. Beyond the valley, after a brief descent on shallow hills, was the Vast Plains. He thought he could see a speck of a shadow on the road, but if Anara hadn't notified them of someone there, he wouldn't have even noticed.

"Cerny's coming on his horse," he heard Anara say from the back of the kitchen. "We better let down the ladders." Sure enough, Jasper turned to look down the road that connected the farmyard to his nephew's cabin. He saw his nephew coming at a quick but not hurried pace, his nephew's black-and-white speckled horse trotting comfortably. Cerny's tall shadow fell across the road, cutting into the green grass. Jasper glanced farther along, but Cerny was alone. Why would the boy leave his wife, sister, and infant daughter when he knew there was a stranger coming?

"Let down the ladders, quick!" Jasper said, knowing he was only repeating the sensible suggestion his daughter had already made. Etim was already spinning the wheel that lowered the ladders. Jasper watched in dismay as his nephew rode his horse to the bottom of the cliff, dismounted, and hitched his horse without hurry.

Once Cerny finished tying the horse to a fence post, he looked up and smiled, his brown hair blowing in a gentle breeze. He grabbed the ladder as soon as it was secure on the ground and began the several-stories climb.

"What are you doing?" Jasper yelled down the ladder when Cerny was close enough to hear. "Didn't Raden tell you about the . . ."

"The visitor is already here," Cerny yelled back up. "He's injured!"

Jasper and Etim turned to Anara. Her eyes were closed, but then she opened them and looked pale.

"I don't—" she began but then stopped when her cousin reached the landing and pulled himself up, interrupting her without realizing she'd started to talk.

"Ray must have heard you wrong, Uncle Jasper. We were expecting someone on the road, but he came down through the canyon. We found him in the river. Unconscious, a broken leg and several cracked ribs. Sunburned something terrible. Couldn't say anything sensible. Probably a treasure hunter from the other side of the range. It's been a while since anyone was fool enough to get here from the Ensign side, but it has happened before, you know."

"Annie?" Jasper asked, dismissing most of what Cerny said. Though a wounded stranger was something to note, it was of far less concern than Anara not notifying them.

"I still only feel the one, and she's off on the road," Anara said, pointing to the shadow approaching the valley from the plains, then closing her eyes again, her face tight in concentration. "I can feel Milne rocking the baby. And Ray is leaning over the bed—bandaging something, I guess the injured man, but there's nothing there. I can't feel him at all."

"He's definitely there," Cerny said, looking at Anara with concern. "We found him right before we heard the ringing on the alarm stone."

"Maybe he died after you left the cabin," Etim suggested. "The Warning's never really been tested."

Anara glared at her brother.

"Not now, Etim," Jasper said, but Anara was already retorting, her usually steady voice rising in concern.

"There's nothing wrong with my magic," Anara said. "I've always felt everyone. Even if he's dead now, I would have felt him in the river, even if he were asleep the whole time."

“He’s been unconscious, or nearly so, the whole time,” Cerny said, “but he was stable when I left. I don’t think his wounds are mortal.”

“Maybe someone found a way to counteract the Warning,” Etim said. That thought jolted through Jasper. Who knew of the Warning? Why would they need to counteract it?

“Stop,” Anara whispered, her eyes closed again, one hand on her stomach, the other with a finger in her mouth as she grimaced in concentration. Jasper was about to speak, but his daughter interrupted him.

“There’s no one there,” she said.

“I know what I—” Cerny began, but Jasper had heard enough speculation.

“Kids, stop,” Jasper said. He felt a rising dread in his stomach.

“He is definitely there,” Cerny said, looking at Jasper for support.

“You left Milne and Raden with a stranger?” Jasper said. He knew he sounded pedantic, knew his nephew was mature enough to make his own decisions, and mentally rebuked himself for being the crotchety old man, but he maintained his stoic face. He saw Cerny tighten up, defensive of his newfound maturity in fatherhood.

“I thought he was the one we were expecting,” Cerny said. “Even so, Milne’s better with a knife than I am, and Ray’s doing his bandages, but we were running low. I was going right back—”

“What you thought doesn’t matter now,” Jasper said, stepping into action. “Take the supplies you need, quickly. Etim, help your cousin get a bundle together, then ready the rifles, you’ll cover me and Annie.”

Jasper was satisfied to see the two young men react without question, running into the cave house, leaving the door swinging behind them.

“Annie, you and me are going out to greet this other guest. We won’t wait to see what she is.” He didn’t have time to explain, but in his mind, he’d already jumped to the worst conclusion, the

visitor on the road ambushing Etim and Cerny as they returned to the cabin, or somehow making it to the cabin before them, engaging Milne and Ray. They would cut the one on the road off first.

“But Pa,” Anara said. “I’ll go with Cerny. I need to see who’s evading the Warning.”

“There’s time for that later,” he said. “Go ready the horses.”

“Pa, I—”

“You’re right,” Jasper replied, thinking immediately of a better chore for her. “Keep the Warning trained on the cabin. If you sense anything happening to Ray or Milne before Cerny arrives, let us all know right away. I’ll ready the horses and meet you at the bottom.”

Anara nodded but didn’t otherwise move, her eyes out on the distance, her mind clearly elsewhere, her teeth nervously clenched on her knuckle.

Jasper shivered, feeling tense. He didn’t know what this meant any more than his daughter did, but he also knew they had little time to muse about it. He stepped behind her, laying a hand on her shoulder to bring her back to the moment.

“I need you with me,” Jasper said. “Can you be here for me now?”

She didn’t immediately respond, but he saw her swallow. She turned to look at him, her hazel eyes childlike in momentary anxiety before her usual cool looks returned. She set her jaw before speaking.

“Saddle the horses, Pa,” she replied. “I can monitor the cabin and get the guns at the same time.”

Jasper nodded, watching as his daughter moved into the house without further hesitation, then, alone on the platform, he started down the ladders.

Chapter Two

Anara gripped her rifle tightly in one hand, the butt resting in the saddle, as she and Pa trotted down the road. Her Warning, the ability to sense everyone on the property, was in full force, and she could feel each of the approaching woman's steps as though they pressed on her skin.

"There she is," Pa said, his head nodding as they could see the stranger, still at a great distance, cresting the hill that was the boundary between their circular valley and the plains. Anara focused her eyes on the target. Her Warning always became more distinct and honed once she'd seen the person. She was surprised to see the woman leading a donkey. Animals never registered on her Warning, but now that she could see the woman, she could sense as well as see the way she held the guiding rope. Together, the woman and donkey were little more than a brown-gray silhouette, but still, Anara felt the woman's body inching toward her, and each step was a new discomfort.

Her power was not always so distinct. She'd long grown accustomed to her family's movements, the way they walked, their rhythms, and she felt them only dully unless she focused on them. And when her mind was truly occupied elsewhere, her Warning was simply as present as breathing, a force of life that required no conscious effort. It was second nature now—not a caution, but a reassurance—to know that Etim watched from the house balcony, that Cerny was on the road, his body bouncing in the saddle as his horse galloped. Milne stood by the door, partway between baby Teris and Raden, who sat near the bed, tending to something, a cow or a bookcase, for all Anara felt.

Anara had often failed to describe her power to her family: it was like a touch on her skin, almost. But that wasn't it either. It was like when she closed her eyes but could still feel that her fingers existed. It wasn't just an itch, because she felt other people in relation to herself, as though a map of the world stretched across her mind, and so her power both consumed her body and

radiated from it. Her family's continuous presence was like a gentle breeze, but strangers itched before they even arrived and then crawled about like spiders, especially when she put her mind to her power, feeling every step, every movement of their bodies. But even this woman's itch was not as uncomfortable as the emptiness where the injured man from the river should be. She tried not to resent Pa for keeping her here. She was more useful here, she knew that. Still, her head hurt from trying to feel the man she could hardly believe existed.

As they rode, she let her horse follow Pa's, and closed her eyes, trying to reach for the undetectable man. Straining her power, she thought she felt something unusual, some other presence, but it wasn't in the old cabin.

"Bad timing," Pa said, interrupting her concentration. He wasn't accusing anyone, of course, but Anara felt guilt nonetheless. It didn't help that she felt the twitching movements accompanying his nervousness. She had heard about the wizards in the King's court who had complete control of their magic, who understood their limits and used their gifts to great effect. She did not wish to control her powers—what did she have to control? She could not force other people to move; she only felt their movements—but when information was unclear or inconvenient, she wished she could turn her magic off. She longed for the ignorance her family must enjoyed daily. Or, at the very least, wished she didn't live so far from anyone who knew anything about magic. Most likely, she'd already reached the limit of her Warning, but perhaps she only floated on the surface of her true power. She didn't even know how to tell. Was the injured and undetectable man counteracting her Warning somehow with his own magic, or were there simply people her magic could not detect?

"What was Cerny thinking," Pa mumbled, "leaving Ray and Milne? But even he shouldn't be allowed to take on the man himself. Best I was there, too. Then again, can't be risking *this* stranger to you little ones."

Anara let out a surprised laugh.

"Little ones, Pa?" she said. Pa's comment momentarily dispelled the unplaced guilt and worry stewing at the top of her throat.

He only shrugged and continued, his eyes not leaving the silhouette of the approaching stranger. A gentle breeze flapped at his pale linen shirt and played with his dark brown, slightly wavy hair, graying at the temples and down his sideburns.

"If this lady's safe," he said, scratching his thick black beard, "I'll ride on. Seems you and Etim can get her situated well enough. Raden's better with the bandages, good she's already with the other fellow. I hate to leave anyone, but if this one's trustworthy, I suppose we'll have to risk it."

"I want to see the injured man," Anara said.

"Not until I deem it safe," Pa said, then kicked his rust-colored mare, Fillian, to a slightly faster pace, ending the conversation.

Anara's horse, Gallon, followed Pa's mare effortlessly, but Anara's other hand still held the rein tightly, in case they needed to make a quick getaway. She gritted her teeth as Pa dismissed her request but promised herself she would bring it up later. She stared ahead at the woman, now clearly female, with a curvy frame beneath loose, shapeless robes of dark brown, which protected her from the sun and obscured her face under a shady cowl. Though she knew it was only because she was annoyed with Cerny and the injured man, Anara immediately felt irritated with the new woman.

It wasn't that Anara disliked strangers generally; most visitors told interesting stories, offered news of the outlying cities, and brought useful or entertaining trinkets. There had been robbers, or men who'd attempted to be too amorous with her or Raden, but their family was prepared for all those situations. And such dangers were rare. They hadn't had any problems since a raid two years ago, when a highwaywoman had knifed Pa in the arm, and Anara, her Warning guiding her aim, had shot the attacker and another of the band in their thighs. They'd turned and fled as she aimed for a third.

But most visitors only wanted food, a night's rest, and directions. She and her mother had been such visitors once, lost on the plains, rescued from a storm by a much younger Pa.

But Anara didn't let her mind dwell on the painful past. She knew so few details about her mother, had no idea why she'd abandoned Anara here in the valley. Pa rarely wanted to speak about it, feeling he'd said everything he knew, so everything Anara had was equal parts imagination and disappointment mingled with a constant gratitude that Pa had taken her in, a stranger's infant child.

Anara focused on the woman ahead of her, who, as she neared them, raised her hands in a position of defenselessness. Anara had received strangers with her father enough to know the routine: Pa would play gruff while Anara would remain silent and passive, but observant. Eventually, the stranger would prove some level of trust, and Pa would decide whether they were welcome just for a meal, for a place in the barn, or for multiple nights.

Though they still couldn't see the woman's face, Anara studied her clothing. Her clothes were clearly meant for traveling, but were also finely tailored. Her cloak was a dark brown cotton with hems and seams adorned by bright red stitching. Her well-worn leather boots jingled as the bells on the laces danced with each step. A gentle breeze lifted the cloak, revealing a rich purple blouse embroidered in the colorful fashion of Old Towers. The woman wore an almost-knee-length skirt that caught the breeze, a flag of green and blue. Anara became momentarily conscious of her linen shirt, worn for weeks with nary a wash. She'd put on a wide-brimmed cap of goat-wool felt and realized now how homely it must look. It occurred to her that the woman's fancy dress might be another reason not like her, but as soon as that thought occurred to her, Anara felt suddenly at ease and decided that anyone traveling this far surely cared least about their clothing. The donkey, laden with bags, a sleeping roll, and even a copper kettle, moved with a gentle, determined pace. The beast was mostly gray, specked with white across its nose and brow.

“Good day, Tradesman Goatherd!” the stranger called though she was still far out. Her voice was confident, but raspy with thirst. It was a bit shocking to hear Pa’s name called, and the formal Tradesman, too. Such formalities were rare in the outer plains, and the words felt odd to Anara’s ears.

“My name is Belvisa Harkwell,” the woman exclaimed. “And my traveling companion is Lord Loadbearer. You and I do not know each other, but your kin in Hainsville said I might find rest in your valley.”

Pa reigned in his horse a short distance from the woman, his large figure and brandished rifle a clear signal of intimidation. The tension Pa had been exuding since the announcement of a second stranger still left his back ridged and his hands tight around his gun. Hyperaware as Anara was, she could feel his fingers fidgeting, worried his temper might flare at any moment.

“If you’ve come for trouble,” Pa said, “just a caution that we’re prepared for that.”

“Oh,” Belvisa said, both hands at her heart. “I promise I’ll be no trouble at all. Just looking for a few nights’ lodging.”

Anara’s horse stopped as soon as Pa’s did and then stared longingly at the grass at the road’s edge. Anara pulled the reins just a little to keep the horse from wandering and kept her eyes trained on the stranger, whose shuffled steps Anara felt across her skin.

“Friends and friendly visitors can always find lodging here,” Pa said, “but strangers we’ll have none of.” It was a familiar greeting, a mantra Pa had instilled in them young: a generosity they owed to any who came this far, but a wariness of those who would not reciprocate kindness.

As the woman drew a few steps closer, Anara realized that the woman’s rich clothing was her least interesting feature. As the woman raised her hands to pull back her cowl, Anara caught a glimpse of hands far paler than any Chetian might have.

“I hope we will be friends, then,” Belvisa said.

Anara and Pa both stared at the woman's arresting face. Belvisa obviously expect a reaction and allowed a moment of silence as though her face were part of a performance, her eyes calm and fierce, unapologetic.

The skin about her forehead, cheeks, and ears was the usual dark gold of a Chetian, darker for being weatherworn and sun-touched, but a large swatch of pale, pink skin framed intense, honey-hued eyes that sparkled as she let them admire her. Her nose and mouth were similarly haloed in an almost symmetrical hourglass of pink skin. Smaller patches, spots, and freckles of white dotted her cheeks and chin, descending onto her throat and into the purple fabric of her blouse. Anara could not help thinking that an artist had applied white paint on her skin. But it was not a random splashing. Every pale freckle and swath of lighter skin felt masterfully placed.

Whatever abnormality or disease discolored the skin only highlighted her ease of movement, her simple confidence in being. And when the stranger moved a hand to brush her iron-hued, windblown hair from her face, she revealed hands similarly speckled; deep brown wrists gave way unevenly to delicately pale fingertips.

"As I said, I am Belvisa, a storycatcher," she continued, ending their observation. "In Hainsville, Goodmen Iago and Kito told me that this was the natural stopping point before Shanortown. Plus, as a kindness, I've brought your letters."

The woman pulled from the donkey's side satchel a small bundle of envelopes and considered them for a moment. Her eyes darted up to look at Pa and Anara, giving them the same scrutiny they had just given her. Anara felt a sudden thrill in be *seen*, not just observed.

"Do I have the pleasure of addressing Master Jasper? Here is a letter for you from your dear uncles—they were such a treat—and also letters for a Lady Milne and a Miss Raden Goatherd?"

Belvisa looked passed Pa to Anara, as though expecting some celebratory reaction. Anara only shook her head and was surprised that Belvisa had a look of disappointment, and then her eyes shifted to a careful, friendly calculation.

"Thank you," Pa said, reaching out to take the letters.

Anara could see that despite his gruff responses, Pa was already relaxing. They'd heard plenty of fibs and yarns from visitors over the years, but had never had a real storycatcher on the farm. Her tales would make a welcome change at supper, worth the price of room and board storycatchers required. Besides, the mention of Iago and Kito, Pa's distant uncles who owned a mercantile business in the nearest town, had settled him. Most visitors expressed surprise at finding anything this far from a town; that one had come with information and letters was a sign of intent, at least. But Anara had the impression that Belvisa was more interested in her and Pa than she was in Shanortown's supposed mysteries.

"I hope a storycatcher won't be too much in the way of your work, Tradesman," Belvisa said.

"Not many stories left to catch in Shanor," Pa said, and Anara sensed his back releasing ever so slightly. "Nor people to tell to them."

"We'll see," Belvisa said. "Word in Hainsville says there's not much farming out here either, but you're well enough off. You harvest your crops, I'll harvest mine."

She smiled as she spoke, making the speckles around her lips crinkle together, and Anara noticed Pa suppress a laugh. Belvisa clearly saw through Pa's show, recognizing the necessary caution, playing along without resentment. Anara knew Belvisa would be in Pa's good graces soon. He knew the risks of strangers better than anyone, but he also longed for them more than the rest. Still, Belvisa's self-assuredness sent a fresh shiver up Anara's spine. Her presence still tingled along

the mental map of the farm. The stranger looked up at Anara and smiled, more with her eyes than her speckled lips. Her eyes were radiant and clear, honey-colored and honest amid the mottled flesh.

“You must be the Goodman’s daughter,” she said.

“Those fools tell you the whole layout of the place?” Pa said defensively, and Anara recognized that Pa was no longer acting.

“No,” Belvisa said. “They told me only that there was you and your family, nothing more. I can just see it, something about the shape of the face, the same carriage, I guess. A glint in the eyes.”

“Well,” Pa said, glancing briefly at his adopted daughter before fiddling with the gun, aiming it at the sky. Anara looked at the ground, not wanting to affirm or deny the stranger’s position. It was true that she had never doubted her place as Pa’s daughter, never felt anything less than family, but the truth became more uncomfortable the older she was.

“I sense a story there,” Belvisa said. “Perhaps you will tell it to me when we are actual friends. May I be bold enough to assume I may stay for the evening? I left Hainsville nearly a week ago, and I have to say I haven’t slept well on the road these nights for the anticipation. I’ve never been to a ghost town before.”

“Too late for Shanor anyhow,” Pa said. “If that’s where you’re heading, you’ll want a full day’s light to get through the canyon and can’t come back that day, neither. The shadowcats come out at dark, so you got to hole up and—”

“Pa,” Anara said, seeing he was about to explain the entire logistics of a mountain trip. The woman’s smile showed she clearly never intended to leave right away.

“Well,” Pa said, looking at Anara then back at the visitor. “It’s best you stay a night, first. We’ve room in the barn, anyhow.”

Anara smirked and looked at her father who, realizing that he'd said exactly what the stranger had hoped he'd say and how easily he'd been duped into it, blushed of his own. Belvisa's face was crooked with a playful smile.

"I mean . . ." Pa tried to correct himself. "You seem nice enough anyhow, and won't do much damage in the barn, unless you have something against goats."

"Or they against you," Anara teased, looking at Belvisa, hoping her little joke would get the woman to smile again. The combination of the speckled face and the bright eyes made the smile all the more mystifying. She wasn't sure why, but she felt a strong desire for Belvisa's approval edging out the initial dislike.

"Goats are as suitable as gentlemen when your best friend's an ass," the storycatcher said as though imparting wisdom, but then looked up at Anara and winked, the smirk returning to her face as she pattered her donkey's head, scratching him behind the ears.

#

Pa led the way, stepping down from his horse to walk besides the stranger and her donkey; Anara rode behind. Out of habit, she kept her rifle at the ready, but she felt unusually relaxed. She attributed her comfort mostly to the presence of the other stranger—Belvisa didn't appear to be a problem, and if she were, she was a mundane one. The unknown disturbed Anara far more. But she found that, in Belvisa's presence, her mind could not stay far away, always coming back to her.

"How long have you been wandering the roads, Goodwife?" Pa asked politely.

"It's just *Tradeswoman*," Belvisa said, and Anara saw Pa put a hand in his pocket and look first at the ground before looking back at Belvisa. Anara got the impression Belvisa enjoyed the effect this had, a punchline she'd used before to emphasize her lack of a partner. "But I really don't take much to the formalities anyhow. If you don't mind, you can just call me Belvisa, or even just Bel."

“Well, Belvisa,” Pa said, the informalities sounding strained. “How long have you been traveling?”

“I suspect it’s been some twenty years since I left city life behind,” she said. She glanced at Pa, then behind her at Anara, smiling briefly. The skin of her face looked soft, even with its leathery wrinkles, and her eyes both kind and cunning.

“Ah,” Pa said, slowly. “I took you for someone much younger.”

“You flatter me,” Belvisa said. “But have you ever seen hips like these on a young woman?”

In self-mockery, her speckled hands smoothed the travel robes over her wide hips, and she laughed. It was a disarming move, seductive and derisive at the same time, but clear that she alone was the brunt of the joke. Pa and Anara both laughed as Belvisa’s hips danced for a moment, the bells on her shoes tinkling a pleasant rhythm.

“I’ve been pretty much everywhere,” Belvisa said as she ended her dance, “but tell me: this valley, is it always so lovely?”

“Well,” Pa said. “Sure. But my favorite is winter, when there’s a light snow and a full moon on the red rock. It’s sublime, the valley.”

Pa continued, rambling as he described the land to their guest, but Anara mostly tuned him out. As they made their way toward the farm house, Anara tried to see the land as Belvisa must—rustic, provincial—but she could not shake from her mind the comfort the valley gave her, a persistent connection to the world and to ages past.

The farm occupied a small, circular valley at the mouth of a longer canyon. The Shanor River ran east-west, with steep red cliffs on the north and south sides of the valley and canyon. Just inside the canyon proper was the old family homestead, and a day’s hike beyond that, the crumbling remains of Shanortown.

Before the Chetian Empire's splintering a century ago, the road had connected the coal mines of Shanortown to the region's larger cities. And though the Empress's fall meant there'd been turmoil in the distant cities, little changed in the Smirog Mountains until the collapse of the Shanor mine when Pa was a child. The steady decline in population and the Wizard King's rise ten years ago meant that even lawlessness on these backcountry roads was decreasing.

Where their valley met the plains, a trail left the road and zigzagged up the mountains to the northern lip of the rocks, leading to the Sovereign of the Cliffs. It was an easy hike to the shrine, and from the top, one had a breathtaking view of their little valley, with the Vast Plains to the east, and the mountains in every other direction

"Rumors from ages past," Pa said, trying to be impressive, "say a powerful wizard carved our valley, leaving behind its stark cliffs."

Anara had heard *that* tale many times, mostly on holiday nights when the family gathered round for gabbing. Anara found the tale unlikely—not because she couldn't imagine a wizard powerful enough to carve away mountains, but because she doubted a place this far from civilization had ever garnered anyone's attention. But her family had made good use of the cliffs, whatever their origin. And Belvisa, clearly of a quick eye, pointed out their ingenuity as they approached the farmyard proper.

"The cave house!" Belvisa said.

Anara had a moment of concern—how much had her uncles told Belvisa? The house in the cliff face was their primary defense against bandits. Iago and Kito knew that, so why would they have described it to a stranger? She expected Pa to grow defensive again, but he nodded with pride. Belvisa expressed true delight as she gazed up at the cliffs.

"How marvelous. Kito and Iago said it was a sight!"

Anara studied the old house—the only home she could remember—with new eyes. It was more cave than house, as it was only the façade of a cabin built into the northern cliff, with a small patio jutting out, from which hung the ladders and pulleys they used to move themselves and their goods to and from the cave. The barn occupied the yard directly below the cliff house, and a henhouse and tool shed, also carved into the rock, filled out the other farm buildings. Chickens scratched in the yard and in the garden, which was large enough to fill the space between the cliff and the road. Try as she might, she could not see the scene as anything but idyllic.

The road ran parallel to—and often followed the curve of—the river that trickled out of the canyon. Here and there, small irrigation ditches carried water north from the river to the garden, and south into the orchards and fields. Closer to the southern cliff wall, near a gently sloping hill and copse of tress, reposed Etim's cabin. Only about a year since being completed, it still glistened in Anara's imagination, though the pitch and wood had begun to take on natural, earthy tones as the cabin settled. The cabin's yard was large, filled with emerald grass, all fenced in to corral the milk goats and work horses who pastured there. Tall, rich trees cut their way through the valley along the river banks, and at the canyon mouth, the trees were thickest.

Considering Etim's cabin, Anara suddenly recalled the odd dream she'd had two nights ago. She'd woken in the middle of the night with the sensation that someone had come and gone on the cliff. The feeling was already gone when she recognized the presence for who it was: Hilsan, another stranger who'd come to the valley but who'd died on the cliffs nearly a year ago.

Anara, of course, knew that Hilsan had become much more than a hired hand. She couldn't avoid observing the physical intimacy between Hilsan and her brother, Etim. She remembered their first kiss on the riverbanks, knew when they'd spent a night in bed together. She was not new to such sensations. Ever since she was young, she'd known every private pleasure her family and each of their visitors afforded themselves. When Uncles Iago and Kito visited, she knew their intimacies

in bed, she'd felt each of Cerny and Milne's couplings, known even before Milne that a person grew inside her. She could not feel what they felt, only knew the positioning of their bodies and the way their bodies moved. If she focused elsewhere, she could ignore the more precise actions, but her mind could not always turn away. She'd learned young not to discuss such matters. There was knowledge her family wanted her Warning for, and much more she was happy to let them forget she knew.

Though Etim had been broodier than usual since Hilsan's death on the cliffs, Anara had mostly forgotten about him. Hadn't thought about him in months until two nights ago, when she'd woken shaken and breathing heavily, Hilsan's presence as sharp and quick as being jabbed with a needle. But then there was nothing, and she'd returned to sleep, convinced it was a dream.

Remembering that now, she once more sent out her Warning, trying to feel the cliffs. It had just been a dream, yes? There was no one on the cliffs, but as she thought of Hilsan, she could almost feel him, as though even the memory of him were enough to register on her Warning.

"I've heard of cave dwellers," Belvisa said, and Anara's thoughts were pulled back to the moment. "But never in the civilized folk. Tell me, is it for protection or climate? I hear caves are quite cool in the summer."

"And warmer in winter," Pa said. "But this one, mostly protection. You'll forgive our coming here with irons at the ready, but we've lost people to bandits over the years. Not much protection but ourselves this far from the law."

"Oh my," Belvisa said, putting her speckled hand on her breast. Anara could only see her from behind, but she could tell the reaction was an affectation. Though not an unflattering one. It certainly charmed Pa. He gave a grim smile and, uncharacteristically, began to tell her about the losses they'd accrued.

"I got stabbed a few years ago. And my own parents were killed by bandits, must be going on twelve years now. Maybe longer. And a pair of farmhands, too, what, five years ago?"

Pa looked at Anara, his face as innocent as though he were confirming yesterday's weather. But her face—grim from thoughts of Hilsan and upset that Pa would mention his parent's death—must have shocked him from whatever flirtatious power the stranger held, because Pa suddenly went quiet, his eyes apologizing.

She remembered clearly when her grandparents—adopted though she was, she couldn't remember thinking of them as anything else—had died. Only a girl, her power still new, she had felt them leave the world. Her grandfather, shot in the head, had simply disappeared from her mental connections. But her grandmother, who'd not been shot but had fallen and broken her leg as she'd fled, had faded slower. Through her Warning, Anara felt the bandits circle her fallen grandmother. She hadn't then understood the import of that, but she now knew they must have questioned her grandmother, must have considered her fate. And they left her there, in the cold, bleeding to death.

Their deaths were not her fault—she'd been a child. She hadn't known to tell her family of strangers, didn't yet realize her extrasensory abilities weren't shared—but still, if she had known to warn them of people coming down the mountain, following the river, how things might have changed. She'd worked hard to remove herself from that guilt, though she could never quite leave it behind. Why would Pa tell this stranger? He'd never told a stranger about his parents before.

"Pa," Anara said, trying to pull him back to the present. "I'll let Etim know we're having company."

She spurred Gallon forward, passing Pa, trying not to notice whether he wore an apologetic demeanor or whether he was still thrilled by Belvisa's very presence.

Pa nodded and Anara rode off, but Anara heard him muttering something to Belvisa. Anara gave one backward glance and saw that Pa had rolled up his sleeve. Belvisa grimaced as she leaned in to touch the scar on his hairy, muscular arm.