

Fifty-Five

“Beware, beware the tunnel’s light. Tis a dragon’s hungry eye.”

– Excerpted from *The Varahunaiya*, a famous Kandori legend

“Isabel van Gelderan...”

Isabel woke in darkness. She felt the whisper of his breath cold upon her neck, but the knife was colder still.

A circular room came into focus...wide, with windows overlooking bleak mountains, broad strokes of charcoal and white. All the world seemed twilit and colorless, without even a hint of gold from the sun’s radiant departure.

“Isabel...” His voice in her ear made her jump, but she quickly stilled with a sharp inhale, for he drew the point of his knife lightly down the side of her neck and along her collarbone, scratching a whiter than white trail across her skin.

She realized she was bound. As awareness returned to her fully, she looked to find her arms and legs spread apart and a particular silver rope binding ankles and wrists to a pair of gold poles. She’d been stripped of her fighting clothes, of everything save her blindfold and a short linen shift...but she hadn’t gone into Ivarnen wearing that. It must’ve been a gift from him.

“Can you see me, Isabel? Even with that fold of silk across your eyes?”

She scanned the tower room, for she’d felt him moving away, and saw an ornate bed, a table, a hearth. He was leaning in what passed for a corner in the circular room, one shoulder braced against a window’s frame.

“Pelas.”

He had his arms crossed before his chest and a Merdanti dagger in one hand, and his eyes were very, very dark.

She’d known it would be him even before he spoke her name...even before she walked unarmed to meet his brother. She’d known she and Pelas would meet again, but not the manner of it. She never imagined it would be like this.

Isabel swallowed and looked down at the shift protecting her modesty. Then she looked back to him.

He shrugged. “Out of respect for you.”

“And the *goracrosta*?”

He smiled. “Out of respect for your ability.”

An ache in her stomach and another in her head warned her she’d been unconscious for some time...hours, perhaps a day. She turned her attention to the window before her. These were no mountains she’d ever seen. “Where are we?”

He straightened and wandered along the curving wall. As he walked, he trailed his dagger behind him, scraping an uneven line. Reaching the window, he bent his head and peered out. “My best guess is Myacene. There’s naught but what you see out there for hundreds of leagues. Such lifeless emptiness appeals to my brother.”

She managed a dry swallow. “And this tower?”

He opened his arms. “This beautiful tower is a gift to me.” He started walking the rim of the room again, tracing his dagger’s uneven line. She saw thin ones and deep ones drawn across plaster and stone. Hundreds of lines encircling the room.

“A quiet place to ‘ponder my disobedience’...somewhere away from distractions, where I might learn to reform my ways. He promised to check on me again in another century or so.” Pelas shot her a bitter smile over his shoulder as he continued his slow tracing. “Being that I need neither food nor water to survive, Darshan considers this a suitable arrangement.”

Isabel breathed in sorrow, for the air was thick with it. This was not the same being she’d met in Tal’Afaq—yet the darkness she now perceived in Pelas had been lying across his path even then. “What did he do to you?”

He shot her a look of fire and fury, of torment and agonized despair. “He took away my power.”

She stared at him. “But...that’s impossible.”

He barked a caustic laugh and threw open his arms. “And yet here we are!” He plunged the dagger back into the wall and scraped a deep fissure as he dragged it behind him.

If she’d been talking to the same man that had faced her so calmly in Tal’Afaq, Isabel might’ve tried to reason with him, but she sensed that this version of Pelas had abandoned reason some time ago. And could she blame him, when no reasonable answer could possibly be found?

She watched him making his slow circle dragging his dagger, a predator chained in a cage. A god chained to mortal form.

“Why am I here?” She knew the obvious answer—that this is where her path had brought her, but *why* it had taken her there?

Pelas turned abruptly, tossed his dagger into his other hand and started dragging it back in the opposite direction.

“Why are you here?” He eyed her over his shoulder, and in that brief moment she saw something very dangerous in his gaze. An austere smile flickered and was gone again from his lips. “You’re a present for my good behavior. Darshan’s idea of sport.”

Feeling a little light-headed, Isabel tested the *goracrosta* at her wrists. The cuffs were tightly bound and had been artfully woven. Another piece of the enchanted rope connected each cuff to the metal poles. She couldn’t free herself unless he gave her his dagger, which seemed...unlikely.

“But why you specifically, why here, like this...?” Pelas waved an airy circle with his dagger in a casual manner much in contrast to the acrimony in his tone. “*You’re* here, Isabel, because you’re a powerful Healer, and I...” Suddenly he dropped his chin and shot her a look so rapacious and hungry that her heart nearly stopped in her chest. “Thanks to my dear, sweet brother’s *compulsion*, I’ve developed a particular taste for Healers.”

She caught her breath.

Even in Tal’Afaq she’d perceived that Pelas hadn’t been wholly himself. This compulsion then had been what she’d sensed, why he’d kept moving away from her...why she’d instinctively distanced herself.

She understood better the formless darkness that she'd seen shrouding her path, understood why she hadn't been able to see beyond it at the time...and why the world now remained a colorless twilight.

She and Pelas both had passed through Darshan's shadow, and now they were trapped together in a gloaming of his creation, trapped in some sense in Darshan's world—Darshan's *rules*—where all was a glamour.

Only the pain would be real.

Isabel forced a swallow. Though she could guess, she wanted to hear it from him. "What does...the compulsion require of you, Pelas?"

He stopped with his back to her. For a long time, all she saw was the rise and fall of his breath. Then he turned and crossed the room to a table with a linen drape across it. He tossed one corner of the cloth roughly aside to reveal a panoply of knives, and swapped his dagger for a thin silver stylus. Turning, he held it up for her viewing pleasure. "Let me show you, Isabel."

Her heart was racing when he halted before her and presented the stylus across his open palms. One end was needle-sharp, the other flattened to a razor edge—an artist's brush forged in steel.

His copper eyes looked her over, traced the lines and curves of her body. She thought she perceived a flicker of the man he had once been as he admired her form—a man he must still be somewhere, beneath the compulsion, confusion and loss.

He ran the back of his fingers across her collarbone, along her shoulder and down the inside of her upper arm, which lay open and bare to his inspection. "So lovely...too lovely to harm as I have harmed others."

The dark hunger in his gaze truly frightened her. She couldn't close her eyes to shut it out, for they were closed already—this was *elae* showing her what *was*, revealing only truth where human eyes had lied before. Pelas should've *glowed* standing before her, a sun too bright to look upon—even as his brother had appeared to her in Ivarnen's corridor...even with *goracrosta* diluting her *elae*-fuelled sight. Instead, Pelas was bound in twilight.

Somehow...somehow she had to free him from this shadow.

He dropped his arm to his side and his chin to his chest. "I tried, Isabel..." His voice came a bare whisper. "All day I've had you here...I've tried to disobey...out of fury and defiance...spite...but in the end..." He lifted his gaze. "In the end, we find ourselves inevitably back at our mutual beginning—subjects of Darshan's will." These last words sliced the air with animosity and hopelessness.

"You don't have to do this. You have a choice."

"No." He shifted his gaze away and clenched his jaw. "My only hope is to do what my brother tasks me with. If I...please him enough, he may give me back my own will."

It worried her to hear him say such words. "You cannot believe he will ever do that."

His brow twisted. She saw a spark of fury flare in his gaze and quickly die, replaced by smoldering despair. "I fear you're right." The smile he lifted to her then was as bleak as the mountains beyond their tower. "But that just leaves us...here."

Suddenly that dark persona appeared again—sardonic, caustic...coldly indifferent. "And where is here?" He narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips and spun the stylus through his fingers. "Oh, yes." The stylus flipped forward into an artist's practiced hold, and he set the needle point against the skin of her left shoulder.

His eyes flicked back to her, darkly inquiring, and he pierced the tip into her flesh. She inhaled sharply. “What shall we draw today, Isabel?” He drew the tiny razor end through her skin—not deep, no, but deep enough to trace a line of blood. Deep enough to leave a scar...that is, if she lived long enough to heal from this. If she *could* heal from this.

“A pattern—” she gasped. Then she caught her bottom lip between her teeth to keep from crying out.

He smiled into her hidden gaze. “A *pattern*. I hadn’t thought of that.” He drew a circle with the stylus and withdrew it from her flesh, leaving a streak that ended in a curlicue of blood. She inhaled a shuddering breath.

“You needn’t be brave on my account.” He looked her over while his fingers spun the stylus again. “A woman’s screaming has never bothered me. Odd, I suppose. I doubt Darshan put *that* into his compulsion.” His gaze narrowed. “But what pattern should we start with, you and I?”

Her heart was racing and she felt faint. She was finding it difficult to stay focused. “Something...”

He eyed her with dark curiosity. “Yes?”

“Something of the light.”

This made him frown. But then he nodded. “Perhaps you should design it with me.” Abruptly he spread his arms, backed away and barked a bitter laugh. “We’re trapped in this hell together, after all, aren’t we? At least...” his eyes looked her over again as his expression fell. “That is, for as long as you can last.”

“Pelas...” She begged him with mind and tone and voice, but while the goracrosta couldn’t keep *elae* from washing through her, it could and did prevent her from framing it to her intention. “Please—don’t do this to yourself.”

He drew back, blinking. “What?”

She tried desperately to find the right words to get through to him, to reach the being beneath the dark creature of Darshan’s invention. “You’re letting him win.”

He stared at her for a long time, his face twisted with pain. Then he laid his hands upon her bare shoulders and pressed his forehead against her own. “Isabel, can you not see?” He brushed his nose along hers, his breath cool across her mouth. “He already has.”

Isabel roused from darkness into pain. She lifted her head and let the twilight seep back in. Her body felt cold except for her left shoulder and upper arm, where he’d—

She’d lost consciousness during the middle of his drawing. She looked now to the flesh of her shoulder. He’d blotted it, cleansed it of blood. The skin was red and slightly swollen around the swirling cuts, but the pattern...

Even in that twilight world, it glowed.

She didn’t know if it was a real pattern with purpose or merely something of his artistic invention, but it collected *elae* to it like a star.

She knew why her path had brought her there now, but she didn’t know how to move forward upon it.

Isabel looked around the room and found him standing at a distant window looking out. “Is there anything to drink?” She needed water if nothing else.

He turned from the window, and his brow furrowed. After a moment's thought, he grabbed a cup from the mantle, threw open a near window and scraped snow from the eaves into it. Icy air accosted her, rousing gooseflesh from neck to knees. Soon he had the window closed and set the cup by the fire to melt.

"I should've thought of that before. You'll last longer with water, and..." he shrugged, "well, you're all the company I'm likely to have for a very long time."

He pushed his dark hair off his shoulders and came to look over his handiwork with a discerning gaze.

She watched him inspecting her arm. "What does it do, your pattern?"

He pursed his lips. "I'm not certain. It just came to me. It's beautiful, isn't it?" He lifted his gaze to her. Then he smiled sadly and stroked her cheek with a gentle hand. "Something must be left of me somewhere." The look in his eyes made a tortured confession of these words. "I couldn't bear to diminish the beauty in you."

"I suppose..." She had to work to keep her thoughts clear, for her head felt full of wool. "I suppose you've thought of trying to escape?"

He grunted derisively and flung one arm towards the window across from her. "Four hundred feet on that side." He opened his other arm to the opposite window. "A thousand feet over there." Then he gave her a pointed look. "So unless you can fly."

She smiled. "Perhaps if you released me."

He cast his head in a chastising tilt. "But if I did that, sweet Isabel, what hope could I possibly have of pleasing my brother?"

She wetted her lips with a tongue too dry. "Perhaps *my* brother—"

He shook his head. "You and I both know it's too late for that. I should've listened to your warning." He threw himself into a low-slung chair by the fire and pushed out his legs. "I don't suppose it would make you feel better to tell me I told you so."

Isabel gazed sadly at him. "I would rather see you restored than humbled."

He grunted. "Would that Darshan shared your view."

"Pelas..." Her brow furrowed. "Would you really stay here a hundred years waiting for his forgiveness, even knowing as you must in your heart that it will never come?"

"And a hundred more, Isabel. What else is there for me to do?"

"You could..." Again she found herself searching for words to try to reach him, some spark to break through the melancholy, some hope to pierce the darkness. "You wouldn't consider living life...without your power?"

He lifted his eyes and held her blindfolded gaze. "Would you?" When she said nothing to this, for in truth she didn't know how to answer, he shrugged and murmured somewhat desperately, "It's all I know."

As Isabel gazed at him, she better understood his twilight horror. Pelas was an immortal being. What could he ever have known of loss? Perhaps he'd experienced it glibly on a small scale...observed it in the vain struggles of mortal men, but such trials had never applied to *him*—how could they? Pelas was a being who could never die. What was a hundred years in the grand scheme of his eternity? What was the loss of a single lover, or a building where he laid his head at night, or even a kingdom he'd once been fond of? Empires rose and fell while such beings deliberated on their next idle pursuit.

But now Darshan had given Pelas a taste of mortality. He couldn't throw himself from the tower, for he had no power to stop his fall. He couldn't call a portal of escape,

for *deyjiin* was beyond his reach—and thus he felt that all of life was beyond his reach, now, without his power.

That was real loss—experienced perhaps for the first time in the countless millennia of his existence—and he had no idea how to emotionally or rationally come to terms with such a thing.

Pelas picked up her cup of snow, melted now, and brought it over to her. With the utmost care, he helped her drink. It cooled her parched throat but brought an empty ache to her stomach. He rested his cheek upon her shoulder while he held the cup to her mouth and watched her drink. “When this is gone, we should continue.”

She pressed her lips against the cup for a moment and then turned to look at him where he rested his head on her shoulder. “What’s the hurry?”

Abruptly he thrust himself away and turned his back on her. “I *hunger*, Isabel! It *burns*! Don’t you understand?” He waved ambiguously at himself while he glared at her with abject anger pouring off of him in waves.

The currents pounded her, pinned her beneath the pummeling surf of his wrath. But it wasn’t his ire that stunned her in that moment so much as the sudden shocking certainty that his power remained, only...somehow he couldn’t access it—clearly, he couldn’t even sense it.

Her mouth fell open with this realization.

“By Chaos born—” He stalked back to her, grabbed her around the waist, and dragged her body tight against his, straining at her bonds. She inhaled sharply. “I *can’t* control it, Isabel.” He buried his nose in her hair. “I’m sorry.” Then he thrust her away and walked to retrieve his stylus.

Isabel tried to order her thoughts through the fear that clung to her. In the moment when he’d grabbed her, the spark of an idea had formed.

Pelas came towards her with darkness veiled across his gaze again and the steel brush of his stylus at the ready.

“What does it demand of you...the compulsion?” She turned her head to look at him as he came up behind her.

He swept her long hair aside and set the needle against her right shoulder. His gaze narrowed with careful inspection as he pushed the needle tip slowly into her flesh and drew it downward.

Isabel sucked in her breath and clenched her teeth.

“It’s difficult to say.”

She turned away from him and tried to breathe through the pain.

“I thought for a long time it had something to do with a Healer’s blood. Darshan bade me seek the Pattern of the World. We know it’s mirrored within the first strand...” He finished off a curl, plucked the stylus out of her flesh and started another. Pain flared in fire and slicing heat.

Isabel gritted her teeth. She poured all of her intention into forming words. “It’s true...a Healer carries elements of this pattern...but so does every Adept. Including yourself.”

She glanced over her shoulder in time to catch a rueful arch of his brow. Isabel sucked in another shuddering breath. “But the pattern is too vast to be contained in a single Adept...or their blood.”

He grunted.

“Even if you had it—” the words came out tightly, forced over pain, “the world cannot be unworked from within the realm itself.”

Abruptly Pelas withdrew the stylus. He walked around and stood in front of her. “What do you mean?”

For a moment, she thought she’d reached him, but then she saw she’d merely intrigued that dark specter who had usurped Pelas’s form.

“The realm cannot be unmade from within. It can only be unmade from the plane of Chaos.”

Pelas frowned at her and spun his stylus absently through his fingers. “Darshan says that something stands between the realm and Chaos or Rinokh would already have reached us again...that is, since your Ean val Lorian unworked the shell my brother claimed on this plane.” She couldn’t tell if it was dark humor or wrath smoldering in his eyes.

“Yes.” She sucked in a shuddering breath, for her shoulder burned badly enough now to bring tears to her eyes. “Another realm stands between Alorin and Chaos...made to be a buffer, a shield.” She roused from the stupor of pain with effort. “My brother and his Council of Nine made it for this very purpose.”

He regarded her strangely. “And invited us in—*why*...to level the playing field?”

“You were already here by that time, but yes, having you here requires you to play on the same terms as the rest of us—or as close as we can hope for.”

He barked an incredulous laugh. It was almost his own. His gaze when he looked back to her was still shadowed, but it also held admiration. “I had no idea anyone knew so much about us.”

Isabel doubted he would believe her if she tried to convince him that he still held his power, but perhaps she could give him *some* hope. “Pelas, we can help you.”

His gaze darkened, but she couldn’t tell what shadow overcame it. When he looked back to her, it was to level upon her a merciless stare. “Why would you?” He walked back around behind her and resumed his work.

Isabel bit back a cry as the stylus bit into her flesh. That time she couldn’t stop the tears from falling.

Fifty-Nine

“Real trust, true faith...these cannot be explained, only experienced.”

– Excerpted from the collected writings
of Epiphany’s Prophet

Isabel gritted her teeth and took several fast breaths.

She was learning to manage the pain. It would spread and build until it was so intense that she thought she must surely faint, but often in that very moment, Pelas would remove the needle tip to start a new thread of the pattern and give her time to catch her breath.

Still, the world spun dizzily.

Darshan expected her to die beneath Pelas’s knife, but Pelas seemed in no hurry to rush her along.

He sat in a chair at her feet, carving a pattern into her thigh. One hand pinned her hip, holding up the linen shift he’d provided her, while his other hand drew the stylus through her skin with an artist’s steady precision. He attended his work with careful concentration, a faint furrow between his dark brows.

“What do you think about, Isabel?” He looked up at her. “While I’m working on you, what do you think about?”

She summoned her breath. “How to help you.”

This made him smile. “Really?” He gave her a skeptical look that yet seemed pleased. “And have you made much progress?”

“Some.”

He looked at her strangely for a moment and then sat back in his chair. “Some. What *some*?”

She’d been trying to get through to him, to reach *him*, not merely the shadowed entity that possessed his thoughts. But so far nothing she’d said had penetrated the membrane of hopelessness that had enveloped the real Pelas.

“You must...” she wetted her lips, feeling the dullness of exhaustion overtaking her, fighting to stay ahead of it. “You must know of the tapestry, of our paths.”

“Some.” He mimicked her with a shadowy smile. “What of it?”

“In Tal’Afaq, I got the sense that you...I perceived that you’d nearly chosen a path.”

He set down his stylus and considered her. “I was told by someone I trust that I have no path.”

She held his gaze. “Unless you choose one.”

He frowned ponderously at this. After a time, he rose from his chair and wandered to the window to stare out over the bleak mountains. “There was a boy who followed me once.” He turned her an unreadable look over his shoulder, his gaze intense. “A truthreader. I asked him why he knowingly followed me into danger, and he said he was simply following his path.” Abruptly he turned to her. “I have no concept of that feeling, Isabel. I don’t *feel* like I have any path. Nothing seems to stretch before me...” He leaned back against the wall. “No future and nothing behind.”

“*Now*, perhaps,” she conceded gently. “What about before?”

He growled in frustration and pushed off the wall. “Before, before—I hardly remember before.” He flung a hand into the air as he wandered about the room. “All I know is now, and now feels like eternity, and eternity feels like *death*.” Hit bit the word and cast her a glare bound by enmity, wrapped in fear. “In the void, ages passed in the blink of an eye. Without my power, a minute feels like a year, and a day a century.”

“If you would let me help you—”

“How?” He moved swiftly to her, grabbed her and pressed their bodies close. “*How* can you help me? Can you remove Darshan’s compulsion?”

Isabel’s breath came fast, nearly as fast as her heart. “Not like this.”

His face fell back beneath the shadow. He brushed a stray hair from her cheek. “Help me...” he barely breathed the words, a whisper of lost hope. After a moment, he shook his head and released her. Then he sat back down in his chair and retrieved his stylus. “There is no help for me.”

Isabel summoned back the breath he’d stolen. “Let’s say...let’s say Darshan truly took your immortal power away.”

He gave her a look that said clearly enough this wasn’t open to debate.

“Even so, he cannot change your basic nature.”

Pelas hung his head and stared at the stylus in his hands.

Isabel pressed on. “Your friend was right. You have no path—unless you *choose* one. But path or no path, by your very nature, Pelas, you summon to you whatever it is that you most need, whatever it is your desire...whatever you’re most focused upon.”

“Vortices.” He glanced up at her under his brows.

She nodded. “It makes you powerful...even without power.”

He sat back in his chair and considered her. Then he waved a little circle with his stylus. “By all of this, you insinuate that I drew you here to help me.”

She held his gaze. “Facts are facts.”

“Outcomes are all that matter.” He returned his attention to her thigh.

Isabel roused from a fitful sleep with a sudden jerk against her bonds, against shoulders that throbbed and wrists that knew a numb ache deeper than the hunger in her core. Pain had become a jealous lover, keeping covetous watch over her form. Stabbing needles dug into her flesh, even in her sleep.

The latter came rarely enough, and when it did, it gave her no release, for that portentous dream of days past still haunted her. Over and over it played through her head, until she feared she must be missing something of vital importance.

Night lay over the mountains, but a luminous moon shone through the windows, limning the tower furniture in silver. She scanned the room—from fireplace to table, windows to bed. She couldn’t see him, but she sensed him near. Then she happened to look down and found him lying at her feet staring out the window, his eyes half-lidded but awake.

“May I have some water?”

He pushed up on one hand to look at her. “You talk in your sleep.” He got up and went to pour water for her.

Isabel watched him crossing the room, feeling a desperate need to help him. “I’m not sure that qualifies as sleep.”

He turned her a look over his shoulder. “What then?”

She shook her head. “Nothing I can explain.”

He came over and helped her drink. When she’d taken as much as she could, she nodded to him, and he moved away.

“Pelas?”

He looked over his shoulder as he set the cup on the mantle.

“How did you betray him?”

Firelight illuminated his twisted expression. “I chose...I chose...” He sat down on the hearthstone and draped elbows over bent knees.

“You chose...?”

He looked up at her desperately. “I suppose I chose to pursue a purpose counter to his own.”

Hope made a sudden lump in her throat as she realized what he was saying. “You wanted to save this world?”

His gaze...she’d never seen him look so tormented. After a moment, he hung his head between his hands. “Yes.”

He was *so close* to choosing a path! And what it would mean to the game when he did...it would be worth any cost.

“May I ask why?”

He looked up with a twisted smile. “Would you believe for love of a child?”

“Love is the best reason.”

He considered her answer. “I don’t know why it happened, our friendship. It shouldn’t have, by all accounts. I told you once of this boy—he was a truthreader. I thought at first he was one of my brother’s spies. But as I came to know him...” His brow furrowed. “I thought once that I perceived something of my maker in him, just something impossibly...pure.” He shrugged. “He’s special to me now in a way I have no words to describe.”

Isabel didn’t need his words to understand; she knew what he perceived. “Where is he, your truthreader friend?”

Pelas shook his head. “I don’t know.” Then he grunted ruefully. “Waiting for me to find him again, I suppose.”

“And will you?”

Suddenly his gaze darkened, and he shot her a rancorous glare. “Assuming he still lives when my two hundred years are up?”

Isabel’s gaze held gentle understanding—no matter what he did to her in the throes of his compulsion, she wouldn’t give him other than kindness in return. “Imagine he does. Would you seek him out?”

Pelas clenched his jaw. Then he pushed abruptly to his feet and walked to his table of knives.

“If you never choose a path, you will always be a danger to our world.”

He grunted at this.

“Pathless, you’ll continue to disrupt the paths of others as you pull them in to suit your whims. You’re like the prow of a ship plowing through the waves, sending ripples

in vastly different directions, disrupting the equanimity of the tapestry, tearing its pattern.”

He pressed both hands wide against the table, bowed his head and growled, “How do I find a path when all the world is black, Isabel?”

She searched for words to help him. Threads spun before her vision, crossing and entwining, branching again. The threads looked oddly grey in the perpetual gloaming of their shared prison, but she knew somewhere the light was shining. The trouble was that Pelas didn’t.

“I don’t think the compulsion is the problem.”

He turned her a fierce look over his shoulder. He’d drawn that dark veil across his thoughts again.

“I know a little about compulsion, Pelas.”

“High Mage of the Citadel, indeed.” He looked back to his knives.

“What does Darshan’s compulsion require you to do?”

“I tire of this line of questioning, Isabel.”

“You haven’t ever answered the question.”

He turned with stylus in hand. “And yet, I don’t have to answer it at all.”

“If only you—” But the rest of the sentence came out in a hiss as he started in again on the pattern he’d been scoring into her back, and afterwards, she couldn’t find the energy to ask him anymore.

Isabel hung her head. Exhaustion and pain flew in circles through her thoughts, spiraling ghosts, spinning...spinning...

Pain flared in her back—brilliant, intense. Pelas was carving a new pattern.

Images of Arion, then Ean, then the two of them somehow as the same person flashed back and forth before her eyes, tormenting her. They whispered that she’d chosen this path and abandoned them, and for what...? For what? To die in a tower halfway across the realm having accomplished nothing?

No, she couldn’t let that happen.

Twice since waking in the tower, Isabel had caught a glimpse of the path before her and seen...well, if not exactly its end, then at least a door opening upon a new eventuality. But she didn’t know how to get to that door from where she and Pelas now stood.

It was difficult not to give in to despair, yet she had to hold onto awareness—hold to *hope*, so that when Epiphany gave her an opening, she’d be able to claim it. For she understood that if Cephrael carried the staff of condemnation, Epiphany carried one of redemption. Even when Cephrael had set his sights against a man, Epiphany always gave him one last chance to prove his quality.

She didn’t fear death; she feared failing all of those who believed in her, who were depending on her. She didn’t want to leave her thread in the game unfinished.

For the first time she understood the torment Arion had endured in the weeks leading up to the Citadel, when he’d known he was going to die there.

Perhaps she shouldn’t have told him, but he’d begged her to share what she’d seen among the shifting veils of the future, and she’d never been able to deny him anything. What courage he’d demonstrated in walking his path anyway, in going on alone and

giving his life for her brother's game! They would've lost the Citadel that night if not for him.

Isabel thought of Arion in those days, and she thought of Ean now—so buoyant at times, and so overwhelmed in others, yet consistently brilliant if only he could see it in himself. How dreadful it must be for him to be constantly compared to and held up against his own genius, all the while knowing—*believing*—that even with all the knowledge and skill he'd possessed as Arion Tavestra, still he'd failed. Yet Ean chose to continue on.

In every moment, we bear the choice to embrace that moment or become the victim of it.

The temptation to feel that sorrow pounded constantly on the door of her mind, but she knew that once one opened the door of self-pity, it became nearly impossible to close it again. She might've seemed like a victim in this circumstance, chained and tortured by another man's knife, but she was the High Mage of the Citadel. She was Epiphany's Prophet. Outward appearances could be deceiving.

Pelas lifted the needle from her skin to her immeasurable relief. He wet a linen cloth with ice-water and spread it gently across the pattern he'd scored into her back.

Her body was almost covered in such patterns now.

The icy cloth on her back felt heaven's blessing. He must've heard her sigh, for he bent a kiss to her shoulder and then treated two of his other patterns—older carvings from earlier days—with their own chill dressing. Then he walked to a basin and washed his hands.

"What would Darshan say if he knew you were keeping me alive like this?"

Pelas shrugged without looking at her. "The point is moot. It will be decades before he returns."

"I would last longer as company with something to eat."

He paused in his washing. Then he turned and leaned back against the basin to stare at her. "You would choose to stay alive for this?" he waved a hand to encompass her bondage and all of the tools that brought her pain.

"Not for this, Pelas...for you."

Now he really stared at her. "You actually believe...you *believe* your path brought you here." He grunted with incredulity. "For *what*, Isabel?"

She held his gaze as best she could. "I think you know."

He slung the rag to the floor. "I *don't* know. I don't know *anything* anymore—not who I am, nor what I think, nor even why I bother trying to appease my brother when he has me *exactly where he wants me!*" These final words came out in a dreadful thunder.

Power darkened the room in shadowed clouds of static, responding to his rage. Even with *goracrost*a masking her from the full force of the currents, Isabel perceived this storm, but he sensed none of it as she did.

She hung her head and let the cauldron boil around her. Such power he possessed! She might've survived on his power alone had he channeled it towards giving her life instead of instinctively drawing upon it as fuel for his anger.

Isabel hung her head dizzily. "If you despise it so much, why do you not fight the compulsion?"

He barked an incredulous laugh. "You think this is me *not* fighting it?" He shoved off the basin and approached her. "Do you have any idea what this compulsion demands of

me? What it *drives* me to want to do?” He caught her around the throat and forced her head back as he pressed himself close to her. His copper eyes flamed beneath a brow shadowed by fury and despair. She saw him grit his teeth, saw the muscles of his jaw tighten with anger. “Believe me, Isabel,” he hissed, low and fervent, “I’m *fighting* it—Tooth. And. Claw.”

He’d forced her head painfully back, so she had to whisper, “What does it demand of you?”

Oh, how he growled at her at this. “You really want to know?”

She nodded, the barest of motions against the constraint of his marble hand.

Pelas hooked an arm around her body and pulled her close, bringing his mouth to her ear while his other hand clutched her throat. “Need,” he whispered, and he stroked his fingers down her neck. His breath fell cool across her, and his hand felt colder against her back than the icy cloth he’d dressed for her. “Hunger.” His lips brushed her ear and along her neck. “Ache—yearning—heat and fury...*insatiable* want.” He pressed his nose into her hair and smelled deeply of her.

“That’s...” She tried to catch her breath with him still clinging to her. “Darshan cast a broad compulsion—formless. He would’ve given it direction as well.”

Pelas laid his head on her shoulder and let his fingers trace down to pause in the hollow between her breasts. “He wants me to kill you—to kill all of you.”

“Healers.”

He nodded against her shoulder, and still he clutched her to him like a dying man. Her arms ached, strained against her bonds.

Then he simply pushed her away and stalked across the room. She feared for him as much as for herself. He posed the most danger when set upon by this mood, when Darshan’s compulsive darkness wound about him like a viperous shroud, masking all that was innately him.

“I don’t know why I fight it.” He turned a brimstone glare over his shoulder. “Perhaps I shouldn’t. Mayhap he knows even now that I defy him—how am I to know what patterns he’s cast about this place? I have *no power* anymore!” He kicked at the table and sent the entire piece skidding, knives tumbling askew. Then he pushed both hands against the mantle and hung his head.

“Pelas...”

But there was no reaching him now. She saw that.

After a moment, he straightened and walked to his table. Her blood ran cold when she saw the blade he selected. “*No*—” She watched him desperately as he approached, eyes hooded and dark, his face twisted with despair. “Don’t give in to it. Don’t give up!”

He stopped before her and looked her over, jaw clenched. Then he ran the razor edge of the blade lightly down both sides of her neck and in an arc across her chest, as if mapping out the lines of his intended incisions.

More lines followed, tracing down across her shift, outlining her breasts, across her abdomen, another low arc from hip to hip. “Pelas, *please*...”

Oh, if only her mind were clear instead of plagued by this murky, sordid twilight, or if her thoughts weren’t so fogged by exhaustion and pain. If only she could see the paths instead of these shifting threads, myriad filaments of possibility leading nowhere!

Abruptly he pressed the cold steel against her throat. Isabel caught her breath—at any moment he could lose his battle with the darkness and bring an end to both of them.

Holding his knife in place, he traced a hand down her face, watching her with hooded eyes blind to her pleas. Then his fiery gaze narrowed. “But I would see *you* when we do this, Isabel.”

He ripped off her blindfold.

She gasped at the shock of it, at the sudden sensation of cool air upon her eyes, at a different sort of muted light...daylight, sensed more than seen. Her lids fluttered, and then Isabel blinked and looked upon the world with her naked eyes. Looked at him.

Pelas met her gaze hungrily, expectantly. Then she saw his brow tighten—

The knife fell from his fingers to clatter against the floor, and he staggered back—back—all the way across the room until he hit up against the far wall. She found no words to describe the horror on his face.

He gasped in a shuddering breath, pinned immobile. “*You’re—*”

She nodded. She knew what he’d seen when he looked into her eyes.

“*By Chaos born!*” Still he was gaping at her. “If you knew...why didn’t you *tell* me? Why did you let me—” but he choked over the words, suddenly sickened by what he’d done. He pushed off the wall and shoved both hands into his long hair and swore a litany of curses in a language of lightning and formless static.

Yet as she watched him, she knew she was seeing Pelas as himself again for the first time. The shock of seeing her eyes—of the recognition in their shape and color—had driven Darshan’s shadows momentarily to bay. Pelas turned away, hands gripped behind his head, and—

Chills striped Isabel, for she experienced in that instant a Seer’s duality, when life mimics the dream.

She saw the moment—his stance, the agonized expression on his face...

She understood it now, how to help him, but *oh...*the price was so high.

Isabel marshaled her courage. “A broad compulsion...can be rechanneled.”

He threw her a tormented look.

“Compulsive hunger can be assuaged in more than one way.” She strained to find her voice, her breath, to stay focused and aware. “Hunger and desire find harmonics up and down the scale. You can succumb to the craving in whatever form has been forced on you, or you can take charge of it, find a higher harmonic of the same driving impulse—direct it, own it...*sublimate* it.”

He turned. Stared at her. His eyes searched her gaze for meaning. She knew he would find it there.

His eyes widened. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

But her gaze, holding his, said otherwise.

“Sublimate it?” Confusion and hopelessness twisted on his brow. “I...don’t know how.”

“Hunger is desire...” She dropped her gaze and summoned her resolve. Then she lifted her head and looked him in the eye. “Desire me.”

In three quick strides he’d crossed the room and grabbed her into his arms. “I *do* desire you.”

She turned her mouth to receive his, and he claimed of her a violent kiss...a powerful kiss that stole her breath and froze her deeply in the same terrible moment.

Suddenly he ripped away and staggered back. Misgiving and alarm made his copper eyes too bright, hot with accusation. He dabbed at his mouth with the back of one hand. “You would betray your love and give yourself to me just to secure your freedom.”

“No.” Her tone gentled the distrust in his rebuke while her gaze showed him the truth of her intent. “. . .but I would do it to secure yours.”

For a moment, Pelas stared at her. Then he came for her. In a single motion, he swept his knife up from the floor and severed the ropes that bound her to the poles—though not the goracrosta cuffs that bound her wrists. Then he lifted her into his arms and carried her to his bed.

He nearly pitched her onto the mattress in his haste. She watched with naked eyes as he freed himself and threw his body down across her own. He sealed his mouth on hers and pressed her painfully into the mattress. His right hand pinned both of hers above her head, powerful legs forced hers apart, and Pelas channeled the full force of Darshan’s compulsion into their copulation.

For a time, Isabel knew only the engagement of his lovemaking, intense with sensation and terrifying with guilt, but as Pelas found a sense of himself, his eyes sought hers again.

“Tell me. . .” he growled, low and feverish, “tell me how to do this.”

Isabel held his gaze. This coupling had been her suggestion—it was the only way she saw to free him—but it was also a terrible betrayal. She felt the guilt of that betrayal far more deeply than any wounds Pelas had given her.

“You take the force of the compulsion. . .and you channel it to your *own* desire. This is how you overcome it.”

He stilled for a heartbeat’s pause, digesting that. Then he captured her mouth with his and spun her around beneath him.

Violent, fervent, desperate. . .the hours passed in this guise. Isabel became the vessel into which Pelas poured all of his fury and out of which he took everything he could to sate the compulsion’s hunger.

At some point—she didn’t know when, for the hours had become a blur—he pressed his forehead against hers and whispered, “This cannot be the way.”

Isabel closed her eyes, but the tormenting truth still stared at her. “This is the only way.”

He growled and thrust himself into her again, and the rhythm of their union paced the rapid beating of her heart. As he guided their joining, he unconsciously wrapped his power around her in a hundred arms, a thousand hands. His thoughts took flight and shaped themselves and claimed Isabel for their pleasure equally.

And so it went, this punishing, passionate, intemperate union. Pelas molded her body to his desires and carved his freedom out of her sacrifice, and though Isabel had chosen this path and now knew where it would lead, still each moment felt as terrifying as when he’d carved patterns in her flesh.

Sixty-Two

“The light always comes round again, if one can stand the darkness long enough.”

– A favorite Malchiarri saying

Day and night blended for Isabel while Pelas exorcized Darshan’s compulsion, but finally a time came when they lay abed with moonlight as a blanket across their naked forms. Isabel lay on her back, Pelas with his head on her stomach. His long raven hair draped across the mattress, blending with hers, dark shadows amid a field of luminous white. Her fingertips traced the line of his temple and smoothed back his hair. His breath came evenly. He seemed at peace for the first time.

They’d been hours in this stillness, not speaking...perhaps not daring to speak. She sensed him waiting for the horror to return, for that repulsive, irresistible urge to do harm...for the dark desire that had always before overtaken and enslaved him.

“It’s been three hours.” She felt the roughness of his unshaven jaw scraping her belly as he spoke. The feeling reminded her heartbreakingly of Ean.

Though Pelas lay calm, serene, nearly whole again, Isabel felt shattered. Hunger was an ache she barely recognized anymore, so faint it felt compared to her guilt. Her raw and damaged skin touching or being touched threaded throughout this constant ache. But these hurts were part of her sacrifice—she would do whatever she must to ensure Pelas’s freedom.

Her freedom... she wasn’t sure she could ever feel free again with such a cilice of guilt around her soul.

“It just doesn’t seem possible,” he whispered.

She lifted her head to give him a smile, then slowly laid it back again. “Perhaps we should begin keeping count of the hours.”

His brow furrowed faintly. But seeing him and only *him* as he looked at her...

“I cannot believe I’m free of it.”

She stroked his hair. “Belief will come in time.”

Abruptly he pushed to his hands and crawled up the bed to stretch out his body alongside hers. He rested his head on his arm and gazed at her, tracing his thumb idly across her collarbone. “But how will I remain free if I must have you to exorcise this demon?”

She gave him a look of soft acceptance. “You won’t need me. Even so, I will stay with you if you wish it.”

He lifted to his elbow. “You would stay with me—*here*?” He stared at her for a moment, but then a frown overcame his expression. “You cannot mean what you say. You have your own path.”

“Pelas...” She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, the better to ease the tension binding her. She looked at him until he met her gaze again. “Your freedom *is* my path.”

He heard this, but then he shifted his head slightly, and his eyes tightened. “No...I sense something in this—a truth you’re not saying.”

She gave a brief smile at his perception—proof again to her that no power had truly been taken from him—but she quickly turned her gaze away, that he wouldn’t see the sorrow in it also.

“I am two. Even in a sense as you were two, yet mine is and has always been a battle between two selves. What I long for,” she looked bravely back to him, “what the woman Isabel desires, must defer to the path I walk first as Epiphany’s Prophet.”

His gaze reflected his understanding, and his sympathy. “Then it’s Epiphany’s Prophet who gave herself to me, who I took to my bed, not the woman Isabel.”

She nodded.

Pelas smoothed a strand of hair from her face and placed a chaste kiss on her cheek. “Dear, sweet Isabel...what you’ve sacrificed for me.”

She turned him a fierce look softened with humor and darkened by grief. “I trust you will be worth it.”

He chuckled. Then he laughed. “I can’t believe it! How long I’ve lived with that...*demon* haunting my thoughts! Always fearing the inevitable moment when it would raise its head and consume me. If not for Tanis—” Suddenly he stopped himself, his eyes became round, and he gave her a wondrous look, for now he saw what she had already surmised. “If not for Tanis, Isabel,” he said with deliberate slowness, “I would still be thinking I *was* that beast.”

She lifted a hand and touched her fingers lightly to his lips. “Tanis truly saved you.”

He held her gaze, nodded. Then he laid his head down beside hers again. “How did you know?”

“How did I know what?”

His fingers traced the curve of her hip. “How to help me?”

She turned him an amused smile. “It’s just application of the Ninth Law. ‘*Do not counter force with force. Channel it.*’ Fighting the compulsion merely pits force against force—your will against Darshan’s pattern.”

He pushed up on his elbow to look at her better. “Explain this to me.”

“As you learned,” and she managed a smile on his behalf, “the way to escape compulsion is to rechannel its power to a harmonic of the pattern’s original intent. Once you’ve learned to sublimate and channel a compulsion along one harmonic, you’ll find you can channel it along any harmonic, any passion—be that a passion for sex, for exploration, for the creation of your art...” She held his quiet gaze and let her eyes convey more than words could ever express. “You’ll find infinite harmonics to explore, Pelas.”

She could tell from his serious expression that he truly understood now, whereas before, perhaps he had not.

“Darshan will never be able to compel me again—no one will.” His eyes were very wide and impossibly bright. “Isabel...” He planted a sweet kiss upon her mouth. “You really have set me free.”

She closed her eyes and smiled and tried to keep from crying, for in setting him free, she had surely imprisoned herself. “Perhaps we should thank Cephrael,” she offered quietly.

Pelas propped his head in his hand again and gave her an amused look. “Hmm...why?”

She opened one eye and closed it again. “You’re laughing, but Cephrael wrote the Laws of Patterning to help Adepts solve the problems of Patterning. Had you known the Laws yourself, you might’ve found your own way free.”

This made him quiet for a long time. After a while he murmured, “High Mage of the Citadel indeed,” and fell back onto the mattress to stare at the ceiling. “There is much I still don’t know about your Patterning.”

“You have lifetimes in which to learn,” she told him softly.

Her comment brought a sudden darkness to his gaze, which she immediately perceived. Before he could sink beneath those shadows, she forced herself to sit up and moved her body to straddle his hips. He smiled up at her curiously but with a hint of suspicion in his gaze.

She extended her wrists to him with their cuffs of silver rope. “Remove the *goracrosta*.” When his expression hardened, she pressed, “Let me *help* you—I’m the High Mage of the Citadel, if you recall.”

“I recall.” Still, he watched her carefully, as if suspicious now of some hidden agenda.

Isabel took one of his hands and then the other and pinned them over his head. She leaned and brushed her lips across his. “Do you trust me, Pelas?”

He gazed seriously at her. “Trust was difficult even before Darshan took away my power.”

She pushed slightly away and touched her fingers to his lips. “What does your heart tell you?”

He searched her eyes with his own and ran his fingers down her face. “I want to trust you, Isabel.”

She closed her eyes and nodded. Exhaustion and pain were all intermingled now. It was so hard to stay alert to the shifting paths, but Pelas didn’t know the way. She was his only guide. “Trust will be a new experience for you.”

He chuckled. “*You* were a new experience for me. I like new experiences.” He set her aside and moved off the bed. She lay quietly, eyes closed, trying to keep the path clear in her mind. But when cold steel touched her flesh, her eyes flew open.

He sliced the *goracrosta* cuff from one arm and then the next, and Isabel inhaled a shuddering breath of relief at the surge of life that *elae*’s return restored to her. The currents swarmed around her in warm waves, like children greeting a parent too long away.

As her first action with *elae* so blessedly restored, she removed the concealment she’d worked to protect her mind from Darshan’s inspection. She felt an immeasurable sense of restoration in doing this.

Cloaking herself in the lifeforce’s blessed warmth, Isabel looked back to Pelas. He was regarding her with a deep furrow between his brows.

Isabel sat up and pushed him back on the bed. She straddled his hips and placed her hands to either side of his face in the truthreader’s hold. “Do you trust me, Pelas?”

He looked nearly undone. “I trust you, Isabel.”

She held his gaze, opened a truthreader’s rapport with him, and flowed into his mind. Ah...treading upon the light of his mind was like swimming through the sun. Perhaps

that boundless sky had once been shadowed by Darshan's storm, but as with all workings of *elae*, compulsion was merely a pattern; it collected *elae* and focused it towards an intention.

Pelas had learned how to rechannel the power of that pattern into his *own* intention, and its darkness would never trouble him again.

His mind was powerful and free.

Except... *Ah, there it is.*

"What is it? What do you see?" His voice rang with concern, though seeming far away, for she was deep inside his mind now on her own wondrous exploration. That he felt barely a whisper of her presence was less a result of the vicious trick worked upon him than a product of her skill. "Isabel, please...I see it on your face."

"Be at peace, Pelasommáyurek," she whispered, using his full name in recognition of all that he was. "I'm merely sweeping up the brittle leaves of an illusion not long for this world." In that moment, she sent the smallest spark of the fourth to sear the offensive pattern from his mind.

He inhaled sharply.

Isabel opened her eyes, and her lips spread in a slow smile.

"I—" He gaped at her. Abruptly he sat up and took her hard by the shoulders. Fiery copper eyes searched hers. "*How?*"

She took his face in her hands and shook her head slowly from side to side. "You are immortal. No one can ever take away your power. It is only you who permitted it by allowing them to deceive you...and then by deceiving yourself into believing that your abilities could be lost."

He stared at her with a tormented expression, nearly as broken by this understanding as he had been in the belief that he really had lost his power. He looked as if he was about to speak, but instead he threw his arms around her and gripped her into a desperate embrace. That time she couldn't conceal the pain that flared, and she cried out.

Pelas released her with immediate dismay. His eyes searched her face, scanned her body, and he seemed only then to remember what his demons had put her through, what she'd endured on the road to his salvation.

He leapt from the bed and grabbed his pants off the floor. Even as he was bent over putting them on, a silver line split down through the air.

"Pelas..."

He turned her a look that silenced her. Then he stepped into Shadow and the portal vanished.

Isabel inhaled a tremulous breath and buried her head in her hands.

There was no other way... There was no other way!

There had been no other way.

Oh, perhaps if she'd known that all of Darshan's efforts had been nothing more than smoke and mirrors, an attempt to deceive Pelas so that he would believe his powers to be gone—the ruse helped along by lengthy torture capped off by a tawdry illusion... Perhaps if she'd known how easily she could restore his power, she might've been able to convince him, to bargain her way free.

But if she had...

If all she'd done was restore his power, he would still be the prisoner of that compulsion which had so desolated him.

The *only* way to truly free him had been the path they'd walked together, and now he was *truly* free—more so even than if Darshan's compulsion had simply been removed, for now that he knew how to channel compulsion, he would never again become a victim of it.

As to herself...she was no victim in their interactions any more than a soldier could be considered a victim in battle. Epiphany's Prophet had walked knowingly into peril, and Isabel faced the consequences of her choices without diminishment.

But for the woman Isabel, those same choices would have grave consequences. She only prayed that Pelas's freedom would be worth the cost, for with a single act, she'd saved one good man but deeply betrayed another.

A silver line split the air, and Pelas returned through the portal carrying an armload of supplies. With a breath of the fifth and a dismissive glance, all the knives flew off the table. He laid his jars and baskets and other things in their place. Then he came across to her with water and linen and a salve for her wounds.

She looked up to meet his gaze.

A host of emotions flickered through his fiery copper eyes: gratitude, amazement, admiration...perhaps a hint of fury at how careless she'd been with her life, how she'd nearly let him kill her. Was he comparing her recklessness to that of another who had walked a similarly dangerous path with him? She thought he might've been, and the idea brought a soft smile to her lips.

He arched a brow at her, and she thought she heard his silent inquiry, wry and somewhat amused. *What memories are you looking at in my head, Isabel?*

To which she replied, *Loving ones.*

Then he was guiding her gently over onto her stomach and tending to the wounds he'd inflicted upon her back. "Would that I was better trained as a Healer." His gentle hands smoothed the salve onto her skin. "I have but small facility with such patterns, but I'll do what I can."

She felt him concentrating on using the first strand to ease her wounds and smiled in amusement. He would've had more success trying to work the first strand innately than by using patterns to do it, but some things he must learn on his own. Still, he managed to draw some of the pain from her skin, even if none from her heart.

After he'd treated her wounds, he fed her light fare—broth and bread and wine, what small amount she could take—and wrapped her in a soft velvet cloak he'd brought back with him. Then he held her in his arms on the bed, cradled like a child.

Isabel felt sleep coming and would embrace it when it arrived, for she saw that his path was set now and feared no more for his road. She let him enfold her with his arms and tried not to think about anything that would make her cry. What was done could not now be undone, and crying would not assuage her guilt.

Her voice sounded slow in her ears as she asked him, "How will you deal with Darshan?"

Pelas shifted his eyes to the metal poles she'd been tied to, and his gaze darkened. "Those were the poles he bound me to when he punished me. He brought them here for me to use in binding you. That's Darshan's idea of irony." He grunted and arched a rueful

brow. “The real irony is that if my brothers hadn’t elected me to be their enemy, I wouldn’t have become one. Now...now there is no going back.”

“You must be careful of them.” She didn’t think she needed to say it—she thought he’d learned what he needed to from this experience—but she said it anyway, because some truths couldn’t be heard too many times.

“Isabel, I will be.” He pressed his nose into her hair and breathed deeply. Then he laid his face against her head, and she felt him smile. “You smell like sunlight.”

Isabel squeezed shut her eyes. *Why then do I feel so cold?* “Where will you go when you leave here?”

He let out a slow breath. “There’s someone I need to find.”

Sleep was coming for her. She felt it tugging on her consciousness, lowering its shade across her thoughts. She hardly realized the words left her tongue, for they were more thought than spoken word: “...and one day you will come to find my brother.”

He chuckled. “To give him my oath, as Franco Rohre and others have done?”

Isabel let silence embrace her thoughts. “To shake his hand...and be welcomed to the game.”

He must’ve said something in reply to this, but she’d already drifted off.

“My lady, your chariot awaits.”

Isabel roused from sleep to find Pelas smiling over her. He looked striking in a long damask coat the color of wine, with his hair brushed and plaited, his jaw freshly shaved, and fine, starched linen at his cuffs.

She pushed up on one elbow and saw that he’d prepared food for her. She couldn’t bear to tell him that she felt too heartsick to stomach anything but grief.

He was sensitive to her condition, however, and offered her but little things, fruit and the like. Then he made her drink of his wine to warm her, for he said her hands felt like ice. She knew it was merely an emanation of the regret coating her soul.

When he’d cared for her as best he could, Pelas stepped back from where she sat on the bed wrapped in his cloak, placed a hand to his heart, and swept an arm open in a bow. “Where would my lady travel?”

Isabel closed her eyes. She didn’t know how to explain to him it was time for their paths to part.

Some might’ve looked upon him as a near tormentor, but Isabel only saw him as the man she’d walked a dangerous path to set free. And now that she had, now that he’d chosen a path, it would change the game.

Oh, Pelas would have his own consequences to face for the choices he’d made...for the lives he’d claimed under Darshan’s compulsion, but she could already see threads shifting in the larger pattern.

Pelas sat down on the bed and brushed a tear from her cheek. “Whatever it is, Isabel, you can tell me.”

She looked down at her hands, and two more tears fell from her lashes to mingle with others already glinting there. “I can’t go with you.”

He studied her face for a time. “You don’t expect me to leave you here?”

She shook her head. “Not in the tower. Outside.”

“Out—” he gave her a startled look. “*Outside.*” His gaze strayed to the windows and the bleak mountains beyond. “Out *there?*”

Isabel exhaled a slow breath that felt painful as it left her chest. “Someone will come for me.”

“Someone...what someone? *Isabel...*” He took her chin and made her look at him. “What someone?”

Her eyes must’ve answered him enough, for recognition came into his gaze. Or perhaps it was just the light of realization dawning there. “I see.” He drew back from her. “*He* will come.” When she said nothing, Pelas leaned on one hand to study her. “Just like that?”

She nodded.

“Just...anywhere?”

She nodded again.

He arched a raven brow. “That’s a nice trick.”

“You should ask him about it,” the flicker of a smile touched her lips, “when next you meet.”

His gaze narrowed while one brow lifted upwards in a slant. “I’m not sure I want a path if it means becoming so predictable.”

She gave him sharp little smile. “Too late, I think.”

His gaze softened, and he leaned to take her into his arms. “Too late,” he whispered into her hair.

At the bottom of the tower he set her on her feet, wrapped in his cloak. The day was cold but clear, breezeless. They seemed to be resting on the spine of the world—all around she saw only stark, granite mountains chalked with snow. But the springtime sun felt warm on her aching back, and the sky had never seemed so blue. Almost as blue as her brother’s eyes.

“You’re certain about this?” He looked her over.

She nodded, saying goodbye with her tears.

He pursed his lips, clearly considering the prudence in leaving her alone on top of the world. But eventually his brow relaxed with resignation and he reached into his coat and withdrew a strip of black silk from his pocket.

It was longer than her other had been and embroidered with patterns—*his* patterns, like those that still burned everywhere in her skin. She reached to receive the cloth from him and studied the patterns’ construction, blacker than black thread against the midnight silk like the twisting spirals of endless space.

Pelas had been birthed of Chaos; these patterns were pure starlight.

“Allow me?” he offered.

She placed the silk into his hands and turned, and he replaced the blindfold across her eyes, tying it gently. Then he placed his hands on her shoulders. “You won’t change your mind about this?” But he knew that she wouldn’t.

She turned to face him again. “Be wary of your brothers. They’ll use patterns to trick you again, if you let them.”

Considering this, he drew in a deep breath and exhaled with a nod.

With *elae* now brightly showing her the world once more, she watched Pelas call a portal, watched its silver-violet streak splitting the gilded fabric of the realm, opening upon the dimension of Shadow, which was time itself—the stuff that bound all the realms together.

With one last glance over his shoulder—concerned...impossibly grateful—he stepped into Shadow, and his portal closed.

Isabel let out a sob that caught in her throat. Wrapping his cloak tighter about her form, she walked barefoot across the icy earth and sank down slowly on a rock. Then she called to him, reaching out along their bond.

She'd been an anchor for him once, when he'd navigated the formless stretches of Shadow across the centuries to regain her. Finding her on the other side of the world would hardly be a test of his skill.

Knowing him, he was probably already on his way.

I need you...

And oh, she needed him desperately.

The cold air embraced her with its chill. She hugged Pelas's velvet cloak about her and tried not to breathe too deeply, just letting her body tremble as it willed.

She might've made herself comfortable in the cold—it would've been easy to do. She might've even healed herself to some degree, for she knew her own pattern and had done it before. But culpability weighed too heavily upon her. She felt wrong seeking comfort when the pain was only her due. Some discomforts were meant to be borne.

The sun had barely traveled in its arc when he appeared over a distant rise, a dark shadow crossing the frozen earth. Moments later he stood over her.

She saw his green eyes tighten—he would see what her cloak concealed. He would've seen all the moment he arrived.

"Isabel..."

Amazing how much horror and disapproval he could lace across her name.

She winced beneath the reprimand in his gaze. "Pray don't chastise me with 'I told you so's,'" she whispered. She'd never felt so broken. His censure would only pound the pieces into chalk.

The sky swirled as Phaedor swept her up into his arms.

She laid her cheek against his marble chest while her eyes burned with unshed tears. She knew those would fall later, in her brother's embrace. Phaedor held her tightly, and though he radiated fury over what she'd done to herself, still he pressed a kiss of absolution to her forehead. In Phaedor's embrace was a safety that would survive the shattering of the world.

With her ear pressed to his chest, Isabel heard his heart beating in resonance with hers. Their life patterns were bound in three—her brother and Phaedor and herself—as inseparable as the binding she and Arion had worked centuries ago. Then, Arion had sacrificed himself for her brother, for their mutual game...and sacrificed their love in the process.

And now she had done the same.

Phaedor had warned her it would be so...that her path and Arion's would ever be diverging and converging. She had wanted to prove him wrong just once.

The warmth of Phaedor's body eased her trembling. Or perhaps it was the healing he worked upon her as he held her in his arms, frowning with unspoken rebuke.

“Please...” She pushed her face into his chest. “Just take me away from here.”
“As you will, Isabel.”
And he summoned a portal to take her home.

