



## Chapter One

Coban is hot. *Desert* hot. I can't help the grin that breaks over my face as the dry wind hits my cheek when we step through the enormous shimmering portal. Of course, it's nothing like the first time I used a portal to travel to the capital city of Kaldari for Prince Javed's bride contest—or the last time, when I came back alone to say goodbye to my father and Amma.

Sands, the invitation that had changed my life seems like a lifetime ago.

I suppose it is. I'm a different woman now. A *magi*. Powerful in my own right with the magic of the stars at my fingertips. Silvery iridescence flickers over my knuckles as the simurgh inside of me stirs, sensing my joy.

*We're here. Finally.*

It feels as though a huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders. I breathe in the desert air like someone deprived of oxygen for years.

The noise of the village hits me then as cheers of welcome rend the air. The smell of sweet incense infuses the village as we step into the decorated market square. Connected garlands of flowers stretch across the space, and colorful yellow and orange marigold petals lit-

ter the ground wherever we tread. I can barely see over the heads of the men marching in front of me, but my heart knows that it's home.

Instead of the single runecaster and dozen guards I'd had before, I now arrive in the presence of the king of Oryndhr. King Roshan Acharia, First of His Name. Illegitimate son of the former sovereign, King Zarek. Brother to the deceased regent Javed, the despotic ruler who sought to bring back the worst of the old gods by using me.

Me, Suraya Saab, the prophesized Starkeeper.

The only natural source of true magic in Oryndhr for centuries.

As a result, we are accompanied by several dozen imperial soldiers, six runecasters, the full might of the entire kingsguard, and a handful of attendants. The guards are all armed to the teeth with jādū-forged weapons, not that we expect any kind of attack from the people of my simple village, but one can never be too careful.

I'm no longer the humble tavern girl who had never left the desert. In fact, I've seen enough of Oryndhr to make me want to settle down for a while and just enjoy the tranquility of being still. Though there doesn't seem to be any sign of that happening in the immediate future, not with this royal tour of the realm. It's a necessary show of strength to the four noble houses, that much is clear. Coban is the first stop, but the bigger cities are still to come.

I'm still hoping that I can get out of that; Roshan doesn't need me.

"Suraya! Sura, over here!"

I turn wildly, searching through the faces surrounding us, and ignore the barked warning of the commander of the guard—Hamid, formerly the leader of the now dissolved Dahaka—to propel myself into my father's arms. Amma is next, her round face already wet with tears. Mine are quick to follow as I inhale her delicious, familiar scent of wood, baking bread, and spices.

"Stars, I've missed you both so much!"

"My lady," Hamid says, looming behind me, narrowed eyes on my father. "Please get behind the guards with His Majesty. It's not safe."

I frown. "This is my home. I have nothing to fear here."

"It's the king's command," Hamid insists.

"Fine." I want to roll my eyes, but Roshan's protectiveness is nothing new. In fact, I usually enjoy having the gratifying sole focus of his attention, especially after we'd nearly lost each other, but sometimes it can be excessive.

With an apologetic look to Papa and Amma, I comply, moving closer to where Roshan is being greeted by the effusive alderman of Coban. The local representative takes both of my hands in his and bows. I don't remember him ever being so friendly to me, but being in the presence of royalty will have that effect.

As we are led to the village hall, once more surrounded by Hamid and his very efficient kingsguard, most of whom are trusted senior officers from the Dahaka, I glance over at Roshan, who is immaculately dressed in his ceremonial golden-threaded, amethyst-hued robes. My heart instantly beats a little faster. Sands, he's so handsome.

His dark hair is brushed back from his brow and his eyes are lined with kohl. An elegant dusting of gold shimmers across his high cheekbones, enhancing their sharpness even more. The faintest hint of dark stubble over his hard jaw brackets that sultry and very talented mouth—the one he'd used earlier that morning to my utter ruin—making me catch my breath. The memory of those lips nearly makes my knees buckle.

His head swivels, and his golden-brown gaze slams into mine.

"Stop it," he whispers. The mouth that I'd been thirstily staring at curls into a smirk.

"Stop what?" I ask.

"Ogling me like I'm a sweetmeat."

I can't help the snicker that erupts from me. "I was not." *I totally was.* "Behave, my starling," he says softly, though his eyes convey the opposite. He loves it when I defy him, and besides, he knows what that directive does to me. I despise being told what to do, even by the

man I've accepted as my sovereign, but in public, the rules of being the future royal consort apply, which means I must be demure.

Or at least *try* to be. That was the promise I made, anyway.

"As you wish, my king."

Edging out of reach, I lower my lashes as a tendril of my magic wisps across his shoulders, down his muscular back, and over his tight rear. He gasps, which he covers up with a cough, causing a solicitous attendant to dash up with a cup of water. Impishly, I don't relent, sending the sinful stroke of magic down his leg and then back up, winding my way around his knee, over a rock-hard flexed thigh . . . and higher . . .

"Sura." His warning is a gravelly rasp as my invisible, playful touch inches upward, nearly to where we both desire it the most. "Your family," he grits out.

"What about them, Your Majesty?" I ask innocently, and widen my eyes with concern. "They've gone ahead. Is everything well?" I fight the urge to bite my lip at the strained look on his face. We've toyed with my magic before in the bedchamber, though never in public, and the power I feel over my poor, tortured king in this moment is practically indecent.

With no one else the wiser, I shift to cup his rapidly stiffening length beneath his silk trousers and groan at the feel of him, even via my magic. Holding his gaze, I indulge in a long stroke. Roshan stumbles and hunches over, the back of his neck going crimson and the veins in sharp relief on his forearms.

"Your Majesty!" General Clem Jinn, one of my few friends and Hamid's second-in-command, shouts. "Guards, formation! To the king!"

As the guards form a defensive circle around us, I crouch down, peering up at him with a sweet, solicitous smile. He sees right through my act, glittering eyes that promise vengeance meeting mine.

"You don't like it when I behave, Ro," I whisper, my breath grazing his ear.

He chuckles. "Stars, what compelled me to fall in love with a magical sadist?"

"I don't know," I reply cheekily. "Why did you?"

I stand up to shoot a glance at Clem, who has hurried over but still stands a respectable distance away to respect our privacy, her face stern as she scans the surrounding area for threats. I'd met Clem during the games for the competition for the former prince's hand. Two outsiders, we'd bonded quickly, only for me to discover later on that she'd been one of Roshan's inner circle and part of the Dahaka. Her deceit had been a hard blow, but I understood the pull of duty and her loyalty to her cause above all else. It didn't mean our friendship wasn't real, and I'd chosen to forgive her just as I had Roshan.

I pat her shoulder. "It's nothing, don't worry. He has a cramp from an injury. Give him a minute."

She frowns. "When was he injured?"

"Er, yesterday?" My brain whirls. "During training."

"He didn't have training yesterday," she says. "He was in the forge, if I recall, with you. Did something happen there?"

I blink and inhale a suddenly shallow breath. Oh, something did happen. The king and I had thoroughly defiled almost every available surface in the castle forge to the point where I'd sustained temporary minor burns on my backside that had healed immediately.

*Worth it.*

It's my turn to blush when a smug Roshan stands and lifts his brows, finally able to rise without an embarrassing tent in his trousers. "Yes, Sura, did something happen?"

Clem's gaze dances between the two of us before she lets out an aggravated sound and rolls her eyes. "By the gods, can the two of you

keep it in your pants for once?" she mutters, keeping her voice low so that no one else can hear.

"What can I say?" Roshan teases, winking at me. "She can't resist me."

"You're an arrogant pain in the ass." I must say it much too loudly, because someone gasps on the periphery as we resume our progress to the village hall.

We are separated once we enter, Roshan striding to the front to make his address to the townspeople. I choose to stay near the back, ducking into a quiet corner. I've heard his speech multiple times since his coronation in Kaldari: an acceptance of the transfer of power, the condemnation of the coup that had nearly decimated the Imperial House, and reassurance that the dark forces have been eradicated from Oryndhr.

For good.

It feels like a step in the right direction to rebuild and to restore the confidence of all the people in the realm. Coban was targeted specifically by the former king because of *me*, so Roshan's reassurances mean more than he knows. I wave hello to a few Cobanites, mostly old neighbors, some of whom stare at me openly. The notoriety I've gained for my part in the rebellion still makes my skin itch, but I'm used to the attention by now.

Who in Coban would have guessed that the Starkeeper would have been Suraya Saab?

Even after a handful of months, it's a heavy mantle to carry, and I still struggle with the memories of how close I came to giving in to the darker siren song of my magic. Like any power, it's shaped by the mind and hand of the wielder. Lost in grief and rage after Laleh's death and Roshan's betrayal, I'd almost descended into darkness myself.

With the amount of starlit magic I had in my veins, things could have gone very badly for everyone in Endara. Our entire world might

have been destroyed. The risk is always there if I don't continue my lessons with Aran—Roshan's cousin and a practitioner of formerly outlawed arcane magic—to strengthen my skills.

Roshan has tasked him with training magic users from all the houses, instead of keeping all magic and jādū use under the control of the crown as his father had. Jādū is a finite resource in our realm, but it's like oxygen. It belongs to the people. Of course, there are regulations and laws in place around its use—never to harm—but we're making progress.

Sometimes, and especially here, in the familiar heat of my beloved desert, I wish I could go back to the old me and my old life, when all I cared about was not getting caught for forging illegal jādū blades. But Zora, the goddess of time, waits for no man. She keeps marching forward, no matter our secret wishes.

In recent months, I've become familiar with our pantheon of gods, not just Saru and Fero—the gods of creation and death—but others like Huma, the god of harvest and rain; the mischievous twin gods of wind, Vara and Vati; and Ris, the stern god of the afterlife. Goddesses like Zora as well as Anahima, the goddess of wisdom, fertility, and war, fascinate me. Erased over generations by the ruler of the Oryndhrion Imperial House who wanted to be worshipped as a god-king, it was no wonder they had forsaken us.

A deafening round of cheering jolts me out of my musings.

"His Majesty is charismatic up there," Clem says from where she's standing close to my side like an ever-present shadow. She is usually the one assigned to guard me, even though I've insisted time and time again that I don't need it. She's better off protecting the king.

I nod. "He was born to rule. Oryndhr is in good hands."

She glances at me. "And if he needs you, will you fight at his side?"

"The war is over, Clem," I say with a frown at her tone.

She doesn't answer for a minute, but her mouth flattens as her eyes continuously survey the room. "That doesn't mean our enemies are

gone. We need to be vigilant, especially in Eloni and Veniar, and even with the Scavs.”

“The Scavs?” I ask. “Their general is dead. They have no leader.”

“For now. They have been confined to the northern Dustlands for the time being, but they won’t be held forever. We can’t underestimate them again.” She pauses. “As compelling as the king is, he’ll have to keep his crown with force, if necessary. There are many who would see him off the throne permanently, especially in the House of Regulus. A leaderless army addicted to Jade could be a boon to an ambitious enemy.”

I shiver at the mention of the hallucinogenic drug that had almost felled me. *Twice*. I knew the houses were discontent, questioning the succession of the newly coronated king and hunting for creative ways to unseat him. But at her words, awareness skitters over my tight shoulders. “Regicide?” I ask.

Her face is grim. “Assassins are the greatest threat.”

Much later on and safe, thankfully, after too many hours of food, fanfare, and celebration, Roshan and I are finally alone. I’ve convinced him to spend the night in Coban instead of returning to Kaldari, and while the rooms above the tavern have to accommodate us and his personal guard, my father and Amma don’t mind. My aunt loves having extra mouths to feed.

“So this is the workshop I’ve heard so much about,” Roshan says, coming up behind me and wrapping his arms around my waist as I stare at the cold forge.

“Where all the magic happened,” I say, and turn to face him. I take in Hamid and two other guards who are standing near the door, as well as the shadows of others outside the window. I wish we could be alone, but Roshan’s title comes with . . . an armed entourage.

“Magic?” Roshan asks, bending to nuzzle my temple. “Tell me more.”

“I am a master bladesmith, you know,” I say, my body heating at the gentle touch. “People paid good money for me to forge their swords with jādū.” I wrinkle my nose. “Remember my old boss Vasha? He said I had a way with the crystals.” I lift a hand between us and wiggle my fingers. “I suppose my magic manifested in its own way even then.”

Roshan presses his lips to my fingertips, unexpectedly taking two of them into the wet heat of his mouth. My breath hitches, every inch of me intently focused on that scorching point of contact. I’m mesmerized by the movement of his lips and tongue, shivering when his teeth graze lightly over my skin. Heat gathers in my blood as I raise my gaze to find his eyes smoldering with desire. With a tiny moan, I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, and his stare darkens.

He releases my glistening fingers with a soft pop and glances over his shoulder. “Hamid, wait outside,” he says huskily, walking us backward until the backs of my legs hit my old workbench. The sound of the door closing is the only sign that we are alone. *Finally.*

“You were amazing today with the people. They needed to hear you say that they were going to be safe,” I tell him, gasping as his palms slip under my thighs and he lifts me to sit on the bench. He slides his trim hips, still wrapped in his ornate ceremonial tunic and pants, into the space between my knees, making my pulse ratchet. “You were very kingly,” I add breathlessly, when he tucks my legs around him and pulls me flush against his torso.

At this angle, we both suck in a gasp at the snug, perfect fit of our bodies. Roshan rests his forehead against mine, taking his sweet time as he slides his hands down my shoulders and gathers my wrists in his grip at my back. He runs his nose up the column of my throat. “I like you like this, my starling,” he says. “At my mercy.”

Grinning, I lock my ankles, and he lets out a groan. "And you're at mine, my king."

He crashes his mouth down, the kiss a near-violent tangle of lips, tongues, and teeth, rife with hunger and dominance. It's wet, hungry, and wild, but so *us*, and I meet him stroke for stroke, desperate to satiate the desire burning in my blood. He releases my wrists to cup my face, gentling the kiss as his molten eyes burn into mine. "Gods, you're beautiful."

"Ro, I'm aching," I whimper, and wind my fingers into the wrinkled silk of his tunic. The runes on my arms begin to glow with silvery radiance as the magic fires in my veins. "I need you now. Please."

He smirks. "When you beg so prettily, how can I say no?"

Our hands fumble gracelessly at the ties and buttons of our clothing. We're so lost in disrobing each other that we don't hear the door slamming open until an urgent voice pierces through the thick haze of desire. "Your Majesty."

"Shit," I say, grasping the ties of my tunic. "It's Hamid."

Roshan hisses through his teeth, covering me from view with his body. "What is it?"

"Two of our men are down, Your Majesty," Hamid says in a low tone. "There are soldiers here, we don't know how many yet, but they're fast and skilled. We need to get you back to Kaldari."

Fumbling with my clothing, I sit up quickly and hop off the table. "We're under attack? Here? Is my family safe?"

Hamid's dark eyes meet mine. "Men are already in the tavern. There are . . . hostages, but I don't know if any are your father or aunt. They're demanding to speak to the king alone. I suspect it's a thinly veiled ploy to draw His Majesty out."

"Ro," I say, stomach diving to my feet at the thought of Papa and Amma being in danger. *Again*. "I won't run and leave them. We have to do something."

His brow creases, but then he nods. "Hamid, take some men to the front. Have Clem man the windows. We can shut this down without any more casualties, if we are careful."

"It's too risky," he begins, but is shut down by a ferocious glare from Roshan.

"Ro, it's best if you go with Hamid," I say, and lift my palms, flickers of magic sparking between my fingers. "I'll stay behind and make sure they're safe."

"Not an option," he says, banding a thick arm about my waist. "You stay with me. We do this together or not at all." Sands, he's so stubborn, but the truth is I'd refuse to leave him, too.

"They're probably watching this entrance," Hamid says. "It's what I would do, and despite their skill, we don't know if we're dealing with seasoned assassins or simply disgruntled countrymen."

"There's a back way over there." I point to a small trapdoor in the rear of the workshop. "It leads to a storage room, but there's an exit near one of the old jādū mines."

"That'll do," Roshan says, just as shouts and sparks light up the night. Magic arcs into the air from crossbows, thudding into the wood of the building, and I can see the ice spreading on the inside from the impact. Someone crashes against the door, and the sounds of clanging swords ensue. Orange flames shoot into the sky as the earth trembles.

"Go now!" Hamid says as the doors rattle. I don't know when he locked them, threading a metal bar through the handles, but the workshop is secure for the moment.

The trapdoor is a tight fit for both men, but they manage to squeeze through before I yank it closed, throwing the inner bolts. Again, it won't deter anyone for long, but it will buy us some time. The storage room is pitch-black and smells musty and unused, but I know the small space like the back of my hand. We quickly clear the way, showing bags of sand, old tools, and metal sheets aside, before pushing on

the doors leading up and out. They're rusty and the creaking sound is loud. Hamid goes first—and the sounds of a scuffle instantly filter in.

"You stay here," Roshan tells me. "I'll go."

Furious, I yank at his shirt. "I'm the Starkeeper. You're the king, so you stay put. *I'll go.*"

I'm out the door before he can argue or stop me with some horse-shit overprotective chivalry. I'm the only one with natural magic here and he knows that. My starlight flies out of me toward the grappling shapes on the sand and identifies Hamid at the last second. It incapacitates the two other men immediately and soundlessly.

"Thanks. Are they dead?" he pants, limping back toward me.

"Unconscious," I say, and glance over his shoulder, my magic lighting their faces. Both men are unfamiliar—neither of them looks like he's from here. More sounds of conflict pierce the air, the noise of two swords loud in the night. "Roshan, the tavern!"

Panicked, I start to sprint toward it, ignoring his hushed warnings to wait. My magic crackles, the simurgh inside alert. There's no movement around the back of the inn, and I signal to the two kings-guard to stay in their positions at the door. Clem is crouched near a side window, her weapons at the ready, and I run silently over to where she is.

"What's the status?" I ask, just as she demands, "Where's the king?"

"With Hamid," I reply. "Behind me. How many assailants?"

"At least five," she says, "with a dozen hostages in the main part of the tavern. Aran is in there, too."

My stomach roils, though I know Aran can handle himself. While my magic is fueled by the raw akasha in my veins, he uses *jādū*—a crystal form of magic—to amplify his runes. He is a more than capable master runecaster.

Unless there are too many of them.

Clem had said at least five hostiles, but more could be hiding out

of sight, biding their time. This whole offensive appears to have been orchestrated very carefully, which means whoever is the leader in there had to have had information from someone on our side who was privy to our plans. They had to have known that we were staying with a smaller contingent of guards. The knowledge is gutting—we have a traitor, and it could be anyone.

“And my father? Amma?”

“Both inside.” She turns to Hamid. “You need to take the king to safety. I’ll stay with Suraya and get the situation under control.”

“No!” Roshan snarls. “The Starkeeper does not leave my side.”

I flinch at his unusual vehemence, more so when his fingers fall and tighten over my wrist. Despite the words being similar to his ones earlier, they don’t evoke the same feelings of warmth. The edge of anger feels more possessive than protective. But I have more pressing things to worry about than sifting through Roshan’s mercurial emotions, namely my family’s safety.

“Calm down, caveman,” I mutter, and ease myself out of his hold. “No one’s going anywhere until we can figure out how to defuse the situation. I’m the least exposed. My magic will protect me, so I can go in there and see what they want.”

“*Suraya.*”

I stare at Roshan. “Do you have a better idea? They’ll kill anyone else. What you three need to figure out is who leaked information. Barely anyone outside our inner circle and your war council in Kaldari knew that Coban would be our first stop or, even worse, that we would be remaining here overnight. All the cities of Oryndhr were told to prepare, but the order for the tour was only announced this week to the aldermen out of an abundance of caution. This assault was *planned*. These mercenaries are not disgruntled villagers. People in many cities hated the previous regime and were punished for it.”

The three of them exchange dark looks.

I don't wait for Roshan's assent before slipping around the side to the front and boldly banging on the door. I can hear his growl of displeasure, but with him, it's always better to ask forgiveness than permission. He'd wrap me in wool if he could and tuck me away like a precious jewel. It would be sweet if we didn't have any other option. But there aren't enough soldiers to storm the tavern, and even if there were, the risk of innocents dying in the crossfire is too high.

"Open up!" I yell. "I'm not armed and here to talk!"

When the door cracks open, I walk in with both hands in the air to multiple weapons pointed at me. I'm not too concerned about those, but I am worried about the ones aimed at my father's head. Aran's, too; he's crouched down beside my father, blood spilling down his cheek from a nasty cut on his temple. I scan the room, relieved to find Amma sitting in one corner with no sign of injury or fear on her face. She looks utterly furious.

I smile at her before staring down each of the men. More than double the five Clem had initially counted . . . and there could be more hiding.

"Who are you?" I ask them, trying to determine which one's the leader.

One sneers, a man with a half-shaved head and long upper braid pointing a crossbow at my father. Him, then. "Where's the false king?"

I lift my brows. "The *false* king?" I echo. "He has a blood claim to the throne, and I seem to recall he's the one who saved your homes, lands, and families from being destroyed by a usurper god who intended to yoke Endara into subjugation."

"We have no quarrel with you, Starkeeper," the aggressor says, though his voice is belligerent with skepticism. Stories of my power have traversed the land, but men out here haven't *seen* it. Most of those who have are dead.

“But you see, if you have a quarrel with the *king*, you have one with me.” I pull a nearby chair out, flip it around, and straddle it. “Now, let’s be civil. I’m Suraya Saab. My father under your arrow is the owner of this tavern. Who are you, and what house are you from?”

I can hear his teeth grinding from where he stands. “I am Sandar of Eloni, House Regulus.” He points at a tall man with golden skin and a thick auburn beard. “Alderman Rubias of Eloni, House Antares.”

“An *alderman*, my stars, and you’re both far from home,” I say with an impressed expression. “What grievance do you have with King Roshan, pray tell, that you attack him in my home under my hospitality?”

“He’s a bastard,” the redhead grinds through his teeth, “and led the Dahaka. The rebellion stole from us for years. He’s untrustworthy and undeserving of the crown.”

I nod again. “Harsh words. But where were you during the battle of the capital? Where were all your men who find it so easy to prey upon unarmed villagers now? Does doing this—forcing people to their knees in their own homes—make you feel powerful?”

“Kill the bitch, Sandar, she’s nothing but a traitor, just like her king,” one of the other men growls from the side—a fox-faced grunt holding a glowing crimson mace.

Seeing me staring, he lets one of the red-hot points on the mace touch a hostage’s shoulder, making the poor man at his feet groan. It’s Cyril, I realize, one of the tavern’s regulars and the man who had accompanied my father to the capital to save me from Javed. Cyril is kneeling beside my former childhood nemesis, Simin, one arm around her quaking shoulders. They’d been dancing earlier in the tavern, with Simin flashing her pretty new engagement ring. Silent tears track down her cheeks.

I want to send them a reassuring look, but I don’t. I’m hoping to

end this with the least amount of carnage possible, and even with the increased control I have developed in recent months, thanks to Aran's tutelage, my magic can still be volatile.

Because, if I'm attacked, my simurgh will defend me at any cost—that is a certainty. She is waiting alertly under my skin, flexing her wings with a flick against my senses as if to assert she'll never let anything happen to me.

"The Starkeeper is a lie," someone else says from the back.

With a slow lift of my brows, I let my magic roll along my forearms, the runes there lighting up in silvery symbols and spirals as the akasha in my blood makes itself known.

"Parlor tricks!" Alderman Rubias says, his eyes full of suspicion and contempt. "The monarchy is spinning stories to control us, to control the houses and diminish our influence. The House of Antares was on the brink of exposing the Imperial House's lies and the seed of their corruption."

"By 'seed' you mean the dead Queen Morvarid?" I ask. "Because as far as I know, she was the unhinged magi resurrecting a dangerous god."

His face twists at my sarcasm. "She was the prophet who meant to cleanse her house of the rot eating away at its very foundations," he shouts, a fanatical tone to his voice that makes me stiffen. "She was to usher in a new age for those who served! Who still serve!"

My breath catches at the last. Suddenly, the situation becomes infinitely more dangerous. Nihilistic arcanists are unpredictable. We'd known that there would be pockets of Morvarid's rabid supporters lingering throughout Oryndhr, especially in Eloni, but to be faced with them here in Coban is surprising. But it solidifies my suspicion that this incursion wasn't by chance.

"I was there," I say. "I know *exactly* what the queen planned to do and how she intended to do it. She embodied the rot you speak of,

and yet here you are, praising her. What is it you think you can do in her name now that she's dead?"

He glares, and I can sense the darkness of his spirit, roiling within him. "Call in the false king. Tell him to surrender to his fate or we will execute everyone here, including your family."

"You know I can't let you do that," I say. "Because if you hurt a single hair on their heads, I promise you will find yourself in unspeakable agony."

He nods at someone I can't see, and I feel the blade at my neck a heartbeat later. Icy tendrils lace across my throat like eddies of frost, but there's something else imbued in the blade, not just ice. There's a power within some kind of underlying death magic. I quell the instant roar of my simurgh and the burst of akasha in my blood that wants to incinerate the steel at my throat.

Where and how would they have gotten a weapon like this?

Or better yet, from whom?

The man sneers. "You're flesh and blood like any of us, so pay attention. That blade will freeze your blood from flowing *and* eat away at your organs if you so much as twitch in a way I don't like. And the little light show on your arms means nothing, Starkeeper." He spits the name like it's a curse. "The oracle might need you alive, but trust me, we can bleed almost every drop of you and still keep you breathing."

Exhaling, I blink. *The oracle?*

My gaze drops to Aran's, and I see the alarm and suspicion spark in his gaze. This is new. Despite Roshan's hopes for a united peace throughout the realm, confirmation of an antagonist changes everything. *Who* is the oracle? I need to get the alderman talking.

"Such a good boy, following orders," I taunt, trying to keep my face neutral while my simurgh roils beneath my skin against the corrupted magic it can sense from the knife still pressed to my throat.

Soon, I promise her. "If you're not the true leader, then who is? This oracle? Maybe the grown-ups should be speaking."

"I *am* the starsdamned leader," Alderman Rubias hisses.

"Are you sure it isn't the oracle?" I press. "You seem uncertain."

His eyes shoot daggers. "No."

"Who are they?"

"You'll find out soon enough," he says.

I fold my arms, ignoring the razor-sharp blade cutting into the flesh of my neck. I don't do anything to heal myself, letting the blood drip down my skin.

The alderman's eyes snag on it and brighten. "See? The Starkeeper can bleed. Now, get me your king or we'll sever your spine!"

Knowing I won't get more out of him, I let my lip curl. "No."

It's the only thing I utter before I let my simurgh loose.