

After her father is executed, a sheltered noblewoman is put into indentured service to redeem the family honor. Displaced and confused she falls into progressively dangerous and erotic situations until she finally finds her true identity.

The Opal and the Onyx

By Syndyl vanDeelan

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CHAPTERONE

When the world was barren, and the All-Father was still young, he sat atop the crown of the world, contemplating. As he meditated, he rolled a simple stone round and round in his palm.

Finally realizing his vision, he set the stone down and called forth the Mountains. The Mountains rose, a perfect palace for the All-Father, filled with every conceivable precious stone and metal. Pleased with his creation, the All-Father turned his gaze south. Walking over the dead canyons, he called forth the seas, and every living thing in them. Continuing his epic journey, he called forth the jungles, the fields and the plains, the rivers, and lakes and all the life within them. He even called forth man, to share in his creation.

He stopped at the bottom of the world, where there is only the endless expanse of desert sands. From thence, the All-Father turned back, walking over the earth, and watching over his children. Finally, he returned to the Mountains, his palace, to settle forever in his home.

Upon his return, the All-Father found his palace invaded by a hideous monster. The giant creature attacked him in a blind rage, little more than an animal. However, the All-Father in his wisdom, saw the monster for what it was and knew what it could become. Within its body of ice, every gem known to man glittered and shone as the sun struck it. Except for the stone at the center, its heart. That stone was plain, small, and dark. The All-Father knew that stone very well, though he had not set eyes on it for millennia. It was the stone he held in his hand as he conceived of his vision of the world.

The All-Father defeated the monster, took the repulsive creature in his arms and kissed her. The warmth of his love conquered her rage, the thing that had driven her mad after he had abandoned her heart in the Mountains. As he made love to her, the beauty of the Ice-Mother, his bride, was fully revealed.

The Bride of the All-Father ~ The Zareli Book of Creation

e did not know why he was there. Public floggings had long since ceased to be of any interest to him. Perhaps it was because such a spectacle was unavailable in the Ryordan Empire, where he was currently teaching—or perhaps he was merely delaying the inevitable.

Although his teaching had always been without error, he knew that the High-Council feared his idealism and were jealous of his influence over the People. He encouraged self-reliance and less dependence on the Order of the Grey—a man could please his god without the constant interference of the Priests. Unfortunately, the Grey-Robes' power depended on keeping the People ignorant of such things. Mikal was a dogmatic nuisance to their Theocratic regime.

Mikal's many arguments with the High-Council always ended the same way. If the All-Father did not intend the Grey to serve him on behalf of the People, then why had he created the caste system in the first place? But had the All-Father *really* created the caste system merely by siring six children? Or was that just a social construct justified by the scripture?

When he had been exiled—of course *they* didn't call it that, they called it a *mission*—the priest who had given him the order had laughed at his reaction. "Do not be so paranoid, R'hab! The People in the Motherland do not need you as much as those lost in the Ryordan Empire do. They need a strong man such as yourself to help them resist the ways of the infidels. They need the absolute best the Blue has to offer, and that Mikal, is you." It was indeed the truth—and Mikal saw the trap instantly. He had to agree or else lose face by letting a lesser man take his place. Defeated by his own accomplishments, he could only obey in humility.

The best revenge Mikal decided, was to do exactly what the Grey had sent him to Ryordan to do, but to be so successful as to make them regret their jealous scheming. Not only did he succeed in bringing wayward Zareli to heel, but he also began to convert *non-Zareli*—a thing that had not been done since before the wars with Ryordan. His triumph was bitter though, as the years dragged on, and he remained in exile.

Mikal welcomed the summons to return home to Zarel, although the High-Council made it quite clear it was only temporary. His dedication and service couldn't go unrecognized forever and so he knew the Grey had no choice but to honor him. The formal summons had said his request for an assistant would be granted and that would also be receiving a well-earned reward.

The People were unusually distracted this afternoon. The current penitent, a dirty and ragged old man, whose crime was probably nothing more serious than stealing a loaf of bread, was unchained and tossed out into the crowd. The beggar was able to make his way through the assembly with only a little harassment. The Black-Robe then gestured for the next penitent with an impatient flick of her whip.

Mikal remembered the Dread-One's entry into the square with a chill. The People had automatically made a path for her, the men looking down, the women pulling skirts from her way—not in disgust or disrespect, but as if the mere act of their clothing touching hers could bring the wrath of Mighty Onyx's judgement upon them.

Mikal had a respectful buffer of space around him as well. He was big, even for a Zareli, but his blue clothes clearly marked him as a R'hab, not a warlord. He was an imposing figure, middle-aged and in the prime of his life. His golden hair hid the emerging grey very well and his marble-like face only showed the finest of wrinkles upon close inspection. He gave credit to strict adherence to scriptural dietary laws as well as his exercise regime and warrior training.

A woman in a fine gown of red was dragged up next and shackled to the post. Her long hair had already been hacked messily from her head. A *Red!* How interesting and unusual in a public flogging. *Must have been something serious* – Mikal thought, arching a surprised eyebrow but making no other emotional response. The gown she wore could have fed the beggar for a month; even so, it was brutally torn down the back. Her public humiliation commenced with much screaming, weeping and wailing on her part.

Syndyl vanDeelan

However, even this rare treat didn't seem to interest the crowd overmuch. The last few days had been too exciting. The leader of an ancient clan had been executed here only a short time ago. He was from great bloodline called the Yzra, as well as the head of an underground crime network. All his worldly possessions had been confiscated; his estates handed over to the care of the Lord-General. His only surviving relative, his daughter, was expected to be placed on the auction block any day now. After all that, the squealing of an adulterous wife was not much to talk about.

The woman in question had ceased her screams and passed out, sagging in her chains. Mikal shook his head in disgust. A woman born of warriors ought to be stronger! She wasn't even half-way through her flogging! She would have to be brought back to the pillar after her back had fully healed to finish the sentence. Perhaps the crowd would be more interested in her humiliation by then. In the meantime, Mikal was done there. He turned away and everyone moved courteously aside for him, many of them bowing their heads with respect. He was very well known in the First-City, even though he had not walked here in years.

As Mikal passed fluidly through the crowd, he caught snippets of conversation. Most of it swirling around the fate of clan Yzra's last surviving daughter. Although stripped of her wealth, acquiring such a child into one's house would be a victory. Upon her freedom, she would still inherit a generous dowry. The family who took her in and treated her well could expect to benefit greatly. What they didn't know, was that said child was not going on the block anytime soon. She was being given to *him*, and he was *not* happy about it.

"Rakell, wake up!"

Her father's hands were old but still strong as he shook her insistently awake. Rakell tried to throw off the fog of sleep as she rose unsteadily; taking in her father's serious face and Hannah's terrified one as she shrugged quickly into her dressing gown.

"What is happening?" Rakell asked groggily, holding out her hands as her father thrust a scroll at her.

The Opal and the Onyx

"Take this—it is your betrothal agreement with Lord Abner's son, Zale," the Lord Levi said. "Go with Hannah to the stables. Two men will escort you to the Arak estates. Do *not* stop for anything."

Rakell was surprised that her father had finally made a choice for her and that he had settled on the bashful Zale—but she had no time to question his reasoning. She heard the commotion, the sounds of shouted orders, the smashing of doors and the clang of steel on steel.

"Father! What is happening?" she cried out in alarm.

"There is no time, *mokushlah*," Levi replied. "The enemy is at the gates. Go with Hannah and get to the Arak with all haste." He embraced her hard and thrust her towards her elderly nurse. "Remember—no matter what you hear—that I love you."

These words gave her a chill of foreboding, but Rakell was an obedient daughter and asked no further questions. She rushed with Hannah to the stables where the ostlers had already prepared a horse and cart. The men-at-arms hoisted her and Hannah into the cart and mounted their own horses. Rakell tried to calm her thudding heart as Hannah snapped the reins and followed the men as their horses pounded out of the courtyard. Unfortunately, they never did make it to the Arak estates. The Lord-General was waiting for them on the roads with a company of men.

Lord Boaz ben Dafyd, the clan-head of Zak was her father Levi's nemesis—as different from him as night was from day. Clan Yzra and clan Zak had been in a state of blood feud for decades, the true reasons behind the hostility having long faded from memory.

Boaz had made a recent attempt for peace by offering himself as a husband for the young Rakell, but Levi had scorned the proposal. Insulted, Boaz demanded that Rakell be allowed to consider him for herself before he would withdraw it. Although younger than her aged father, Boaz was still old enough to have sired her. Fortunately for him, that wasn't a concern for Rakell—unfortunately for him, his constant harassment of her family from her earliest memories was. Even so, she paused respectfully as if she was weighing the benefits of the match, and then she politely declined, saying that she could not possibly go against her father's wishes. "Lady Rakell ben Levi Yzra," Boaz said to her now. "You are under arrest."

"Please, Lord-General," she pleaded, holding the scroll out to him. "This is my betrothal agreement with the Lord Abner's son. I am under the protection of Clan Arak."

The General took the scroll without even looking at it. He stared hard at her, his face showing no traces of mercy and Rakell knew that she had been a fool to trust him. Her father had *warned* her not to stop. They should have tried riding past them. Boaz held the scroll up to the torch his man was holding.

"You can't do that!" the normally genteel Hannah shrieked as the scroll began to burn. As she tried to leap from her seat to grab it from Boaz's hand, he contemptuously knocked her right out of the cart to the ground. The horse leapt and whinnied, threatening to bolt. One of Rakell's men grabbed the bridle and Rakell instinctively grabbed for the reins, although she had no idea how to control the beast. Her other man pulled out his sword and instantly, he found arrows trained on him.

"Peace, brother," the General proclaimed, raising his hand. "There is no need for you to die for the whoreson's daughter tonight."

"She has a betrothal agreement with the Arak," he said.

"Which is now a pile of ashes," Boaz replied, flicking the burning document to the ground. "Your employer has been stripped of his lands and titles by order of the High-Council. You are no longer honorbound to carry out his orders. My suggestion is that you both return to your own clans."

Rakell gasped in shock as the two men looked at each other for a moment and then surrendered. "You will allow us to escort her to the Gaol," one said. "Honor demands that we see the Lady brought there unmolested."

"Of course, I would expect no less from men of honor," the General agreed pleasantly. He gestured at his men to move out and turned to Rakell. "My lady, you would be wise to co-operate."

"Lord Abner will have a copy of the betrothal!" she protested.

"I am certain that he does!" Boaz laughed. "No doubt he shall produce it to secure your release from Gaol. Until then, my order from the High-Council is to take all blood members of clan Yzra into custody."

Weeping in frustration, Rakell allowed the General to take the reins from her and lead the cart. She jerked her hands from his as his fingers lingered suggestively over hers. She looked back at Hannah, who was crying out to her and trying vainly to pull her frail bones out of the mud.

"Perhaps you should have given my suit more consideration, Lady," Boaz mocked her as she was thrown into a cell. Before he left, he shoved her into the corner and grabbed her by the face. "Think you that I didn't know this was coming?" he accused her. "I was trying to protect you—stupid Yzra bitch! Now your father is for the axe, and I shall have you anyway. I was not good enough to be your husband, but I think I will enjoy being your master more." He grabbed her breast cruelly before shoving her away. He exited the cell, laughing. Rakell huddled in the corner and cried, covering her ears against the derisive sound as it faded down the corridor.

As the days passed, it became clear to Rakell that Clan Arak was not going to step in to rescue her. She assumed Lord Abner must have been keen to distance his frail son from the criminal activity of her family and her disgrace.

Rakell shivered at the memory of that cold cell and the dread she had experienced there. She was cold *now*—she was always cold these days. She had never suffered the cold before. The halls of her father's house were always warmed by massive hearths full of roaring fire; her body always covered in layers of the finest cloth and fur. The clothes she was forced to wear now were little more than under-things in her opinion, not that her opinion mattered—and she no longer had a home. She was a slave now, a lady by blood but no longer in name.

She had been training with the other slaves in the Temple for the last few moons and dreading the day she would be put up on the block. Rakell was not sure she could survive the experience and was terror-stricken at the thought of being bought by the Lord-General.

Syndyl vanDeelan

She knew that no one would dare to outbid him. Although he was not permitted by law to physically harm her, she did not doubt that service in his home would consist of one humiliation after another. Also, she did not think that he would balk at assaulting her if he thought he could get away with it. It would be easy to keep her hidden away in a fortress as massive as his.

That clan Zak had been granted regency over Yzra lands was a dreadful blow to her, but she was relieved beyond belief to learn that Boaz would be thwarted in his desire to have her as well. Instead—the Overseer told her, she was to be presented as a gift to a man who had done the High-Council a great service. Her father had deserved his fate—the priestess said, so Rakell should consider herself lucky that that she had the opportunity to redeem her family honor *if* she served her new master faithfully and dutifully. Rakell certainly didn't *feel* lucky, but she had bowed deeply and expressed her gratitude. At least she would be safe from the Lord Boaz.

Rakell lay on the ground in a childlike pose; head supported on elbows and hands as she looked at her face in the garden pool. At home, such an undignified position would have put her elderly nurse Hannah into hysterics, so it was a small comfort to lazily lay in repose now. As a slave she was not allowed a mirror or any other vanity items. Gazing into the water was the only way she could see herself. Not that she had been overly interested in staring at her own reflection before—knowing that she did not look anything like a typical warrior maid ought to—it was just that not being able to see herself at all was disconcerting.

Rakell had gotten heartily sick of sitting in front of the mirror as Hannah prepared to parade her before yet another suitor. She knew the lords didn't care what she looked like anyway. All they cared about was the clan territory she was heiress to—Yzra was not overly large, but it was extremely profitable. It seemed to her that she had met every eligible lord in the highlands. Why had Lord Levi waited so long to choose one? If only he had betrothed her sooner, she would have been spared the sentence of slavery. She had not even been allowed to see him before he was executed.

Best to put thoughts of father away – she thought, catching the sob before it started. Things were bad enough; she didn't need to meet her new master with a tear-stained face and a runny nose. But how long must she wait?

Impatience and boredom as well as being cold drove her to her feet to begin the saan't'sar—the dance of health. The moves of the dance were designed to exercise every muscle in the body. All Zareli children were taught the dance as soon as they were able to walk, the moves becoming more complicated and challenging as they matured. As well as maintaining good health, the saan't'sar prepared the body for all the ancient martial knowledge of the Zareli. The flowing moves easily morphed into strikes, kicks, throws and blocks and became known as the zaar't'sar—the dance of death.

Rakell's father was adamant that she never be taught the zaar't'sar. It was too dangerous, he said, worrying about losing his only heir to an unlucky injury. Besides, he reasoned she would never need to defend herself anyway. That's what the guards were for. How wrong he had been! Although she doubted it would have made any difference on that fateful night.

The dance of death was not what she performed now. Not long after her father started allowing suitors to visit, Hannah had begun to teach her the dance of love, the *laar't'sar*. This was the ultimate expression of seduction in Zareli culture. Also adapted from the *saan't'sar*, it was spiced with differences, the flick of the wrist just so, the sway of the hips changed, the dip and twist of the body designed to display its assets perfectly and gracefully to a new spouse. A maiden was expected to perform this dance in public only once—at her wedding feast alongside her new husband. The conclusion of the dance would end with the intoxicated and cheerful wedding guests whisking the aroused and eager couple to the wedding chamber to consummate their marriage.

Rakell swallowed yet another stab of seething hatred for clan Arak. She doubted being married to the Lord Abner's vapid son would have been a joy, but it would have been better than *this!* She stopped dancing, calmed her mind, and then continued. Dancing was her only source of happiness these days. The joy of the movement allowed her to forget that she had been reduced to a piece of property. In her imagination Rakell pictured a young, handsome groom matching her movements like a mirror. She danced for the fantasy husband she knew she would have—one day.

What would her master be like? No doubt, he had to be rich, someone being rewarded for monetary gifts or other virtuous services rendered. At the very least he would be a well-to-do merchant of the Topazes caste. His house would be full of servants and so she would not have to work too hard. Hopefully, he was a family man and he and his wife would treat her kindly. Perhaps they had always wanted a daughter. Or would they have a handsome son? He would spy on her exercising in the garden, see her perform the *laar't'sar* and fall madly in love with her. It would be outrageous to everyone, but he would insist they be married...

A loud clearing of the throat rudely interrupted her fantasy. Rakell nearly fell, recovered ungracefully and stared blushing at the priestess overseer. The woman looked irritated and embarrassed. "You were told to kneel and wait!" she snapped. "Not to prance about like some Emeraldis dancing-girl!"

The young woman gasped and dropped to her knees—briefly catching the flash of blue beside the priestess. The only way Rakell could hide her embarrassment was to touch her forehead to the floor in total abasement and keep it there. Thankfully, that was what she was supposed to do anyway.

"I certainly hope you will be more obedient to the R'hab Mikal than you have been to me," the Grey-Robe said.

Rakell almost wept in relief. Not a lusty man of the Red or licentious Emeraldis, not even a Topazes, but a holy teacher—and the most exalted one at that! Mikal was an unusual man, well-known for his single-minded devotion to his profession and virtuous conduct. Surely this was a sign that the All-Father was watching over her and keeping her safe. If the priestess who greeted the R'hab Mikal in the Temple courtyard was irritated at his tardiness, she did not show it. All courtesies and protocols observed, Mikal was then led to the Temple gardens to receive his prize.

"Given the girl's age, gadai was simply not an option. Imagine! Throwing a child like that to the outlaw wolves!" the Priestess explained, suppressing a shudder. "Then it came to our attention that the Lord-General had designs on the girl's fate. He was constantly harassing me for the date of her auction. He even tried to bribe the High-Council to keep her off the block. When that failed, he claimed that the child had wanted to marry him, but her father had forbidden the match."

Mikal simply grunted. Boaz had always been a loyal patron of his. No doubt preventing the General from acquiring the girl and then presenting her to him instead was a ploy to create friction between the two of them. Mikal knew the General had his faults—one of them being his weakness for nubile women, but he suspected Boaz's desire to own the child was more about *revenge* than anything else. Clan Zak and clan Yzra had ever been at odds. Whatever else Boaz may be, the man was not a pedophile.

The Grey-Robe prattled on; "Given her youth and potential for motherhood, zaar'onorak would be a blasphemy, not that she could have carried out such an act by herself. Besides, she has no living relations left to atone for. The dead ones will have to content themselves on her servitude."

Zaar'onorak was the ritual suicide that a criminal could carry out to spare his family from dishonor. His blood sacrifice would be presented as a sin-offering to the All-Father on his relatives' behalf. The girl's father had been denied zaar'onorak because of the enormity of his crimes. Also, given his advanced age, the sacrifice would have had less value. Mikal doubted the child had even contemplated the act of piercing her own lungs and drowning in her own blood.

"It is a great pity," the Priestess sighed. "Such a thing has never happened before. We can find no scriptural precedent and no historical precedent for her situation. I am sure you could confirm that, R'hab. She is an innocent victim of her father's machinations, but the Law is the Law."

"All children are innocent in the sight of the All-Father," Mikal said, knowing it would irritate the Priestess for him to presume to know the god's mind better than she. "This is hardly what I expected from the High-Council when I sent a request for an apprentice. A youth of the Blue or an up-and-coming acolyte, but a child-slave instead? A child I will have to train—again. A spoiled brat of the Red will be practically useless to me, even as a menial servant. Did I not request long ago that no more delinquents be foisted upon me?"

"The former Lady of Yzra can hardly be considered a delinquent, R'hab," the Grey-Robe said coldly. "If you cannot appreciate the honor that is being conferred upon you then at least consider it your sacred duty to protect the child."

Mikal knew he was tempting fate to provoke the woman any further. "I am but the All-Father's humble servant," he said, bowing in way of apology for his rudeness. "If the god has seen fit to deliver this child to me then I shall bow to his will."

"But of course, you shall," she smiled condescendingly.

The Priestess watched Mikal covertly to gage what his reaction to Rakell would be and was sorely disappointed. He showed no shock or dismay at the young woman being presented to him. One could still call her a *girl* perhaps, but *child* really was out of the question. The teacher simply waited with a bored stance as Rakell bowed prostrate and recited her pledge to his household.

Sweet Ice-Mother dying, this man is made of stone! – the Priestess thought to herself – This girl is not going to work out any better than the rest of them did. With not much else to be done, she gave the R'hab the barest of nods and with a theatrical swish of her grey robes turned and left them alone.

Rakell lifted her head and took a quick glance at the face of her new master. His eyes blazed with cold blue fire and she realized she had already broken protocol by rising before he had bid her. Now that the priestess was gone, Mikal was able to give rise to his anger. Now he understood why Boaz wanted her so badly. He was not going to be pleased by this arrangement at all. Mikal realized he was scowling, and the trembling girl had mistakenly assumed that she was the object of his displeasure. Well, she was—but that was hardly her fault. "Come!" he ordered, snapping his fingers, and stomping away.

Rakell threw her small bag over her shoulder and stumbled after her new master, running to keep up with his long stride. Rakell knew that the R'hab Mikal used to work for Yzra's hated rival, clan Zak, but that wasn't what frightened her. He did not reside in the Motherland anymore. Did that mean they were going to be leaving the Mountains? The idea held both trepidation and fascination. "May I ask where we are going?" she gasped from behind him. "Master?"

"You may speak when spoken to," was his tart reply. "But if you must know—we go to Korthage."

"The Ryordan Empire!" Rakell exclaimed in despair, even though the city-state of Korthage was only on the very fringes of it. "So very far away!"

"So, she knows geography," Mikal muttered as he slowed down to descend the Temple steps. The steps were purposely designed with irregular landings and intervals to force people to slow down and navigate carefully. One must not ever rush to and from the presence of the All-Father.

"I never thought I would see it for myself!" she said to no one in particular.

"Shut-up or you'll not see anything!" Mikal scolded. "I shall lock you up for the entire trip!"

Standing a discreet distance from the Temple steps the Lord-General was waiting for him. Mikal was not surprised—he smiled warmly as he descended the stairs and approached his long-time friend. Rakell careened ungracefully into Mikal's back as he stopped to bow. She yelped apologetically, then cowered when she saw the reason for the stop. The General did not bother to hide his open appraisal of Rakell's body as she trembled behind Mikal.

"A beautiful flower of Zarel has been bestowed upon your house, R'hab," Boaz said amiably.

Syndyl vanDeelan

"Indeed," Mikal replied. "Although, I believe she will be more trouble to me than she is worth. Would that I could sell her off to you, it would be done!" Rakell made a disturbed peep from behind him.

Boaz raised his eyebrow at his beneficiary's genuine expression of irritation. He laughed and then clapped a hand on Mikal's arm. "You ever were the virtuous one, Mikal. No doubt this is a ploy to set us at odds, yes? A rather weak scheme if I might add. The Grey can't possibly understand the strength of our friendship. Speaking of which, where do you go in such a hurry?"

Mikal smiled weakly. "To make arrangements to return to Korthage, my friend. I fear to overstay my welcome in Zarel."

"Never let it be! You are most welcome in my house, as ever," the General replied. "The R'hab we got to replace you is a doddering idiot, and most likely a spy for the High-Council besides. Fah! I *insist* you stay with me for a few days. I will make all the necessary arrangements for your journey. Why did you not come to me as soon as you arrived?"

"I would hate to spoil your affable relationship with High-Council by spending too much time with you, Lord Boaz," Mikal explained.

"I care more about my affable relationship with you, Mikal! It has been too long since we spoke. Much too long," Boaz protested, leading his friend over to his private coach. "You have powerful allies in Zarel, my brother. You must learn to make use of them!"

Temporally and thankfully forgotten, Rakell climbed onto the back of the coach with Boaz's coachman, who openly leered at her but otherwise left her alone.

"It was ridiculously easy to take the entire manse," Boaz said as he looked into the fire and casually stabbed at it with a poker. "His men were well-trained to be sure, but there was not a blood relative among them. His corps was entirely composed of second sons from other clans. None of them had anything to lose by surrendering. Fool of an old man! Only one daughter all these years—and not a single bastard son to defend him? Fah!"

"Clan Zak is not exactly rich in sons these days either," Mikal said thoughtfully, leaning back in the padded chair and sipping his wine.

"Perhaps, but my corps is bursting with cousins all desperate to be named my heir," the General replied. As he turned back to his own chair, he practically tripped over a maid sneaking in to top up Mikal's glass. "Onyx take all you sluts!" he yelled, kicking the girl aside. "If you don't need to be here then take your pretty ass out before I personally beat it for you!"

The room became significantly less crowded after that. Boaz half grunted, half chuckled as he threw himself back into his chair and grabbed his own glass. "I swear, they come out of the woodwork whenever you show up, R'hab. They are getting sick of *my* ugly face," he said, winking. "Speaking of pretty asses, I don't see your little slave anywhere. I would have expected her to be hovering at your elbow."

"She is probably hiding in terror somewhere," Mikal said blandly. "This is the fortress of her great enemy after all."

"It could have been her fortress, had she any sense," the General muttered. "Honestly, I think the girl must be feeble-minded. The old man probably hid her away all this time out of embarrassment. It truly was pathetic how easy it was to capture her. Had Levi sent her into the woods with a single huntsman they could have eluded us. We took her on the open road in a cart—accompanied her old nurse of all things! Why would he do that if she wasn't a complete idiot? Even after we captured her all she did was sit in the cart and cry. If she made a run for the trees, she *might* have made it to Arak on her own. She didn't even have the wits to try."

That Rakell's intelligence was impaired was not an opinion that Mikal shared. He had seen the brightness—and the abject terror—in those grey eyes. Fear could be a paralyzing thing. Mikal knew only too well from his own childhood. He suspected Boaz was simply soothing his ego over Rakell's rejection of him. "And you have heard no protest from clan Arak at all?" was all he said.

"What do you think?" Boaz scoffed derisively.

Mikal also cracked a smile, thinking of the Lord Abner's effeminate son.

"Ah, Mikal, just enjoy the wench while you have her. At least she'll make your exile less miserable."

"Speaking of exile," Mikal started, hoping that his friend could make some headway in getting him back home for good.

"Best you stay away for now," the General replied, surprising him. "Things are not...stable here. Clan Yzra was just the beginning, I'm afraid."

"Then I should be here with you—"

"Mikal, no." Boaz replied in a flat voice that brooked no argument. "Trust me this once and make as little trouble for the High-Council as possible. I will tell you what I can..."

Rakell's stay in the house of her father's greatest enemy was most unpleasant. Clan Zak's hatred of Yzra had even trickled down to the servants and she was bullied mercilessly—but that was the least of her worries. It was the General himself that truly terrified Rakell. The woman in charge of the fortress was only too aware of her Master's designs on the girl and his sexual appetite. The chatelaine was a graceful freeservant in white who took pity on her and rescued her from her tormentors and hid her away from the Lord Boaz.

The woman provided a sleeping pallet the kitchen storeroom which allowed Rakell to remain hidden except for when she had to sneak out to the water room at night. Boaz was unlikely to be stalking the halls of the servant quarters then anyway. Rakell prayed that Mikal would not call for her in the meantime—that in a fortress full of servants she would not be needed. The All-father appeared to hear her prayers and for that she was grateful.

"I know you are a minimalist, Mikal, but please indulge me," Boaz said as Mikal scowled at the coachmen loading many packages full of gifts onto the luxury carriage. "I spared no expense in getting you to the lowlands, after that you may travel as meanly as you wish." Mikal smiled slightly, embarrassed at the Lord's attention and generosity.

"Ah, and here comes your wayward household," Boaz said cheerfully, gesturing to the girl running into the courtyard.

Mikal turned an annoyed face to her. "It's shameful enough that you refused to wait on me the whole time I was a guest here, but to have to be flushed out of the servant's quarters like some hiding quail?" Mikal scolded.

"Perhaps she wished to stay?" Boaz joked.

Rakell flushed crimson. *That* she most assuredly did not wish—but she had not known what she was expected to do at all, nobody had *told* her.

"Forgive me, Master," she gasped and curtised deeply, which was much easier to do with the traveling cloak wrapped around her. It was a plain, undyed thing, but she had gratefully received it from the General's Freemah chatelaine, along with a better travel pack and extra clothes.

"Need I tell you to thank the General for his generous gifts too?" Mikal rebuked.

She stammered a thank-you in the General's direction, but Boaz was distracted, castigating his servants for their rough handling of Mikal's baggage. Rakell obediently climbed up onto the back of the coach, but the Lord-General was not done with her yet. Once he saw that Mikal was settled inside the coach, he sauntered towards her, leaning over when she could not get away.

"I shall be waiting for you when you come back to the Motherland, mokushlah," he breathed in her ear, his hand caressing her thigh. "Then I will gift you with the finest red fox for our wedding day and plenty of silk to wear in my bed." Disgusted, Rakell could not help herself. She shoved him away with all her strength, but he was already letting go—laughing, as the coach began to pull out of the yard.

Rakell crouched in the back seat. Indentured servitude regardless of the crime could never last longer than ten years, but it could end sooner if the Grey decreed that she had paid her family's honor-debt. They hadn't bothered to give her a date to hope for. If she pleased Mikal, he could petition them on her behalf and as her legal guardian, he would have a say in her fate afterwards. Mikal was obviously on good terms with Boaz, it was possible the General would ask Mikal to do just that. She now understood all the gifts the man had lavished upon his former R'hab. He was setting up his suit in advance.

When it began to rain, and then to pour, Rakell hunched her shoulders miserably, pulling her shabby hood up. She was surprised to hear Mikal call for a stop and insist that she enter the carriage with him. Stammering profuse thanks, she sat in the seat opposite him.

"No not there—you silly girl, here!" Mikal pounded the seat beside him. "You'll make your delicate lady-stomach sick travelling backwards."

"Thank you, Master," she whispered, shifting over.

"Do not call me that. I don't like it," Mikal snapped.

"Yes, R'hab," she stammered, unsure of what to call him.

"From now on you will address me as your lord."

Rakell visibly jerked in her seat, a reaction that Mikal immediately noticed. "No, I don't have a single drop of noble blood in my veins, in case you are wondering," he said. "It pleases me to humble you in this way. You Reds are so proud of your fancy blood when it is the same color as everyone else's."

The cloak Mikal wore was a fine, blue-dyed otter fur, a gift from Boaz. He shrugged himself out of it and laid it over Rakell's shivering body. "This suits me not," he said, arranging it around her like a blanket. "I much prefer my simple wool, but one does not refuse a gift from the Lord-General, does one?"

Rakell shook her head weakly.

"No doubt he thinks to gain your hand from me in due time. As if I were the only one that he would have to bribe, yes?" he laughed. Rakell didn't think it was funny, but she refrained from commenting.

"Fear not, *mokushlah*," he smiled, finding her hand under the cloak and taking it gently in his. "By the Ice-Mother, your hands are freezing!"

Mokushlah—It meant 'my little beloved one'. Her father used to call her that all the time. The endearment sounded obscene on the General's lips but from Mikal it was soothing. Unable to stop herself, she burst into tears. "Shh-shh," he reassured her, patting her hand. "Like I said, he has more than me to deal with and a great deal of time to wait until then. I doubt he has the patience. My prediction is that he will set his sights on some other young heiress within the year. He is getting too old to wait much longer."

"I do hope so, my lord," Rakell sniffled, wiping the tears away with her free hand. Her other hand in Mikal's was warm. She dared not let go, not that she wanted to. "Though, for truth, I greatly pity the new object of his desire." She blushed then. She had not meant to sound sensual, but the way the word *desire* had rolled off her tongue surprised even her.

Mikal did not seem to notice, laying his head back and closing his eyes, but he still held her hand. "You talk too much," he muttered. "I will probably have to beat you into silence before this trip is through."

Rakell made a disturbed peep and tried to pull her hand out of his, but he would not let go. "I jest, *mokushlah!*" he said turning a genuine smile her way. It made his handsome face even more glorious. "But you will not please me with idle chatter. From now on you need to forget your own wants and focus on what pleases me. Understand?"

She only nodded, too scared to answer. She felt hypnotized by his azure eyes as he spoke. "When we do speak," he went on, his thumb idly stroking her palm as he said it. "You should say 'If it please you' instead of yes and 'not unless it please you' instead of no. Never say no to me, understand?"

Subservient language she was used to, having heard it from her own servants. It was humiliating to have to use it herself though. "If it pleases you, my lord," she replied softly.

Something changed in the look of his eyes then, but she didn't guess its meaning until he raised her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers softly. "A-ha," he said lowly. "Now we come to the *real* reason the Grey have placed you in my care—and I had dared to hope they had given up playing this game with me by now." His lips skimmed lightly over her fingers once more and she felt a fluttering in her chest. "I did not expect you to tempt me so soon, *mokushlah*," he put her

hand gently down into her lap and moved away from her to the opposite side of the coach. "Perhaps I am Ionelier than I realized."

"How could a man like you be lonely?" she whispered.

"Ssh!" he hissed, snapping his fingers at her and laying his head back to close his eyes again.

Rakell huddled into the warm cloak and felt the weight of her fatigue. Before she drifted off, she wondered about the fluttery feeling she was experiencing. She had never been alone with a man like this. She admired Mikal's chiseled face and his well-muscled arms crossed over his chest as he appeared to sleep. Surely it was a great sin to be attracted to a holy man, but it was hard *not* to be. He was strong and handsome, looking more like a warrior of the Red than a peaceful teacher of the Blue.

She ought to have been insulted by his innuendo, but for a moment Rakell had wanted him to do more than just kiss her hand. No wonder her father had never left her alone with a suitor! Her wantonness surprised and shamed her. She made a silent vow that she would never give him reason to be tempted again.

The voyage out of the Motherland was a slow process, made even slower since the Zareli shunned modern technology. The journey was achieved by both winding roads and rivers that flowed down the mountains to one glacial lake after another, until finally arriving at the shores of the Great Sea.

Living in the highest livable elevations of the mountains Rakell had never seen all the true beauty of the Motherland. She knew Zarel was rich in lush timber forests, but to see these for herself was breathtaking. Farming did occur in the valleys, but elsewhere land was dedicated to the grazing of livestock or to orchards as her father's lands had been.

The true riches of Zarel, however, lay beneath the soil. The diamond mines and troves of other precious stones had brought the legions of the Ryordan Empire to the mountains of the Motherland centuries ago, salivating for conquest. However, the Ryordans were lowlanders, not used to the cold or high altitudes. Although brilliant strategists, even when the legions managed to draw the Zareli warlords into battle on the open plains, they were not prepared for their savagery. The Zareli were more than the simple barbarian berserkers the Ryordan Generals expected them to be. They had strategies and skills of their own.

The war waged on-and-off for decades, stripping the Motherland of her finest sons and nearly bankrupting the Empire. Short of an all-ornothing gamble, the Zareli in their mountain strongholds would never fall. Even if they did, the Ryordans had discovered the Zareli made troublesome slaves. Most managed to escape or suicide before they could be kept long. Many of them, male and female, would kill as many Ryordans as they could get their hands on before being killed themselves. Holding the Mountains would have been a nightmare of putting down one rebellion after another, drawing much needed legions away from the rest of the Empire.

who The Zareli. never surrendered, were none-the-less demoralized by the death of the Priest-King Soliman and his heirs. With some encouragement from the what was left of the High-Council, the warlords were ready to talk peace for the first time in history. An uneasy truce was reached. The warriors of Zarel were praised and declared brothers by the emperor. Many gifts were lavished upon the Theocracy while negotiations were made. The Motherland would no longer close its borders to foreigners and a system of trade was arranged. For the first time in ages, Zareli began to immigrate to the Empire, and Ryordans sought residence in Zarel. The Motherland remained independent of Ryordan rule but did pay an annual tribute to keep the Legions out for good.

The foothills and lowlands of the Motherland were the place where most Ryordans preferred to live. Outlanders did not adjust well to the higher altitudes. Consequently, Zarel's theocratic oligarchy the priests of the Grey who comprised the High-Council—moved ever higher, thus staying out of Ryordan reach and remaining isolated. The lowlands were also the place where the Lord-General Boaz's luxury travel arrangements ceased. When Mikal asked if she was more comfortable riding a mare or a gelding, Rakell had simply blushed and stuttered.

"Well, out with it girl!" he shouted.

"I—uh, that is—I don't know how to ride," she whispered. Mikal only stared at her incredulously for a moment before he asked how such a thing was possible for a woman born in the warrior caste.

"My nurse thought it would be um—harmful to my maidenhead," she blushed even redder.

"Of all the ignorant nonsense!" Mikal muttered. "Not even a side saddle?" Rakell only shook her head again, trying to explain that her father had been too afraid that a horse would throw her after she had fallen off her first pony as a child. Mikal instead launched into a tirade about spoiled and delicate daughters.

Perforce, Rakell had to ride behind Mikal, clinging to him for dear life. It wasn't until he patted her hand in reassurance that she realized how hard she was pressed up against his back, panting terrified breath against his neck. She tried pulling back, but he only grabbed her arms and adjusted them more firmly around his chest.

"You won't do anything for my honor by getting your brains dashed out on the road," he laughed. "Try to relax, *mokushlah*. You're making the horse nervous. Trust me, I won't let you fall."

Like most R'habs, Mikal chose to live a modest life. He received a stipend from the Temple simply for being a teacher, but he also received money for his services and gifts from other wealthy patrons like Boaz. Rakell knew that, and so was surprised by the choices Mikal made as they continued their journey. It seemed to her that he always took the worst option possible. Mikal was hardly a pauper—why did he insist on travelling like one?

Rakell understood extraordinarily little about true poverty though. In fact, she hardly knew anything about life outside of the highlands or even outside of her own clan territory. She was shocked at the open rudeness she received from the lowland peasantry. Even Mikal sometimes drew stares of distrust and resentment. Hostility Rakell expected from outlanders but scorn from her own people was disturbing. The last vessel they took to the Sea was little more than a scow, full of unrefined ore bound for the foundries of the Ryordan Empire. Rakell's body was so sore from riding that she was relieved to be done with the horse. She did her best not to wrinkle her nose at the smell of the vessel and her fellow passengers. She and Mikal were jostled roughly as they were all herded aboard. Despite her best efforts to hang on to Mikal's cloak, they were separated.

Alone for the first time in days, Rakell scanned the deck in a panic. As the barge moved from the dock she shifted unsteadily on her feet and pitched forward onto the deck. The shift knocked more than a few passengers off balance, allowing her to catch sight of the large man in the blue cloak. She whispered a prayer of gratitude and began to make haste toward him, but was rudely prevented from continuing when one of the crewmen grabbed her by the arm. "You's one of them dancers, girl?" he slurred into her face. "How much furra quick one?"

She almost gagged at the smell of his breath and the sight of his rotten teeth. "Get your filthy hands off me!" she shrieked in fear and revulsion, much to the amusement of the man's crewmates who commenced to chortle loudly.

"Uppity Zareli bitch!" the man sneered, smacking her face and then fumbling through her cloak to stick his hand up her skirt. "I'll just shag ya fer nuttin!"

Rakell could only scream, not knowing what else to do. Suddenly, Mikal appeared like an avenging angel. His fist connected with the offender's face and as the man fell backwards, Mikal pulled her away and shoved her behind him. "She is a true daughter of the Ice-Mother!" he shouted. "She is not to be defiled by the likes of you!"

The filthy man regained his balance and spat blood onto the deck, glaring hatred at Mikal. His hand twitched near his belt knife. Not missing a beat, Mikal grabbed the hilt of his own blade.

"Think you's too good for me, ya?"

"Is that a challenge, little man?" Mikal sneered.

"Back off!" a fellow crewman shouted, but not at Mikal. "If that zealot draws his blade, he won't put it back till he draws yer blood." "So?" the offender retorted, but he took a better look at Mikal's size and scowl and decided to take a step back.

"Back off and get back to work or I'll toss ya over!" the scow captain shouted.

The man grumbled an apology to his employer and turned to go. But as he passed Rakell he aimed a final blob of blood and phlegm at her feet, making her gag again. He shot a look of pure malice at Mikal before sauntering off.

"Apologies ser," the captain said curtly. "He be new, and don unnerstan the Zareli like the rest of me crew. He be all talk and nuttin more. I canna afford to be short a crewman now, so if you could let this slide, I'd be in yer debt." Mikal simply nodded in reply, putting his hand at Rakell's back and leading the trembling girl away.

Further from the press of bodies, Mikal grabbed her hard by the cloak and hissed down at her; "How dare you embarrass me with such a scene! A simple hand lock would have prevented that filth from touching you! Have you forgotten all your training?" When she only stared helplessly up at him, he leaned back with yet another disdainful look and stated, "You never had any training."

Rakell shook her head, knowing that she had disappointed him yet again. "My—my father didn't—"

"Speak not to me of that fool ever again. Not only did he ruin his own life, he ruined his daughter," Mikal sneered, turning away. "And now it's up to me to make a proper Zareli of you."

At night, brackish whiskey was passed around by the crewmen and a few of the passengers partook as well. No one offered any to Rakell or Mikal, not that they would have accepted. Zareli were forbidden to consume any alcohol that was not made from the vine.

Mikal was asleep—again. His ability to drift off anywhere, anytime, in any position never ceased to amaze her. He looked as comfortable as if he were in a luxury bed instead of lying on a dirty deck with his head resting on a duffel bag.

Although a respectable distance was granted to them after the groping incident, most of the men were taking turns sauntering by to

leer at the only woman on board. Ashamed of herself, Rakell huddled in her cloak. She hugged her knees to her chin and felt just a bit seasick. The river current was much rougher here where the river was wide.

She inched closer to Mikal each time she heard a nasty laugh or a slur in a language she couldn't understand. No one was bothering to speak in the common tongue, but she didn't want to know what they were saying anyway. When she finally backed right into Mikal, he grunted irritably.

"Forgive me my lord! I did not mean to disturb you—" she began to say when some extra loud laughing and ribald jeering made her burst into tears. "They are scaring me!"

"They will not touch you. I shall kill anyone who dares."

"If you say so, but—"

Suddenly, Mikal reached up and pulled her down beside him. One strong arm wrapped around her shoulder, throwing his warm wool cloak over her, the other pulled her closer and wrapped the other side of the cloak over them both. There was great barrage of laughter and comments from the onlookers around them.

"They think that we—we—" she trailed off, not knowing what else to say.

"Let those lesser mortals think what they like, *mokushlah*. It cannot touch your soul." Mikal settled himself in a more comfortable position and tightened his arms possessively around her.

"I feel so ashamed!" she whispered.

"I shall not let any harm come to you. Calm yourself and go to sleep. You need it."

"Thank you, my lord."

Mikal grunted sleepily and lost the tender tone in his voice. "Shut up, now."

Rakell's thoughts were in turmoil. It was not seemly for a man to be holding her this way. The feeling she didn't have name for fluttered again in her chest. There was a perfectly good reason why he had done this. It was a simple way to console her and keep her safe at the same time—and she did feel safe pressed up next to him. He was such a handsome man, and she was not a child. She imagined herself as his new bride, instead of a lowly slave to comfort herself. Rakell hid her face under his cloak and snuggled against his chest. She breathed in the warm inviting male scent of his skin and was able to finally drown out the outside world and go to sleep.

CHAPTERTWO

The Priest-King Soliman loved many foreign women in addition to the Queen-Priestess. They came from all the nations from which the Mighty Onyx had warned the People about.

"Never intermarry with them," he had written. "They will surely tempt you to follow their gods."

But Soliman was obsessed with the love of these women. He had one hundred demi-wives from all over creation, including many of the most hedonistic people of all, the Ryordans. In his old age, his wives tempted him to follow other gods. He was no longer committed to the All-Father as his forefathers had been. So Soliman did what the All-Father considered evil. He did not wholeheartedly follow the laws as the Mighty Onyx had set them down for the People.

Then Soliman built an illegal worship site for all the gods of his foreign wives, on the highest peak of Zarel, blasphemously close to the sacred tomb of the Sweet Lady Opal. His foreign wives and their entourages committed many abominations in that place.

Is it any wonder that the All-Father brought the Ryordans to the lowlands of Zarel? Much blood was required to wipe away the sins of Soliman, his foreign wives and his sons. Therefore, there has been no Priest-King since, and polygamy is discouraged to this day.

The Last Priest-King ~ The Zareli Book of Kings

ow nice of you to grace us with your presence. Jovi's blood and tears! What are you wearing?" "Is this a formal breakfast?" Ty asked innocently, flicking his

"Is this a formal breakfast?" Ty asked innocently, flicking his head at his sister Vanna, lounging in a deck chair in her swimming clothes as she picked fruit from a platter held by a waiting servant. "When are you going to cut that hair?" Governor Rahlo-Flavian Antonius demanded. "It's longer than your sister's. You look like a bloody barbarian, Tyberius!"

"Bohemian, father," Ty shrugged, wincing at his father's use of his proper name. He hated it. No one else ever used it, except for his sister when she was trying to annoy him—and Tyla too, but she always had ever since they were children, simply because their names sounded so similar.

"You are a lord, and *my* son. I think your pedigree denies you membership to *that* particular group of miscreants," Rahlo replied. "I swear you dress this way only to aggravate me. However, if the hair is what's stopping you from taking your place at my side, then I won't insist on you cutting it."

"Does the Emperor really want to go to war with Zarel again?" Ty asked, changing the subject. "I don't understand. The treaty seems to be working fine."

"Not as fine as you think, my son," Rahlo grunted. "The tributes get smaller every year, and the real power in Zarel has retreated into the highlands and isolated itself. The Senate finds this highly suspicious. If Zareli immigrants were not still applying for citizenship, then they would have had an excuse for war a long time ago."

"The only good thing about Zarel is the men," Vanna yawned. "So big and fit! They make Ryordan men look so short! The senators are probably just jealous of all those gorgeous warriors fucking their wives on the sly. Just let them crawl back up their Mountain. Who cares?"

Lord Rahlo gave his daughter an annoyed look. He was as liberal as the next Ryordan, but he still did not like to be reminded of his daughter's sexuality. "There's more to it than that and you know it," he snapped. "Where do you think all those lovely jewels on your fingers came from?"

"Can't you do something?" Ty interjected. "The war almost bankrupt Ryordan a few centuries ago. Has the Emperor forgotten that already?"

"Tyberius, we've been over this before," the man sighed. "What would you expect a Frontier Governor to do about it? The movement of troops into Korthagian barracks is putting money into our coffers. I'm afraid the city Magistrates are blinded by this short-term gain."

"But you're the Governor—and a senator!" his son protested. "Surely you can veto the Magisterium or speak up when the Senate is in session next."

"Everything I could say has already been said, Tyberius. The decision rests not with me alone."

"But it's wrong and you know it!"

"I have a job to do," he snapped. "You'll learn for yourself one day that doing your duty oftentimes means submitting to things you don't agree with. Which," he paused for effect, "sets up a certain subject you've been avoiding. It's past time you started attending the magisterial sessions with me. You will be running the city-state one day. That is, if you want our family to continue to keep its hereditary place in the Empire—however small that may be." On that note he excused himself curtly.

After his father had left, Ty spent a few moments brooding sullenly. The man was making more and more comments like that last one. The Governor Rahlo was not a subtle man. Soon he would not be asking but *demanding* for his son to take up his duty.

But why am I resisting? – Ty thought. It was not as if he truly resented being taken away from his leisurely lifestyle. That held little pleasure for him as of late. More likely it was that learning to govern would take him away from what he felt was his true calling—his writing. His father never considered that real work. The fact that Ty's articles had been presented in several well-known publications did nothing to persuade the Governor that this was little more than a hobby—a hobby that he barely tolerated from his politically unambitious son. Maybe he is right – Ty thought – I haven't been motivated to publish anything recently either. If he had indeed hit his creative peak, perhaps it was time to move on?

Vanna finally broke the silence: "Will you be at Jan's party tonight?" Ty just mumbled in reply.

"Tyla is going to be there," she offered.

"All the more reason for me not to go," Ty remarked wearily.

"Enough of this!" Vanna hissed, tossing down her grapes and shooing the servant away. "Just what happened between you two?"

"Ask her."

"I did! She's being as tight-lipped as you are! And that's not like her. You know how much she likes to talk about herself. She seems *hurt*, Ty, and that really surprises me."

"I can't tell you what I don't understand myself," her brother replied. "She's an incredible lover, but what I used to feel—it's gone. Besides, I never know where I am with her. What does she really want? Do you know?"

Vanna just shook her head, and Ty continued; "She can never be totally honest with me. Seems like she's always playing a game that I'm always losing, and I don't even know the rules!" He made a longsuffering sigh, "She will get over it—eventually. It's not like I'm that fantastic a catch."

"Don't sell yourself so short," Vanna said in doubt. "This time I think she actually had her heart involved."

"Does Tyla even have a heart?" Ty scoffed. "Did she ever actually say that she loved me?"

Vanna shook her head again and let the matter go. "There will be other women there," she offered. "Oh, please come! Father doesn't like for me to go to these things without an escort and I refuse to take any of his drooling bodyguards with me!"

Ty swiped a hand over his face and muttered; "They are going to follow us anyway, you *know* that." Vanna's lack of privacy was a problem that he faced as well. Unlike him though, Vanna's only duty to the family was to marry into a family as rich as her own. Sir Janius seemed to be the prospect she was setting her sights on. Despite his wealth, Ty was sure that Jan's mixed blood and lack of lordly status was not a thing the Governor was pleased with. "If I do this for you, *please* don't try to hook me up with anyone," he begged.

"Why have you been so distant with me lately?" she remarked.

"You're fucking my best friend. It's a little awkward."

"Oh please. Stop pretending to be mad about that because I know you don't care. You were in this melancholy state well before he and I were a thing. Honestly, you're so strange."

"Am I really that strange?" he whispered.

"Yes, and that's why we love you!" she laughed back.

"Who is 'we'?"

"Me, you jerk. Father too, although maybe not so much for your strangeness. The ladies like it—the tormented artist, so broody and mysterious."

"I wish," Ty scoffed at his sister's words. He knew women only saw him for his title. He knew he was strange too; Vanna didn't have to tell him. He fostered it on purpose to drive away the worst of the opportunists.

"One of Jan's parties will do you some good," Vanna said. She grabbed his hand in an affection gesture that caught him off guard. "Please Tyberius. This depression that you're in is not healthy! Have some fun tonight, at least *try*."

Ty hadn't realized his mood was that evident to anyone else. Besides his break-up with Tyla he assumed that the impending doom of governorship was what was depressing him. However, the truth of the matter was that the indolence of his life was beginning to bore him. Being an apprentice Governor would at least offer a diversion, if nothing else—and keep Tyla away. Politics bored her. Perhaps there was something he could do about the Zarel situation that his father hadn't cared to think about. The thought cheered him considerably.

The Topazes Innkeeper leered at Rakell and snickered suggestively as he led her and Mikal down the hall to their room. Without the Lord Boaz's generosity, it was a simple, single-bed chamber, with no anteroom for a servant. Rakell supposed that she would have to sleep on the floor and hoped that Mikal would let her have a pillow, at least. Once the innkeeper left, she dropped exhausted to the floor, hugging her small pack.

"It doesn't take much to tire you, does it?" Mikal grumbled. "You must be the most useless slave the Grey have ever foisted upon me."

"I swore to serve you the best I can, my lord," she said wearily. "I am sorry I have displeased you—but I am so tired!"

"Don't expect lenience from me, I won't tolerate laziness. If I think you need to be punished, I will punish you. Now, get up!" he commanded and snapped his fingers in the gesture that she knew meant she better obey.

Dragging herself off the floor she followed him into the water room. It wasn't much of a room to speak of but who was she to complain about it? And since it was not a luxury accommodation, they had to heat the water and draw the bath for themselves. Mikal showed her the heating chamber below the basin where they had to start a fire. Rakell had seen her servants do this before and thought that she could handle it in the future.

Thinking that he would dismiss her to bathe, she was taken aback when he began to strip in front of her. Although conservative people, the Zareli were not embarrassed or shocked by nudity. Physical beauty was appreciated and considered a blessing of the All-Father. Public bathhouses were not uncommon in the Motherland. Rakell however, was no handmaid used to bathing men.

Mikal entered the bath, hiding most of his body from view. He dunked his head under the water and then commanded her to wash his hair. Rakell lathered the cheap soap provided by the inn with her hands and imitated to the best of her ability what her own servants had so recently done for her. Once rinsed, he demanded the soap, and stunned her once more by standing up to wash right in front of her.

She looked politely at the floor, but the sound of the splashing water piqued her curiosity. She turned her head slightly and covertly watched him. Of course, she had seen naked men in the bathhouses, but she never stared at them. Zareli men did not ogle the women either. It would have been considered rude.

The water seemed to caress his skin as it ran over and around his hard body. She knew she should not be watching, but she studied him as if she was looking at a work of art. Her father's house had a magnificent statue of the Lord Ruby and the Lady Opal entwined in its main atrium. Mikal looked just like that marble edifice of masculinity—only his muscles were alive and moving. The way that they bunched and rippled under his smooth skin was fascinating. The blond hair over his chest and arms was slick with a shiny skin of water. Lost in her study, she failed to realize that he had stopped washing and was staring straight at her. As her eyes met his she let out an embarrassed gasp.

His expression showed only amusement as he gazed back at her calmly, and he surprised her by chuckling softly. "The towel, Rakell? Sometime tonight would be nice."

Rakell nervously spun away to grab the towel and then spread it out for him to step into. Mikal took it from her shaking fingers but let his hands linger over hers first. She looked meekly at the floor while he climbed out of the basin and dried off right in front of her.

"You may see to yourself now," he said, swathing the towel around his hips and departing from the room. "And do take your time please, you stink."

Rakell lingered in the bath water long after it became cold. The feeling of being clean was such a pleasure after days of unbroken travel. She wasn't even disgusted that Mikal had used the water before her, she was just so happy to be in a bath again.

She became lost in thought as she poured the water over her head. The image of Mikal's body kept invading her imagination even though she was trying hard to keep it out. What is wrong with me? – she thought – Never mind that he is handsome, he is not for you to be pining over! Although, it did seem like he had enjoyed her watching him. Surely, he must realize that he was handsome. He had laughed at her discomfort. Perhaps he found her embarrassment to be girlish and silly. She didn't want him to think of her in that way. She would try to be more dignified from now on.

The sun was setting when Rakell rejoined him in the main room. She was dressed in her only clean clothes. The rest she had washed clumsily in the bath and were now drying on the edge of the basin.

She was so ashamed when Mikal told her that she stank! She was still chagrined by it.

The evening light was dim, but she could see well enough. Mikal stood with his back to her, looking out the window and still only wearing the bath towel swathed loosely around his hips. Rakell stared in confusion at the scars all over his back, wondering how he had gotten them.

"All and Ice! I could kill for a glass of red wine right now, no matter how revolting!" he lamented, pulling the threadbare curtain against the setting sun. Then he turned and regarded her thoughtfully. "Did I affront your fine sensibilities in there, *m'lady*?"

"You only surprised me, my lord," she replied.

"Indeed?" he said, walking toward her. "Shall I surprise you again?"

"No, my lord," she said, stepping back and putting up her hand as if the gesture would stop him.

"Why not? Did you not like what you saw?"

"It was rude of me to stare, my lord," she blurted out.

Mikal's eyes hardened as he continued backing her up across the room. She did not even realize she was backing away until she felt the wall behind her.

"When I ask you a question," he said pressing his palms to the wall on either side of her shoulders, "I expect you to answer it."

Trapped there, Rakell found herself becoming afraid of him for the first time. "Forgive me my lord," she mumbled.

"Did – you – like – what – you – saw?" he bit out.

Rakell closed her eyes, trying to force herself to stay calm. When she opened her eyes, Mikal had leaned in even closer to her, his naked chest so near that she could feel the heat coming from his skin. "Answer me!" he demanded; the threat implicit in his voice.

Rakell flinched and bit her lip. She wanted to lie and say that she did not. Some people found it easy to lie but she wasn't one of those. Yet the truth embarrassed her. With all the dignity she could muster she answered, "Yes, my lord, I did. I am sorry." "For what?" he mused, reaching out to curl a lock of her wet hair in his fingers.

"Please," she stammered, putting a supplicating hand on his arm. "Would you back away, just a little?"

"You say my lord when you speak to me!" he suddenly spat out in a harsh whisper. He grabbed her by her hair and dragged her away from the wall. When she screamed, he clapped his hand over her mouth and shoved her back again as she struggled to get free. Rakell blurted a frantic apology under his hand.

"Calm yourself," Mikal said softly. When she finally stopped struggling, he let her go so suddenly that she staggered forward. Mikal stopped her from falling, his hands buried into her hair again and she cringed, but this time it was only a caress.

"Forgive me, my lord!" she said, looking up at him with tearful eyes. "You won't punish me, will you?"

"I should," he said bending to whisper in her ear, "and I would, but your answer has pleased me."

Rakell flinched again as he stroked her face. She had not realized she was crying until he did. He looked at the moisture on his hand. "What are you crying for?"

"Because you *hurt* me!" she said as if was the most obvious thing in the world. Then she hastily added the honorific 'my lord'.

"I frightened you," he said in a more tender voice, running his hands down her shaking arms. "You frighten easily, don't you?"

It seemed to Rakell that he was amused by her discomfort. She wished he would back away—and yet this sudden change in demeanor made her want to fall into the comfort of his arms, like she had on the barge.

"You need not be frightened of me, *mokushlah*," he said, taking her hands and holding them tightly. "I'm not permitted to cause you any real harm. It is my sacred duty to protect you. You should *know* this."

She just nodded mutely, then gasped as he took her hands and pulled them right against his chest. "Touch me," he whispered guiding

her hands over his skin. "Rakell, you are so beautiful it makes my heart ache just to look at you."

Rakell gasped at his words and was equally surprised at how warm and smooth his skin was. It was silky and soft, but the muscles beneath were hard. She could even feel his heart pounding, as her own heart was pounding. Could he really hold feelings of fondness for her as she did for him?

Mikal released her hands and allowed her to stroke him of her own volition. Her mouth opened in a surprised but silent 'oh'. He hardly dared to breathe while she explored him. When her fluttering hands finally stilled at his hips, she looked up at him with a confused and questioning look in her eyes. It was obvious that he was aroused, and it occurred to him that she never would have seen a man aroused before. "Did you like touching me?" he asked.

Rakell just nodded again and was rewarded with a smile. She smiled back in relief. He was handsome before, but the smile made his face brilliant. He smiled so rarely. She was happy that she was the cause of it.

"I want to show you something," Mikal said. Then he took her hand and pulled it under the towel.

She started to protest. "My lord—what are you doing?"

"Shh," he whispered. "Listen to me. There was no need for you to be embarrassed. Beauty is a gift from the god and a healthy body honors him. If beauty was not meant to be looked at then why would the All-Father bless us with it?"

Rakell could only stare at him like an idiot, trying not to look down at what he was doing with her hand. Since he was a R'hab—and the greatest one—what he said had to be the truth. Yet, looking and touching were two separate things! The towel fell away from his hips and Rakell let out a tiny cry of shock as Mikal wrapped her hand around his swollen cock. Again, she was surprised by the feel of silkysoft skin against what was hard underneath.

Now it was Mikal's turn to tremble. His body tensed as if he was afraid that she was about to hurt him. She tried to let go, but his hand was firmly around hers. The wall was at her back again before she knew it. "Rakell, you look so sweet. I can't help myself," he whispered, pressing up against her.

Confused, and shaking her head desperately, Rakell tried to wriggle away. He was so much stronger than she expected! It was hardly an effort for him to pin her there. Pride and desperation made her push at him with all her strength.

"I know that you want to be near me. I could hear it in your sighs when you fell asleep with your cheek on my chest," he said, turning up her head so he could place a soft kiss on her forehead. "You don't have to pretend to fight me, *mokushlah*. I won't think any less of you."

"I am not pretending!" she protested. "Surely you realize that I am a virgin. Why are you doing this to me?"

"And just what is it you think I am I trying to do to you?" he laughed. Rakell didn't think she could blush any redder. "You are a R'hab! You are known for your—"

"Virtue? True, but I am still a man," he interrupted. "As such my desires make me weak. You couldn't possibly understand this. Women are much better at controlling these things. You could control *me*—if you only knew how."

"Then let me go!" she said defiantly, renewing her struggles.

"Have it your way, *mokushlah*," he said with amusement, wrestling with her flailing limbs until she was panting in fatigue. Mikal was not even bothered by the effort. "You see how useless it is to defy me? If I wanted to rape you, I could have done it by now."

"Please, stop this!" she begged.

"Then stop fighting," he warned her. "You started this. If you really want to end it, you shall have to touch me—here." He took hold of her hand again and placed it back on his sex. He had lost some of his erection when he was subduing her struggles, but it wasn't long in springing to life once her fingers were curled around his shaft again. "It is only a simple thing. I'll show you how," he said and guided her hand in a downward motion, then up again. Rakell could only comply; she didn't know what else to do.

"Yes, that's good. See how easy it is?" Mikal said thickly. He groaned and rested his head on top of hers, running his cheek against

Syndyl vanDeelan

her hair. He reached up and locked one hand on the back of her neck in a possessive grip. Slowly, he released the hand she had wrapped around his cock. Instead of pulling away, she continued to stroke him. This was going much easier than he had anticipated. In his mind she had only resisted because she was afraid to appear too eager. Her compliance only confirmed that really did want to do it. "Yes, good. Good girl!" he gasped.

Rakell felt a shiver pass through her at the change in his voice. She was happy that he was pleased and thrilled at his praise, but she was disturbed by her actions. It felt wrong—but surely the R'hab wouldn't make her do something that was wrong? *Would he*? Suddenly, he took her by the arms and pulled her towards the bed. "Lie down with me, Rakell."

"No, my lord! Don't make me do that!" She resumed her panicked struggles.

Mikal seized her slender wrists, effectively putting an end to her thrashing, but he stopped forcing her towards the bed. "We will do nothing more than touch, I swear it," Mikal said. "Trust me, *mokushlah*. I will not hurt you."

Rakell wanted to trust him. Swallowing her fear, she let him lead her to the bed. Mikal could feel that the fight was gone out of her. She had placed herself in his hands, now he had to be as gentle as possible. "It will be easier for you this way," he said soothingly, drawing her limp body closer. He guided her hand to his sex again. "Everything will be alright, *mokushlah*, nothing bad will happen. Do it like I showed you now."

Rakell nodded weakly and resumed to stroke him. He caressed her face, his thumb feathered over her lips, parting them gently. The sound of her trembling breath was wildly exciting to him. "These sweet little noises you make—I love them!" Mikal said savagely. His fingers dug into the delicate skin on her arms as his body began to tense. "Oh god, here it comes now!"

His body was shaking so badly Rakell was frightened by it. She knew that men reacted strongly to desire but did not know exactly how. Mikal suddenly became rigid, and he cried out as if he was in agony and trying to choke back the sound. As he ejaculated into her hand he shivered convulsively and exhaled. His death grip on her eased and he slid over on his back with his eyes closed.

"My lord, are you well?" Rakell asked timidly.

"By Emerald's sin, yes. More than well—thanks to you," he answered.

Rakell took the opportunity to roll away to the very edge of the bed. She held her offended hand away from herself and covered her face with the other. She felt ashamed by what had just happened and felt the urge to cry again.

By contrast Mikal was feeling somnolent bliss. He reached out and absentmindedly stroked the shaking girl as he reveled in the first orgasm he had experienced in a long time. It took him a while to realize that Rakell was softly weeping beside him.

"I should have warned you what it was like for a man to lose his desire before I did this," he said suddenly.

"What do you mean, my lord?" she whispered.

"I assumed that you already *knew*," he said apologetically. "After all, you're not a child. *Please*, tell me your nurse told you what you need to know about men by *now*."

"I was told, but I didn't really understand," she choked. "I didn't know it was so—so..." She started sobbing in earnest.

"What are you crying for?" Mikal said. "You would think I hurt you the way you're carrying on. Come on, up with you. Wash your hands and get me a hot cloth while you are at it." When she didn't immediately move, he reached over and caressed her backside; it made her jump up and run away immediately.

Rakell lingered in the water room as long as she dared, washing her hands repeatedly and splashing water onto her face. Her hands just wouldn't feel clean and her tears wouldn't stop coming. When she finally returned to Mikal her vision was in still in a blur from her weeping. She held the cloth out to him, afraid to get any closer. Irritated, he grabbed it from her hands. "Too cold," he said wiping himself off roughly. "I expect it to be hotter next time." Rakell almost choked. The possibility of a *next* time had not occurred to her until then. The pronouncement brought on a renewed bout of sobbing. Mikal was both annoyed and guilt-ridden by her reaction. The shame threatened to overwhelm him. He had to get control over the situation—and quickly. He tossed the cloth away carelessly and gestured for her to lie down.

"Stop crying Rakell, you did well—did I not already say so?" he crooned gently. "You've done a very sweet and selfless thing for me, *mokushlah*. You deserve a good rest. I *promise* I won't lay another hand on you."

Rakell was grateful for the praise, but disturbed by the thought of sleeping in the same bed with him. Her sobbing slowly abated, but she still could not bring herself to lie down. "I can sleep on the floor, my lord," she murmured. "Only—may I have the pillow, please?"

Mikal sighed impatiently and pulled back the covers for her. "How can I make you sleep on the floor after you have been so good to me? I can force you lie down if that makes you feel better about it," he threatened playfully.

She made a tiny, frightened noise and dared not disobey any longer, so she did as he bid her.

"Was it really that bad?" he asked, tossing the covers over her and shoving the pillow in her direction. "You're being so silly."

Rakell kept opening her mouth to say something, but she couldn't get the words out. Was she just being silly?

A blurry memory surfaced and stuck in her head. Money changing hands. Her father's man giving it to the young Grey-Robe on the day of her dedication when she was four. "More for you every year as long as you keep her name off the lists," Levi had said, looking down on her lovingly. "No one in the house of Yzra will ever serve as long as I live!" How prophetic *that* statement had been!

Rakell might never have been selected for service to the Temple even if he had not bribed the cleric to keep her out of the lists. *Had* she been chosen the Lord Levi could have paid a ransom to keep her free. The Temples made money off the ransoms, so very rarely were they denied. Perhaps given his rocky relationship with the HighCouncil, Levi had not been willing to take that chance. Startled, Rakell understood that this was the first crime she had witnessed her father commit, she had just been too young to understand it then.

As a warlord, Levi had nothing against slavery. He had his own slaves. He treated them well, so well that many chose to stay on as his Freemen. Going through the names and faces of the household Freemen Rakell finally realized something—all the White-Robes in the manor-house had been women! The older Hannah had been her mother's nurse—and then hers, of course—but the youngest Freemah, Lilah, was the chatelaine of the house, carrying out the duties of a wife ever since Rakell's mother had died.

What other private duties did Lilah perform? Did she pleasure her father in the way that Mikal just made her do? She must not have minded, or else she never would have stayed. Like most who chose to wear the White, Lilah was highly devoted to her Master and would have died for him. She even tried to rescue Rakell from her servitude.

Lilah had forced her way into the trial and tried to purchase Rakell's freedom with her own money. Rakell remembered only too well Lilah's desperate pleading to the judge in Grey, only for him to tell her that she had no right to Rakell since she was not her daughter or even a remote blood relative. Lilah might have done better if she had brought a R'hab to represent her, but Clan Yzra had not had one for years.

"Take the wealth bestowed on you by your amoral master and consider yourself lucky that you did not have to share his fate!" the judge had said. Rakell had cried and the Lord-General Boaz had laughed when Lilah was forcibly removed from the court.

She must have loved my father – Rakell thought – and she must love me too, even though I always kept her at a distance. Rakell shut the memory away before she started sobbing again. It was still too near and too painful.

"You are troubled," Mikal said, jolting her out of her reverie. "We can talk about it if you like. You can always ask me anything."

She really did not want to talk about it, but thought it was disrespectful not to acknowledge him, so she changed the subject. "My lord—that awful man on the barge..."

"What of him?"

"Would you really have killed him?"

"If it had come to that, without hesitation," he answered, feeling a surge of anger at the memory. "At the very least, I would have taken a finger to remind him never to challenge a son of the Ice-Mother again." Mikal yawned then and rolled away from her.

All was quiet for a few minutes until Rakell broke the silence again. "My lord?"

Mikal only grunted.

"You were right."

"About what?" he mumbled.

"I did like sleeping next to you," she whispered, then paused. "I do like being close to you, but—it scares me."

His only answer was deep, even breathing.

He's fallen asleep already – she thought, perturbed – He's not even listening!

Rakell wanted to sleep too, but couldn't relax next to a naked man, sated or not. So, she passed an uneasy night, jolting awake with a racing heart every time Mikal moved. Was he going to touch her again? No, he was just shifting in his sleep. He told the truth; he didn't lay a hand on her again. Was it relief she felt? Or disappointment? He had seemed perfectly content, but Rakell felt strangely empty. She was frustrated and didn't know why.

Sir Janius was supposed to be hosting the party, but had long since abandoned his guests to enjoy the Lady Vanna in private. This late in the night—or rather, this early in the morning was more accurate—all the rooms of Jan's villa were taken by other lovers with the same idea. It did little to stop those without privacy. They simply carried on where they were; on the furniture, the floor or wherever a bit of empty space presented itself. Jan's terrace was reserved for dancing, though no one was out there *dancing* anymore. The women he hired to keep the party going were enjoying themselves instead, sighing and moaning somewhere out in the gorgeous gardens many wealthy Ryordans had. Even the musicians were gone, save one, who played a decent background tune on his stringed instrument while a lovely dancer knelt between his legs and played upon his other instrument.

Ty rubbed his temples. His head hurt. His eyes were stinging. They were probably blood-shot too, he knew; for he had inhaled as much of the aphrodisiac incense still permeating the villa as the other guests had. In fact, he had probably over-done it. He hoped the drug would stimulate him into some sense of enjoyment, even if it wasn't real.

The opiate was poetically called 'The Breath of Venys' and it was supposed to expand your consciousness. Ironically it tended to make people *un*-conscious too. Lovers that had spent themselves out in orgasm were snoring contentedly next to the ones still capable of fucking.

Ty didn't *feel* like his senses were expanding. He felt like he was on a bad trip. The naked limbs he saw entwined everywhere looked like worms writhing on rotten fruit. The real fruit—and other food—was splattered across the tables, often with people—conscious or otherwise—lying in the mess. It looked like guts pulled out from eviscerated murder victims. Ty felt the sickness rising from his guts and knew he had to get outside fast.

He stumbled over to the terrace, where the golden curtains flowing with the breeze beckoned like the arms of a comforting goddess. In his haste, he tripped over a couple of women on the floor. "Sorry," he slurred, trying to move his sluggish limbs. The women gave him looks to kill at first, then recognizing him they reached out to prevent him from leaving.

"I know you! You're the Governor's son!"

"Lord Tyberius, right?"

"Just Ty, please," he mumbled, trying to disentangle himself from them.

One woman smiled wider, licked her lips and pulled him closer. "You're welcome to join us." Her lips looked like a big, slimy slug to Ty's drug-induced vision. He choked back on a heave. Sensing his distress, the woman pushed him away in disgust. "You better get outside," she said.

"Come back when you feel better!" the other one called out as he staggered over to the exit.

Ty made it to the railing and leaned over, inhaling deep gulps of fresh air, trying to stifle his nausea. It had been a while since he had indulged in recreational narcotics and it was hitting him hard.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he heard an exasperated voice from behind him say, and Ty just groaned to answer his friend's question.

"Those two haven't looked at a *man* all night and you just walk away from a double bang?" Lord Gyllium said.

Ty could only heave the contents of his stomach over the rail in reply. He hoped no one was underneath! Probably would just keep fucking in it anyway – he thought, and that caused him to heave some more until his stomach was well and truly empty.

Gyl laughed and pounded him on the back in a gesture that was supposed to be helpful but really wasn't. "You okay?" he asked, thumping Ty once more for emphasis.

"Don't feel very good," Ty moaned.

"Don't look very good," Gyl commented, steadying his friend from falling. "And now you don't *smell* very good either!"

Ty's head was staring to clear though, and the nausea was passing. "Do me a favor, buddy," he asked.

"Yep."

"If Tyla comes out here looking for me, would you distract her please? I've been trying to avoid her all night."

"Jovi! What the fuck for? If she wants it, give it to her! It doesn't mean you got to marry her."

Ty shook his head. Gyl was too much of a walking hormone to understand that he was trying to spare Tyla's feelings instead of giving her hope that they might get back together. "Name the demon and it will come," Gyl laughed when Tyla's sing-song voice could be heard calling: "Ty – beer – ree – us!"

"Please—tell her you never saw me," Ty begged, and proceeded to throw himself over the rail. He floundered ungracefully to the ground, barely avoiding the pool of his own vomit, and crawled off into the darkness.

Laughing uproariously, Gyl watched the spectacle. Then he turned to see the object of Ty's distress come teetering onto the terrace. She looked like she was trying to walk with a seductive sway, but she was obviously intoxicated, and it was a sluttish parody of her normal, graceful stride. She looked accusingly at Gyl. "What are you laughing at? I saw someone fall! Was it Tyberius?"

"Nah, I'm alone," Gyl replied innocently. He took a quick peak over the rail see if Ty had managed crawl out of view.

"You're a liar—it was him!" she pouted, looking over the rail too, but seeing no one, turned quickly back. She wobbled on her high heels and lost balance, falling right into his arms.

Well, isn't this just a blessing from the gods? – Gyl thought to himself. Ty did beg him to distract her after all. He'd been dying to make it with Tyla since he was seventeen. "You're right, I was lying," he smiled suggestively at her. "Why don't we walk through the gardens and we'll look for him together."

The reason for Mikal's frugality was revealed when he booked passage for them across the sea. He had been saving the money for a private cabin on a beautiful sailing ship, not one of the smelly steamers Rakell had seen puffing out of the docks. It would take longer to get there, Mikal explained—but it would be much more pleasant. The steamers were always coated with the murk of coal dust that got into everything. The cabins were like metal crates that they would have to share with multiple passengers. It was a recipe for either violence or serious illness.

To Rakell's embarrassment she had become terribly seasick within a few hours of departing. Mikal was surprising sympathetic and took care of her until it passed. When she could finally stop vomiting, he bundled her up in blankets and carried her up to the bow of the ship. He told her that setting her sights on the horizon would help her body become used to the movement of the ship. He continued his tender nursing, even spoon-feeding her salty broth until her stomach was more settled. Anyone who didn't know the caste colors of the Zareli would assume that she was a lady—albeit a reduced one—travelling with her manservant, and a love-struck servant at that.

Mikal was surprisingly tolerant of her wide-eyed wonder during their travel. Since there was very little real work for her to do on the ship, he seemed content to spend the time teaching her what he knew about the people and the places they encountered. She enjoyed the topic of geography, but when lessons fell to sacred scripture, she became withdrawn.

She had been brought up observing all religious customs, as befitted a Zareli lady but she felt like a hypocrite now, knowing that her father had secretly lived a double-life as a criminal all those years. What a sham it all had been! She had thought herself a godly maiden, and now she was paying for the false piety.

One evening Rakell was leaning over the rail of the ship thankfully she was fully over her seasickness by then—enjoying the view of the islands they were sailing away from after a quick stop for supplies. This archipelago of lush tropical islands would lead them into the massive port of Korthage.

The Islands were home to the people who crewed the ship they were taking. Rakell had been stunned by their ebony skins when she first saw them, making the ward of the x-cross over herself; hand to left shoulder, to right hip to left hip to right shoulder. "Are they the children of Mighty Onyx?" she asked in superstitious dread, forgetting the honorific 'my lord'.

"No indeed, and you should know better than that," Mikal chided. "The Dread-lord could not sire children. These people you see are the lesser children of the All-Father, just as any non-Zareli is."

Rakell was even more shocked by the women sailors. They wore the same billowy pantaloons as the men and were just as barechested. But all were respectful and kept to themselves; not staring or harassing the way other people had. She enjoyed watching the graceful way they rolled about the ship, climbing the rigging, and keeping foot no matter how rough the seas were. Both men and women had hair plaited in long braids with beads and bells that made music as they moved. They also sang back and forth to each other while they worked, in a beautiful melodic language that continued day and night. *Truly the All-Father is great, creating so many types of people* – Rakell thought.

Mikal told her they called themselves the Mermidians. He explained to her that their entire lives were spent almost never setting foot on dry land. Laboring women were even brought out to sea in boats so the babes could be born on the water. "They are decent people, yet to be corrupted by the hedonism of the Ryordans. But their religious ways are very strange."

"How so my lord?" she asked.

"They have no gods."

"They do not believe in the All-Father?" Rakell gasped, confronted with religious thought different from her own for the first time. "Then how do they think the world came to be?"

"By accident," Mikal replied.

"By accident! But that is so silly!" she exclaimed incredulously, forgetting the honorific 'my lord' again, which Mikal let pass once more.

"Well, they may not be born of the Ice-Mother as we are, but they are still children of the All-Father," she said. "If they are good people, does he not love them anyway? Even if they don't remember him?"

"You view the world through such innocent eyes," Mikal said. "You see the good in everything. I envy you." He put his arm around her and tilted her chin to look up at him.

"Envy me? But why, my lord?"

"You had only beautiful things surround you your whole life. My life was ugly from the moment I was conceived. It took me a long time to see the beauty in anything—but in you it is not hard to see." He stroked her cheek. "So fair... Like the Lady Opal come again."

Syndyl vanDeelan

Rakell's heart fluttered. This was the most he ever talked about himself. She closed her eyes as he bent down to kiss her lightly on the cheek. He stayed quiet after that, but didn't take his arm from around her shoulder. She was frightened and excited by that, wondering if he had intentions for later. She wondered if this was what falling in love felt like, and she cursed herself for being a fool.

As the evening colors faded into night, he took her down to their cabin and held her in the dark. This time, he touched her. His hands traveled smoothly over her body, and he made soft kisses on her face and neck. These tickled, raising goosebumps all over her body. She sighed and twisted in response, making him laugh, a deep sensual sound that made her heart flutter even more.

Rakell became afraid only when he opened her robe, exposing her naked breasts to his touch, but even then, he was gentle. "Don't be frightened, *mokushlah*," he whispered in her ear, making her shiver all over.

Rakell trembled in his arms, wanting him to stop and hoping that he wouldn't. The conflict of her desires was confusing. In the end, Mikal lost his desire over her belly, stroking himself to climax so she didn't have to do anything. It wasn't so shocking now that she knew what to expect. She chided herself for being so distraught the first time. *I* would have done it for him if he had asked me to – she thought.

Rakell's favorite moments with Mikal were when they performed the saan't'sar on the deck in the evening. They would then switch to the zaar't'sar and he would encourage her to spar with him, teaching her the deadly art of the Zareli, something her father had forbidden. The sparring also allowed for more intimate touching when they made contact. Whenever she managed to land a blow, Mikal would fall to the deck with exaggerated surprise, extolling her warrior prowess.

They played more secret games in their dark cabin during the remainder of the journey. He especially liked taking her hands and guiding them over his body as it pleased him. Afterwards, when he lay snoring beside her, Rakell was always filled with a sense of emptiness and resentment even heavier than that first terrifying night. "Mokushlah! How did I ever live without you?" he called out once during his orgasm. He fell asleep with her tight in his arms—something she found extremely uncomfortable. Her body was still humming from the pleasant effects of his caresses, but something was missing. Why didn't she feel the same soporific bliss that he always felt?

Rakell stroked a hand over her breast, feeling her nipple peak instantly and a fresh shimmer of pleasure ripple through her body. There was a sensation between her legs that was like a painful, but pleasant aching, and she felt wet—very wet. She didn't dare to touch herself there, though. Not even Mikal did *that*.

When his arms finally lost their possessive grip, she wriggled her way out of them. Rakell rolled away and wept quiet tears of frustration until she finally fell asleep.

CHAPTERTHREE

You who are made slaves for your crimes must submit to your masters with all respect. Do whatever they tell you—not only if they are kind and reasonable, but even if they are cruel.

Words of the Mighty Onyx ~ The Zareli Book of Chaos

akell was tired and annoyed. It was obvious to her that the Zareli were made to wait before everyone else, judging by the amount of them detained at the docks. However, it was good to see her fellow countrymen, even if they ignored her.

Walking through the streets she was again subjected to the rude leering of men, but this time it was accompanied by a distain that even Mikal was not exempt from. So many men had tattoos—heathen marks that she had heard of, but never seen before. Rakell turned her eyes away whenever she saw the baleful stare of some inked creature staring in her direction and made the sign of the x-cross repeatedly.

The dirty harbor didn't reflect the delightful view of Korthage that she had seen from the sea. From there, the city had looked like a living thing, rolling up a gentle hillside, the multi-colored terraces, spires, and domes of buildings sparkling in the sun. The hissing and steaming machinery everywhere in the harbor frightened her terribly and she covered her ears for the noise. The farther they got from the reeking and dirty docks though, the more the city improved.

Everything was very different from the mountains of the Motherland. The streets were chaotic, compared to the orderly bustle found in Zarel, but the atmosphere was more vibrant. Shops beckoned passersby with displays of exotic goods. Cafes and restaurants offered respite from the heat under vivid-hued canopies and whimsical umbrellas. Patrons lounged in the sun or the shade enjoying icy drinks.

Rakell's dawdling separated her from Mikal, but she failed to realize this as she was taking everything in. She gave a startled yip as a horseless carriage rattled by. Her wide-eyed wonderment marked her as an easy target to the passing thief who grabbed for her travel pack. The strap was too securely wrapped around her shoulder and Rakell fell to the ground, dragged a few feet before it broke. Even though she screamed for help, people didn't seem to notice or care they simply stepped around the obstruction on the sidewalk. Mikal, too far ahead of her to have prevented the trouble, suddenly turned back and shoved through the crowd upon hearing her screams.

Sir Janius slammed his hand on the table. "I don't buy it. Call something slavery and that is what it is. The Empire out-lawed child slavery ages ago."

"I believe the more correct translation is *indentured servant*," Ty said. "Unlike us, they can't keep a slave forever."

"Hello? Child labor?" Jan retorted.

"I think they are seen more as status-symbols than menial servants," he offered.

"Like pets, more like! Are you defending them now?"

"No, I'm just thinking out loud."

"If they were allowed to mingle with other kids, I bet it wouldn't take long for them to rebel," Sir Varus yawned. This was an old subject—and he was bored of it. He was part Zareli himself, but he would never admit that to anyone.

"They are allowed, they just don't," Ty said. "Maybe they think that they wouldn't be accepted. I mean, Ryordans haven't exactly been welcoming. Especially these days."

"The only slaves I want are the cute ones in the bedroom," Gyl laughed.

"Please tell me those aren't *real* slaves, Gyl," Var said. "I know you're a freak and all—"

The other young men laughed at Gyl's expense, except for Tyberius. He was ashamed, remembering that none of Tyla's pretty chambermaids were free women. Still, they didn't seem to mind. Tyla was a most generous Mistress, with her money and her men.

"I don't need to buy a woman to fuck!" Gyl retorted.

"Kidding, kidding!" Var protested. "I can understand Zareli following Ryordans to live our way," he deflected. "What I don't get are women following Zareli men to live that backwards life."

"Maybe they know something we don't," Gyl said coldly. "Ask your mom, Var!"

"My father is Ryordan!"

"Half Ryordan!"

"They must be after the money," Jan interjected before it got violent. Those two had been known to get rough with each other before and it was still much too early in the evening for a bar fight. "I heard a Zareli wife automatically gains control of all her husband's wealth—and besides, everyone knows the best diamonds come from Zareli mines."

"I wish I could get just one Zareli to talk to me for more than five bleeding minutes," Ty mused. "If I could write about them, maybe we could understand them better."

"Ah, what for?" Var said contemptuously. "Most of the money they make goes back to Zarel anyway. Maybe we should ban them from immigrating." This comment was met with vigorous agreement by Jan and Gyl.

"Right, and have them do the same to us?" Ty scoffed towards Jan. "Where do you think you'll get all those stones my sister loves so much then?"

"We're fucking Ryordans! We'll just take it!" Gyl said.

"You're forgetting your history," Ty said.

"No, I'm not, that was two-hundred years ago!"

"More like three-hundred."

"Even better! We know more now. *Three-hundred* years Ty! The Zareli are still using swords and horses, for fuck's sake!"

It was true. The last three centuries in the Empire had seen dramatic leaps in technology thanks to the research of visionaries and scientists that exploded after the wars with Zarel. For those outside of the Empire who didn't understand the invisible currents of energy that existed everywhere, the Ryordans seemed liked magicians. "We could take out their whole army with a massive shock wave," Gyl continued.

Ty shook his head. "Too experimental, we could end up knocking the brains out of our own guys too."

"Still, I bet one legion with shock-sticks could take them all."

"You're underestimating them," Ty said, "A berserker with a long sword would kill too many before he was shocked to death."

"Zareli archers got nothing on spear-scopes," Gyl retorted.

"Spear-scopes jam all the time, Zareli bowmen don't. And you're forgetting their skill at hand-to-hand combat. What's Ryordan brawling compared to *that*?"

"Well, if they're so great, why is it called the *Ryordan* Empire and not the *Zareli* one?" Gyl mocked.

"Because since the founding the Ryordans have always been a conquering people," Ty replied. "The Zareli have kept to themselves for almost a millennium—"

"What is it with you and the Zareli anyway?" Gyl accused and then his voice trailed off as his eyes wandered to the street.

One of the reasons they liked that establishment so much was its raised patio and its location in the waterfront. The view was spectacular, and in a culture where variety was the spice of life, the variety of women to be seen there was plentiful too.

Despite Ryordan contempt of Zareli in general, Zareli women were a fascinating rare attraction. Tall and fair of form, their natural blonde hair and pale skin were a novelty in an Empire dominated by dark beauties. A group of Zareli maidens, with entourages in tow, walked by with their noses turned up at the leering men all around them.

"Stuck up bitches," Gyl said. "You don't know what you're missing ladies!" he shouted after them.

High-pitched screaming drew their attention away. A young woman lay on the ground, screaming and pointing down the street with frantic gestures. "Why isn't anyone *doing* anything?" she shrieked, not realizing that no one around her understood what she was saying. "Why won't anyone stop him!"

"Nice show honey!" someone shouted in Ryordan, so Rakell didn't understand him. She looked up in distress at the source of the voice. Everyone on the patio had been watching, but now were quickly losing interest since the moment had passed.

Ty couldn't believe that no one was doing anything either. He leapt nimbly over the rail and offered the girl his hand. She took it hesitantly. "You'll need to speak in the common tongue," he said as he helped her up. He fully expected the Zareli maid to be taller than he was, but she stopped just shy of his own height.

"I...thank," she stammered, looking up at him gratefully and then demurely dropping her gaze.

Ty had never seen anything like her before. She was so fair—even for one of them, her skin like marble. Her hair was almost white, and her eyes were as grey as storm clouds.

"Get your hands off her!" Mikal shouted, driving through the crowd.

Ty decided that discretion was the better part of valor and backed away from the big man with his hands up. "I was just trying to help her," he said.

"She doesn't need your help!"

"I think she does!" Ty retorted.

Mikal only spared him a withering glance before taking Rakell by the hands. "Are you hurt, mokushlah?"

"Only my pride, my lord," she cried. "Some miscreant stole my bag! There wasn't even anything worth stealing in there!"

"Sweetheart! Ditch the old man and come work for me!" one of the men from the patio shouted, this time in the common tongue. Rakell blushed but did not look up. The others were commenting too. By the lewd tone they made she was thankful that she didn't understand Ryordan.

"Stop being so rude!" Ty shouted up at them.

"Like she knows what we're saying!" Jan laughed back, still speaking Ryordan.

"No, but *I* do," Mikal growled in the same language, looking up at the offender. The fool wisely sat back down, feigning disinterest. "Let's go," Mikal said, pulling Rakell away.

"Take better care of her next time!" Ty shouted at his back.

"Guess she didn't want to work for you," Var said, poking Gyl in the gut. "Not that I blame her."

"Screw you, Var," he replied, giving him a shove. "I didn't see her making eyes at you either."

"Nah, she only had eyes for that hulking beast in blue," Jan said.

"Bet he has fun hitting that," Gyl smirked, getting back to his favorite subject matter. "Where the hell is Ty?" He looked around and saw his friend still standing in the street. "Get back up here, dumbass!"

Ty didn't hear him. He had watched the girl disappear into the crowd and was still standing there staring like an idiot. She was so exotic—exceptionally so. A strange feeling came over him when her grey eyes had met his. He had never felt that way before. He didn't know how, but he was going to do everything in his power to see her again.

Rakell ran to keep up as Mikal practically dragged her through the streets. The fact that he was furious was obvious. He didn't let go of her until they caught up with the rest of the Zareli travelers. They waited in a designated area for coaches run by the Zareli merchants who still used horses. For cleanliness reasons, the horses were not permitted in the main pedestrian areas.

A robust maiden of the Red insisted that the R'hab travel with her, beating out the others because of her rank. "There will be plenty of room for your slave on the back," she commented.

Rakell knew then and there that her affectionate connection with Mikal was at an end. She would need to behave like a proper servant from now on—especially in public. As she sat crowded on the back of the coach with a couple of other servants, she could hear Mikal conversing with the maiden and her companions inside. They were asking his opinion on Zareli intermarrying with lesser mortals.

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Her thoughts wandered back to the young man in the street. Rakell had never seen eyes so dark before. She could barely distinguish his irises from the pupils. It was alien and unnerving, and yet he had been so gallant—unlike his ill-mannered friends. If all Ryordan men were that churlish, it was no wonder that Ryordan women had taken to hunting down Zareli men for husbands. The sons of the Ice-Mother had respect for women. Quite clearly, the Red maiden considered this to be poaching, but Mikal was advising tolerance and understanding.

Rakell hoped he would be in a better mood once they reached their destination, but as soon as he bid the maiden an amiable goodbye, his scowl returned. She swallowed nervously and looked at the houses on the street. Mikal stalked off to the one they were directly in front of. With no time to look around, Rakell hopped off the coach and hurried after.

Practically tearing the hinges off the door, Mikal stormed in, pulled off his boots and threw them across the room. Rakell crept in after, like a mouse. She took off her own sandals—one never wore shoes in a Zareli house—and dutifully collected Mikal's boots from their far-flung resting places and placed them neatly by the entrance.

As Mikal stood with his arms crossed, staring out the front window, Rakell took the opportunity to look around the flat. It was all one room; a modestly furnished living area, kitchen and hearth combined. A curtain-covered doorway concealed what she surmised must be the bedchamber and water room.

When she turned back towards Mikal, she found him sitting in an easy chair. His arms were still crossed, and he was still scowling, this time at her. She swallowed uneasily and walked quietly across the room to the only other seat, a settee by the front window.

"Did I tell you to sit?" he said.

Rakell bolted upright. She didn't know what to do or say. She had assumed he was angry at what had happened at the harbor, but it was becoming clear that he was angry at *her*.

"Well? Have you nothing to say for yourself?" he snapped.

Rakell was confused, so she still said nothing.

"I had no idea what a *slut* I was bringing into my house," he said.

Rakell gasped in shock. That wasn't a word she ever expected a R'hab to use, and certainly not one that she ever expected to be directed at her.

"I don't understand, my lord!" she protested.

"Making a spectacle of yourself in public is bad enough but soiling yourself with a lesser mortal!"

Rakell touched the hand she had put in the Ryordan's without thinking. "But—I only took his hand! He was helping me to rise—"

"You shouldn't have touched him! You should have *spit* on his hand!"

Rakell was beyond stunned. This was a confusing contradiction to the tolerance he had been preaching to the Red maiden only a moment ago.

"Did you enjoy all the attention?" he accused. "You made quite a scene."

Rakell remained silent and shuffled uncomfortably.

"Stand still!" Mikal bellowed, standing up. Rakell yelped and covered her face.

He paced the room in agitation. "I've been much too lenient with you, treating you like a wayward child instead of the lowly slave that you are," he said. "You are vain, foolish and lacking in discipline. I won't tolerate it. Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

Rakell cringed and dropped her hands from her face, but she still couldn't look at him.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked. Rakell looked at what he was holding. It looked like a coiled piece of leather. She shook her head.

"It's used for binding hides together, but I think it will work just fine on you," he said.

Rakell gulped in disbelief.

"You disagree?"

"Not—not unless it pleases you, my lord!" she begged, tears threatening to run down her face.

"That's more like it," he sneered. "It just so happens that it does please me, and you want me to be pleased, don't you?"

"Yes, my lord," she whispered.

"How would you like me to punish you?"

Rakell knew that some children were strapped by their parents and teachers. She had only suffered such a thing once in her life. Her tutor, an elderly R'habah, had strapped her for daydreaming. When Rakell ran to her father in tears, Levi promptly had the woman strapped for her transgression. The woman's husband, Clan Yzra's R'hab—a cranky old man that Rakell secretly detested—immediately quit her lord-father's service, making loud admonishments against his house. Levi could never get another R'hab to come work for Clan Yzra after that, even after petitioning the High-Council for one.

Everyone in her father's house had been scandalized by Lord Yzra's rough treatment of the holy woman, but as a young child Rakell had been pleased. She never showed it, but inside she was smug about the whole thing. Now her sin was coming back to haunt her, and it was time to pay the price. Not knowing what else to do, she offered her palms up to the R'hab.

"You think *that* is punishment? A tap on your lily-white hands?" Mikal scoffed, smacking her hands aside with contempt. He stomped away a few paces, then whirled back towards her. "I was a slave once too—when I was a boy. Did you know that?"

"No, my lord," she said in surprise.

"My master would make me lie naked on the floor and then he whipped me until I bled. Perhaps I should do that to you."

That explains all the scars – she thought – but what kind of person would do that to a child? "Do you truly feel that I deserve that, my lord?" she pleaded. "For I am certain that you did not."

The hard glint in his eyes softened for a moment. He approached her casually, as if contemplating her words. Placing his hand beneath her chin, he lifted her head. Rakell bit her lip to keep it from trembling. Her eyes were starting to sting from the tears she was trying very hard to hold back. "If you think that pulling a crying fit every time you get in trouble will spare you, then you are mistaken," he said. "On the floor—now."

Rakell dropped to her knees, clutching the edge of his tunic in desperation. "My lord, please! Do not do this!" she cried, tears spilling freely now. "I am begging you for mercy! Please, just this once!"

"And tell me—slave—why should I be merciful?" he said in contempt, pulling away from her grasp.

"Because I don't even know why you are so angry!" she beseeched him, prostrating herself to the floor. "How can I avoid future offense if you don't tell me? It isn't fair!"

"Life isn't fair. Best get used to it," he muttered. "And you forgot to say, 'my lord'. Again."

Rakell covered her head with her arms and bawled.

"You are such a coward. Stop the histrionics, it's sickening!" he shouted, then he snapped his fingers at her. Rakell bounced up instantly, with a huge exhale of relief. Mikal scowled at her in annoyance and stomped away to the curtained room. "Well?" he shouted from within.

Rakell yelped and tumbled into the room. Here she found him looking out of another window, into what she couldn't see for the day's light was fading. She looked around. The bedroom was almost as big as the rest of the flat, and unlike the modest furnishing of the main room, no expense was spared here.

She found herself staring at an ornate standing mirror that any great lady would have envied. She looked away immediately at the sight of her blotched and weeping face. A beautifully crafted writing desk with the same carved and polished wood as the mirror lay at the opposite end of the room next to a doorway she assumed led to the fountain. A matching armoire with mirrored door, fit for a lord's chamber stood at the other side of this entrance. The focus of the room though, was the big, beautiful four poster bed with hangings of deep grey and gold. The matching bolsters and pillows were worthy of a king. Rakell couldn't help herself. She walked over to the bed and ran her hands over the soft velvet comforter. How long had it been since she had slept in a bed like this? "This room is the only luxury I have allowed myself for years," Mikal remarked over her shoulder.

Rakell cried out in surprise and spun around. He could move so silently when he wanted to, like her father's men-at-arms. "Until now," he added ominously. His hand shot out and grabbed her by the throat. Rakell instinctively grasped his hand trying to protect herself, but he wasn't squeezing, just holding her there with a sinister pressure.

"Remember that you belong to me!" he said.

"How can I forget it my lord?" she choked.

"Never forget it," Mikal warned. "If you let *any* man lay a hand on you again, I will skin you alive. Have I made myself clear?" He emphasized his point with a little shake, and then shoved her backward onto the bed.

"Perfectly, my lord!" she gasped, clutching her throat.

Mikal's eyes roamed over her body speculatively. Rakell turned her face away so she wouldn't have to see it. She fidgeted nervously with the hem of her robe.

"Remove that," he commanded. Rakell stared at him in disbelief, holding her robe tighter.

"Are you deaf?"

"No, my lord, but—"

Mikal grabbed the front of her robe and hauled her to her feet. "Do not make me do it for you!" he snarled before shoving her away again.

Rakell shrugged the robe off her shoulders and fumbled for the tie with shaking fingers. She took it off but grasped the loose fabric in front of her breasts to hide. She looked up at him, beseeching with her eyes. "If it pleases you, my lord," she stammered. "May I ask why?"

"Did you think that you had escaped being punished?" he asked. "But—"

"But nothing!" he shouted, grabbing the robe, and hauling her to her feet again. Before she could protest, he tore the garment from her hands and tossed it aside. Then, seizing her by the shoulder he spun her around. She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Put your arms out," he commanded.

"My lord why are you doing this to me?" she pleaded.

"I will not tell you again," he stated.

At least he can't see me this way – she thought, thrusting her arms wide, but she had forgotten the armoire mirror across the room. If she could clearly see herself in it, no doubt he could too. She squeezed her eyes shut for the shame of it all but raised her chin defiantly. The shame is not mine! – she told herself – It is his for wanting this!

Her entire body went rigid when Mikal ran his fingertips down her spine, light as a breeze. "Such fine skin," he mused. He stepped back and uncoiled the leather with a menacing snap. "Let's see how it looks in red."

Rakell flinched but raised her chin higher, determined to prove she was not a coward, but her bravado instantly disappeared when the first strike licked across her back. The scream she had been determined not to make burst forth from her lips. She had barely sucked her breath back in when he struck her a second time. By the third strike, she couldn't even scream as her body was heaving in ragged sobs. Her muscles bunched in anticipation for the next blow but it didn't come. Rakell collapsed in relief, falling forward over the bed. Her flesh burned, but most humiliating of all, Mikal was *laughing* at her!

"I barely touched you!" he said incredulously, running his fingertips over the marks he had just made. She hissed at the pain, but it didn't deter him. "I never made such noise, no matter how hard I was beaten. These stripes will fade in a few days, but three is all I shall give you, lest you break. Well? Aren't you grateful?"

"If it pleases you, my lord," she sobbed.

As she lay there, Mikal left, walking around the bed and disappearing into the water room. He returned rubbing a soothing balm in his hands. Rakell jumped when he touched her back with it, massaging the salve into her welts with expert skill. She could smell the precious oils and knew the value of such a thing. Something else on which Mikal spared no expense.

"I suppose I am being unkind," he said as the massage continued. "I can't remember the first time my father took a strap to me. I probably screamed too. Come on—up with you now." He put his hands under her arms and hauled her to her feet.

Rakell assumed he was just helping her to stand, but he pulled her into his arms instead. The balm had cooled her burning back, but her flesh still stung as her wounds brushed the fabric of his shirt. She could feel his hard body grind against her, but the hands that wiped the tears from her cheeks and stroked her hair were all gentle.

"There, there now, stop your crying," he said rocking her back and forth. "Your lord's jealous wrath has been averted."

"You—beat me—out of *jealousy*?" Rakell cried, incensed. She tried to pull away from his embrace, but he was having none of it.

"And now it is *mokushlah*'s turn to be aggrieved, is it?" He twisted her struggling body towards the mirror. His eyes met hers in the reflection and he grinned at her. "You are so beautiful when you're angry," he laughed. "How would you avenge yourself, if I allowed it?"

Rakell shut her eyes so that she didn't have to see him. It wasn't fair that he was so handsome. She wanted to be pleasing; there was no need for this—cruelty. She didn't want to admit it, but she missed his gentle touch terribly. She had submitted to it on the ship, she would have submitted now if he hadn't beaten her already.

Mikal's hands began to caress her body. She mumbled softly, a mixture of annoyance and protest. Rakell pulled away, testing the strength of his grip and knowing it was futile. He held her possessively as he enjoyed the scene they created in the mirror. "Do you know what lust is, mokushlah?" he asked.

"I don't know how you want me to answer that, my lord," she retorted. "I don't want to be punished for the wrong answer!"

"Answer me anyway," he laughed softly. "I promise not to be angry."

"Lust is wanting to have someone in your bed that you're not married to," she replied tersely.

"Such a sweet lady-like answer," he teased. "But there is so much more to it than that." One hand cupped her breast as he whispered in her ear: "I would love to show you." His fingers played over her nipple, brushing it ever so slightly before taking hold of it. The shock sliced pleasantly through her body. It raised goosebumps over her flesh.

"Stop it!" she seethed.

"No one is free from lust," he ignored her. "Not Grey, Blue or peasant, man or woman. But it is especially hard on a *man*."

Rakell ceased her struggling, soothed by his husky voice and caress. She was abysmally ignorant of anything sexual, and even in her anxiety she wanted to know more.

"It has taken me years to control my lust," he confided to her. "The secret is to give in to it just enough. To deny it is to invite it to control you, because there is no way to destroy it. You could castrate a man and he would still feel lust." He paused, breathing at her ear before continuing: "And now, I have you to deal with—it has made things so much more difficult for me."

"I am sorry my lord," she said. "I don't mean to—"

"I know," he interrupted. "But here you are, and I can't help but lust after you. Do you think that makes me a sinner?"

"It is not my place to judge you—" she began, then gasped as he pushed harder against her and squeezed her nipple tighter.

"Shh," he breathed in her ear. His free hand snaked down her body slowly to explore more of her charms.

"Stop!" she objected. "No man has ever touched me this way!"

"Ssh," he whispered again, placing his fingers over her lips. "Of that I have no doubt." His questing hand lifted her skirt and invaded under her clothes to seek naked flesh.

"Stop it, stop it!" she shouted, resuming her struggles. "You can't do this!"

He squeezed her arrogantly, his voice hard with impatience. "I can do whatever I like to you. I own you."

"Not for this!" she rebuked him. "Let me go this instant!"

"And what would you do if I did?" he laughed at her boldness.

"I'll run away!"

"Where to, pray tell?"

"I can seek sanctuary in the Temple! It's my right and you can't stop me!"

"I have no intention of stopping you," Mikal said, giving her a good shove away to prove his point. "Go ahead, little slave—*Run*."

Rakell caught her balance then spun around to glare at him. He simply stood there, gesturing with his hand towards the curtained exit. Suddenly, she remembered her exposed breasts and blushed, covering herself.

"Out of curiosity," Mikal said. "On what grounds will you claim your right to sanctuary?"

"G-grounds?" Rakell stammered, realizing that she didn't even know where the Temple in Korthage was.

"Well, they are going to ask," he said. "I have abused you so terribly, haven't I? Have I forced you to do menial labor beyond your physical ability? Have I starved you, or beaten you with my fists? Deprived you of sleep? Well? Out with it!"

Rakell's boldness faded under the onslaught of words. "I'm sorry, my lord! I want to do what you want me to do but I don't understand any of it and it frightens me!" she babbled.

Mikal made no reply. He crossed his arms over his chest and regarded her with a softer expression. He turned away momentarily, and Rakell dared to hope that he had decided to leave her alone. Alas, it was not to be, he yanked off his tunic and tossed it aside. He stood there not moving, completely at ease.

"I know you like looking at me," he said. "I have seen you doing it when you think you are being so secretive. I assumed that you wanted my attention and just didn't know how to ask for it. Was I wrong?"

Rakell burned with embarrassment. He was not exactly wrong, but this was not what she had in mind when she desired his attention. She cast her eyes down to the floor.

"It's all right, *mokushlah*," he assured her. "I like you to look." Rakell refused to look right then. She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. "Look at me," he commanded. She looked up, too fearful to provoke his anger by disobeying.

Mikal beckoned, holding his arms open to her. He looked like a heathen god with the ability to hold her in his power simply with the intensity of his presence. He came towards her with a smile that made dark promises. Rakell shook her head again and held up one of her hands. "Stop!"

"Rakell," he said deeply. "You are so beautiful. Don't deny me. *Please*."

Panic seized her as he attempted to take her into his arms. She ducked under his grasp and made a mad dash out of the bedroom. She almost got to the front door, but Mikal was too fast. He reached out and grabbed her by the hair, dragging her back into the bedroom, kicking and screaming.

Laughing at her struggles and subduing her with ease, he threw her face down on to the bed. When she tried to get up, he drove her down hard from behind. She was stunned, unable to do anything while he straddled her back and twisted her arms up cruelly.

Offended and angry, Rakell resorted to insults. "You bastard! Devil! Fiend! Get your damn hands off me!" she gasped, trying to keep her face out of the pillows. She was running of breath and couldn't do anything about it while he had her pinned down.

"An amusing show of bravery," Mikal said calmly. He pulled the pillows away from her face while shoving her hard in the back with one hand just to prove how easily he could keep her pinned down. "Did you really think you could get away? Or do you *enjoy* provoking me? I ought to take you over my knee and spank you like a brat!"

"Please don't!" she begged. "I couldn't help it! You scared me!"

"I would never punish you for misunderstanding me," he explained. "However, you are extremely insolent. Such language from a lady! Those stripes have you thinking that you have become a tiger. Should I give you a few more to tame that sharp tongue?"

Rakell burst into fresh sobs. Never had she felt so helpless, and now Mikal was laughing at her again. She let her body go limp, and she lay like a rag doll as he lifted her gently and turned her over.

"I tease," Mikal said, bending down to kiss her cheek. "But you need not have run from me, *mokushlah*. I wasn't going to hurt you. I should have expected you to be sulky after your punishment and just left you alone." He lay down beside her, propping his head on his elbow, his free hand lazily playing over her naked breasts. "Will you leave me alone now, my lord?" she begged.

"I will," he emphasized, "If you can tell me that you do not enjoy my touch."

"I do not enjoy it, my lord," she blurted out.

"Liar," he grinned. "Shame on you."

"I am not lying!" she said fiercely.

"Oh, really?" he replied. He moved in to kiss her ear and nuzzled at her neck while he cupped her breast. Then his hand passed over her nipple lightly. Rakell couldn't help but respond. Mikal took the hardened nipple between his fingers and chuckled knowingly. "Go on, lie to me again," he teased. "I enjoy proving you wrong."

"Listen to my words and not to my body!" she protested. "It betrays me!"

"Your mind is unwilling, but your flesh says otherwise," he said. "Why such a conflict?"

Rakell struggled to find the words for feelings that she didn't understand. "Part of me longs for it," she confessed. "Part of me is terrified of it."

Mikal held her closer. "As if enjoying the bodies that the All-Father gave us should be terrifying!" he exclaimed. "Mokushlah, who taught you such an awful thing?"

Rakell couldn't reply—it was just something that she felt. The lessons that Hannah had given her were to prepare her for relations with a *husband*. She fully expected such relations to be pleasurable; but she never could have imagined the situation she was in now, being touched by a man to whom she was not married.

For a time, Mikal was content with the silence. They lay together and she submitted to his touch only because he was being so gentle. When he finally spoke again, she jumped at the sudden sound.

"If I were to let you go right now, you would leave me alone with my desire like this, wouldn't you?"

"I would, my lord," she said. "I am sorry."

"Don't be sorry," he said, rolling away from her. "Go then."

Rakell moved away as quickly as she could without seeming rude.

"Before you leave," he said, stopping her short. "There are things that a good servant should do without having to be told."

"Yes of course, my lord," she said nervously. Rakell scanned the floor quickly, looking for her discarded robe, but it was nowhere to be seen. Turning her back modestly to him, she looked about the room for a lamp and found it on the writing desk. As she passed the window, she was extremely aware of his eyes following her. She turned her back again, trying to cover herself from his view.

Mikal, like most Zareli, favored the natural flame over the chemical lights used by the Ryordans. At the desk, she fumbled around for the matches and lit the lamp. She had seen her servants do it enough to know how. Once that was done, she passed to the window again and closed the curtains.

Starting at the farthest post from where he was lying, Rakell undid the cords tying up the bed curtains and let them fall, something else she had watched her servants do too many times to count. She moved on to the bottom posts, then swallowed hard and moved to the post by Mikal's head.

Mikal thought that the girl resembled something as delicate and graceful as a river reed as she sashayed modestly about the room. She looked more like an Emeraldis dancer than a warrior maid. She was so slender and yet so perfectly formed. He enjoyed the look of her long bare legs, the small but flawless breasts, and the slight swell of her hips practically hidden in the folds of her skirt.

He decided that he was going to allow himself to indulge after all. Just one more time – he thought – then never again. As she was untying the last of the cords, Mikal's hand shot out and grabbed her by the wrist. Rakell gave a little yelp of surprise.

"So jumpy, *mokushlah*!" he exclaimed, bringing her hand to his lips. "How did the Red ever produce a creature as skittish as you?"

"My mother was Emeraldis," Rakell burst out before thinking.

"Truly?" Mikal exclaimed, caressing her arm. "Was she some dancer who caught your father's eye?"

"Nothing like *that*, my lord!" she replied, offended. "She tended the flowers in his glass house and made beautiful arrangements with them." Rakell pulled her arm just a bit, but Mikal had no intention of letting go.

"That explains much, my little flower," he breathed. "Stay with me, Rakell. Please."

Rakell looked away, covered her breasts with her free arm and tried to pull her trapped hand away again. "Not unless it pleases you, my lord," she whispered.

"It does please me, but I'm not commanding you as your lord, I'm begging you—as a man," he said.

Rakell gasped and searched his face. Indeed, if one's eyes could be said to be pleading, his were. He looked so sad that she couldn't help but feel pity. Not only that, but his honest confession had also stirred the desire in her own heart again, despite his earlier cruelty. The fact that he was so beautiful was unfair. She could forgive him for anything. His simplest word of kindness made her want to do whatever he asked. She hated herself for it.

Mikal sat up, reaching for her other hand. To her surprise, Rakell allowed him to take it. She stood shivering, allowing him to openly admire her body. She didn't understand why he even *wanted* to look at her. In her opinion, she had nothing to look at.

"I'm sorry for beating you," he said, "You bring out something savage in me, and even I don't understand why. When I saw that boy touching you and those others staring, I was—so *angry*. I wanted to kill them on the spot."

"It wasn't my fault, my lord," she whispered, voice cracking.

"No, of course it wasn't," he said, kissing her hand. "Will you ever forgive me, mokushlah?"

Rakell's heart was pounding so hard she imagined that he must be able to see it. "It's not my place—" she began.

"I need you, Rakell," he interrupted. "I want you to want me—the same way that I want you. But I realize this is too much to ask."

It wasn't really, but Rakell didn't dare to say so out loud. She was terrified and thrilled at the same time.

"Take your clothes off, *mokushlah*. I promise I won't hurt you," he said, then held her arms tight. "I just want to look at you—and hold

you, like we did on the ship. I'm asking you to *help* me, and to trust me." Then he let her arms drop.

Rakell looked around—anywhere but at *him*. With a shaking hand, she loosened the drawstring of her skirt and let it fall. Then quickly, before she could change her mind, she bent down and pulled her underclothes down her legs. Standing up unsteadily, she kicked them aside. Rakell stared a long time at the ceiling, unable to say anything or look in Mikal's direction. She made the sign of the x-cross, a gesture that Mikal found pure and endearing.

When she felt his hand on her arm, pulling her closer, she didn't fight him. He pulled her in, wrapping his arms tight around her. He squeezed so hard the breath rushed out from her lungs, and he held her there for a long time. With some hesitation, she ran a hand down his back.

Suddenly, he was standing and pulling off the rest of his clothes as she staggered backwards. For a moment he just stood naked in front of her. Rakell stood staring up at him as he stared down at her. Then, just as suddenly he scooped her up in his arms and laid her on the bed. As Mikal crushed his body on top of hers, she felt his rigid sex press hard against her belly.

"No," Rakell tried to pull away.

"Still, you resist me! Why?" he demanded.

"Because I am *afraid*, my lord!" her voice and body trembled. "Surely you can see that! Have some pity on me!"

"Alright," he replied, his hand skipping gently over her breast. "But you need not fear for your virtue. Allow me to do what I want to you and I *promise*—I will always leave that alone."

"If it pleases you, my lord," Rakell replied meekly.

"Good girl," he whispered in her ear. He stroked his hand over her shoulder, down her arm, over her hip, down to the soft mound of her ass. She squirmed uncomfortably as he hiked her leg up over his hip then gasped as his hand slid between her legs.

"You still do not trust me?" he asked.

Rakell looked away; she did not want to confront the look of desire in his eyes. She was also afraid of giving away what she really felt. He took his hand away from her sex, and let her leg drop. He pushed her onto her back and lay on top of her. Her wounds stung in protest, but she endured it for him.

"Are you afraid still?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, my lord."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"Do you even care what I want?" she bit out.

"There is that insolence again," he scolded softly, playfully nipping at her nose with a smile. He leaned down and kissed her on the lips. He had never done that to her before. She turned her head away, instinctively pushing her hands against his chest. It seemed like a silly thing to protest, considering that they were lying naked together, but it felt like too intimate a thing. Not to be denied, Mikal held her face and kissed her full on the mouth. Her lips remained unmoving under his. "Kiss me," he demanded.

"I can't," she whispered.

"Why not?"

"Because—I do not know how," she answered, embarrassed.

"You've never even done something as simple as a kiss? Rakell, you really are too sweet," he laughed softly. "Just open your mouth for me and don't worry about the rest of it. That will come in time."

"No, you shouldn't—" Rakell tried to say but found herself caught in his harsh embrace and silenced with his mouth. He kissed as if he wanted to suck the life out of her. She couldn't pull back or turn her head trapped as she was beneath him. She moaned in protest, but then his kiss changed. It was still frightening, but it no longer felt like an invasion. He sucked and nibbled softly on her unresisting lips, drawing out her tongue to meet his own.

Her palms pushing against his chest weakened. Mikal shifted to allow her to move more freely. Rakell spread her hands out over his chest, then slid them over and around to his back, drawing him closer to her. She followed his silent direction. They continued to kiss like that for what felt like a pleasant eternity. A soft moan escaped her before she could stop it. He lifted his mouth from hers and smiled down at her bewildered face. "They say a maiden never forgets her first kiss," he whispered.

As he lowered his mouth to hers again, Rakell turned her head away. That she enjoyed it so much made her ashamed of herself. Maybe Mikal was right about her being a slut. Realizing that she still clung to him, she gave a small cry and tried to wiggle away.

"Where did you learn to kiss like that?" she accused him.

Mikal was secretly pleased to sense the jealousy in her voice. "It's not important," he said, claiming her mouth again, but Rakell didn't feel like co-operating anymore. It didn't matter much—she was trapped under him and couldn't escape. He pressed his cock hard against her belly and began the motions that would bring him to an orgasm.

"You're hurting me!" Rakell cried, fists pounding on his back. "I can't breathe!"

"Rakell, you are too beautiful," he groaned back. "I just cannot help myself. Something about you—something..." She could only tremble underneath him, feeling and hearing the changes in him that she knew meant he was close to his orgasm. He cried out as he came and collapsed on top of her. "God," he gasped in ragged breaths, into her neck.

Rakell stifled her sobs, trying to hide them because she was afraid of making him angry. His weight was crushing her. She tapped at him lightly, trying to get his attention. After ages, he finally rolled off her with a contented sigh. Realizing that she was crying, he leaned over her and wiped the tears away from her face. "No need to cry now, mokushlah," he said, "It's over."

Rakell turned her face spitefully away and continued her soft weeping into the pillows. Mikal took her into an embrace, but her body remained stiff against him. He spoke other soft words to her, but she was not listening. He tried soothing her by gently rocking back and forth but she refused to be comforted by anything he tried. She was acting like she did on that first night he taught her how to touch him.

Growing frustrated and more than a little impatient that she was ruining the moment for him, he pushed her away and got up from the bed. Rakell could hear him stalk into the water room and knew she had made him angry again. She didn't care though. The sound of water running reminded her of the mess congealing on her belly, but she couldn't move.

Mikal returned, freshly washed and dressed in his night robe. He took her by the shoulder and made her lie on her back again. Rakell jumped when she felt the warm cloth placed on her skin. She shivered but made no further reaction as he slowly and carefully wiped her clean. Her sobs died down, and although she was exposed, she still couldn't bring herself to move even to cover herself. Mikal solved the problem by wrapping the bedspread around her body. Then he picked her up in his strong arms and carried her out of the room.

He lay her gently down on the settee. "There, you see?" he asked. "See how you have made a slave of me? You could have so much power over me if only you knew how to use it."

Confused, Rakell turned to regard him. It was too dark now to make out his face, but his tension was obvious as he knelt beside her.

"My lord, may I ask you something?" she whispered.

"Anything and always, mokushlah," he replied.

"Why did you not seek sanctuary? When your master beat you so badly, I mean?"

Mikal let out a breath and pulled back abruptly, startled by the question. No one had ever asked him about those times, nor had he ever cared to talk about them. "I—*did*," he said finally. "Just—not right away."

"Why not?"

"I told you, my father used to beat me before he sold me off to that blacksmith. I thought it was *normal*, but that rabid Topazes was worse than my father ever was. *Still*—it took being burned with a hot poker to make me run."

"Oh! How awful, my lord!" Rakell gasped. "What happened after?"

"The priests locked me in a penitent's cell," he replied. "Then I endured another beating until they were convinced that I was telling the truth."

"But—that's not fair!"

Mikal smiled then, touched by her concern. "It was nothing. Compared to what I was used to it was a holiday. I understood why later. Any slave can cry for sanctuary, but only the truly wronged will stay strong under question." He reached down to stroke her face. For a moment he was lost in thought, and then he brought his face closer to hers. "I never realized how lonely I was until I met you."

"My lord?" Rakell interrupted his action.

"Hmm?" he replied absently as he attempted to draw her in for another kiss.

"I'm very tired."

Suddenly his muscles tensed again. Rakell cringed, expecting him to lash out at her in anger. Instead, he pushed away with aggravated stiffness. He stood up and turned his back to her. "Of course. How inconsiderate of me," he said with sweet sarcasm. "I'll bring your clothes out to you."

Rakell waited tensely while Mikal went away, then he came back to carelessly toss her things on the floor. "There is something under the settee for you," he said curtly. "It will seem foolish—but I bought it for you before I left Korthage." Then he walked away again.

Rakell hunched under the covers, so happy for her own private space, no matter how small. Not for anything would she trade it to sleep beside Mikal in his big bed!

She wondered what would have happened to her if she had managed to escape his grasp and make it to the Temple. The thought of being locked up in a penitent's cell and beaten made her skin crawl. It was probably a good thing that Mikal had prevented her escape. Most likely it spared her from a beating far worse than the one he had given her. He has endured so much – she thought – It's no wonder he thinks me to be such a baby.

Rakell rolled over and reached under the settee and touched something soft. Confused, she picked it up and stared at it in the dark. Suddenly she realized what it was. A child's toy—a doll. She was bewildered at the strange gift until she remembered that Mikal had bought it before they had met. Suddenly, the angry attitude he had on the day she was presented to him made sense. She was a disruption to his serenity that he had not been prepared for. He thought he was getting a child...

CHAPTERFOUR

The Ice-Mother conceived six children. The first, a son made of smoky diamond, came forth, saying: "I shall lead." From him, comes the Order of the Grey, the priests, judges, and scribes of the People.

The second and third sons, twins of ruby and sapphire came forth. The second said: "I shall protect." From him, comes the caste of the Red, the lords and protectors of the People. The third said: "I shall instruct." From him comes the Order of the Blue, keepers of the law and teachers of the People.

The fourth, a joyful daughter made of emerald, came forth, saying: "I shall create!" From her come all the artisans and performers, the caste of the Emeraldis.

The fifth, a melancholy son of topaz came forth, saying: "I shall toil." From him come all the skilled craftsmen, tradesmen, farmers, and the rest of the peasantry.

The sixth and final child, a beautiful and selfless daughter of purest opal came forth and said: "I shall serve." It is she that the People imitate when we serve out of love and devotion. The All-Father and all his children loved this child best.

Alas, the Ice-Mother was only mortal and death eventually came for her. With her last breath she kissed the brow of her youngest child and gave up her spirit. The All-Father could not contain his grief. He abandoned his physical body to join the spirit of his beloved bride in the heavens.

Orphaned and in mourning, the favored children of the All-Father cut out of themselves a piece of their hearts, the piece where they grieved the most, and joining the pieces together, created a brother made of blackest onyx, with a face so lost in darkness it could not be seen. He came forth and said: "I shall chastise."

Therefore, the Order of Onyx is made up of all castes to this very day.

The Children of the Ice-Mother ~ The Zareli Book of Creation

he Market Square was not technically part of the Zarel Quarter, but Zareli vendors dominated it. It was also known colloquially to the locals as "The Jewelry Box" because of the excess of jewelers in the area.

In the middle of the square was a large sculpture and fountain that was a favorite haunt of the more eccentric Ryordan youth. These bohemians were known for their love of old-fashioned things, and so, most of them found the Zareli way of life fascinating.

Ty sat on the steps of the fountain scribbling madly in his notebook as the young Zareli girl spoke with him. This early in the day he was mostly alone, the people of Korthage rarely rose with the sun. However, the Jewelry Box was already bustling. The Zareli were early risers, Ty had noted long ago. Up with the sun, and indoors when it set.

In this square Ty could observe discreetly and write. The Zareli shopkeepers were dressed in shades of green or brown—although some had clothes better than others. The furrier, for instance, was dressed in fine cloth with plenty of gold on his hands and neck, while a simple seller of eggs was dressed more modestly.

Customers milled about, the dominant colors being simple browns and other neutral hues. Ty had long ago discerned that these were the colors of the Zareli plebs—and again some were better off than others.

Sometimes, women dressed all in red would arrive, accompanied by fierce looking men armed to the teeth. Such an open display of weaponry was considered vulgar by Ryordan standards. Most Ryordan men carried blades of a sort—even Ty had a quillon dagger at his hip that he never left home without, but the Zareli took it to extremes.

The red women always had a hovering flock of servants with them. Given the amount of money they spent and the size of their entourages, Ty could only assume that these women were the patricians of Zareli society. Often, they came with companions dressed in pure white.

While seeming subservient to their red masters—and some accompanied other castes as well—these individuals in white were

treated with great respect from all the Zareli around them. Oftentimes these servants could be seen coming and going on their own and received greetings and bowed heads from their countrymen. It was very confusing.

Occasionally, men and women in flowing grey robes would appear, and Ty immediately noticed the deference paid to them by everyone. From the snatched conversations he was able to grab from Zareli shopkeepers willing to talk to him for his patronage, he learned that these were the clergy of the Zareli god—the one they called the Father-of-All, or something like that. Now there's an arrogant assumption – he thought – to think that your god is everyone's god.

That the government of Zarel was a theocracy was common knowledge, and although these priests in grey had no real authority in Korthage, the Zareli still deferred to them as if they did.

Once, and once only—after midday when the Box was at its most crowded, a strange figure in black appeared. The man moved with the grace of a stalking panther, practically gliding along the ground. Unlike other Zareli men, this one carried no weapons that he could see, save one. His cloak was flung over his shoulder, displaying what looked like a whip. His face was hidden in the deep cowl of his hood despite the heat of the afternoon, and even his hands were covered in black leather gloves.

He looks like a bloody Pro-Dom from a sex club – Ty thought wryly. The Ryordans paid him no mind, but the Zareli practically flew into a panic. They parted for him swiftly, bowing their heads, and many made the sign of the x-cross that Ty had recently learned was a ward against evil or misfortune. Ty assumed the man was just a Zareli thug until what happened next.

A young child, separated from his mother in the mad dash to make way for the man in black, ran across the square and careened right into the imposing figure. He bounced backward to the ground and looked up at the man in wide-eyed terror, too traumatized even to scream. The woman ran to her child and flung herself prostrate into the dirt in front of the man. Ty couldn't understand a word she

Syndyl vanDeelan

babbled, but he quite clearly understood her begging tone as she pleaded for forgiveness. Other than her, the square was dead silent.

The man didn't speak at first, but he made an eloquent gesture for the woman to rise and she immediately obeyed, but she was still blubbering profusely. The man said something soft, hardly louder than a whisper and then patted the child on the head before moving on. To Ty's surprise, the woman then gave her child a hard smack across the face and hauled him away. The kid didn't even cry or protest. He looked—relieved!

The fear was palpable. Ryordan patrons couldn't get the Zareli merchants to speak to them until the man was well out of sight. Blood and tears! Now that's power – Ty thought - but what was the significance of all that?

When the market was busy, Ty sometimes was able to lure a beggar child to talk to him. Presently, he was lucky enough to have found a young girl of about ten who was trying to explain the caste system to him. It turned out that the people in white were servants, but ones that were considered like family to their masters. This service was voluntary, and they were deeply respected and valued for their unwavering loyalty. The Greys were on the top, Reds—the warriors were next, sharing relative equality with the Blues, who were community leaders or teachers of some kind. Next, followed the Emeraldis, the creative ones. These blurred in a bit with the Topazes who were the skilled tradesmen and laborers, but also included the rest of the peasantry who were often considered as having no caste at all. Although free, those peasants were little more than serfs back in Zarel. The reason why so many came to Ryordan was so they could improve their lot in life.

"My sister married a rich Ryordan man," the Zareli girl bragged proudly to him. "But I'm going to marry one even richer, because I'm much prettier than she is."

Ty smiled at her childish flirting and gave her double the amount of money he promised her for her time. He was impressed with her grasp of the Ryordan language. *Must have been born here* – he thought. However, the child's friendly demeanor quickly vanished when he asked her about the man in black. Her eyes grew wide, and she went ashen, making that x-sign he saw so often. "I have to go," was all she said before running away.

Shaking his head in confusion, Ty looked away into the square. A flash of blue caught his eye, and he recognized the big brute from the waterfront the day before. To his delight, the girl was with him. The pair was standing in front of a tailor's stall, and the man appeared to be perusing the material. The girl had her hood up and her head down, and she held her cloak tightly around herself as if she was hiding from everyone.

"I would not recommend wool, R'hab, the air is much too humid," the merchant said. "Did you not like the cotton tunics I made for you?"

"I did like them, I'm wearing one now," Mikal said jovially. "But I'm not buying for me. My slave had her bag stolen when we arrived and now she has only what you see on her."

"I have plenty of undyed cotton to make her suitable clothing, R'hab," he replied.

"Make it the best if you please, Jeshua. I can't cover the girl in silks but spare no expense where quality is concerned."

"As ever, R'hab. If the young woman would allow me to take her measurements?" the tailor asked. Mikal gave Rakell a small push towards the man.

Rakell looked up at him in terror. "Please, my lord—is there not a seamstress we could go to?" she protested. Had he not just warned her last night never to let another man touch her?

"Oh, don't be so prudish, girl," Mikal laughed. "Jeshua is a professional. Your virtue is safe with him." Then he and the tailor both laughed.

"Indeed, I am," Jeshua said, helping Rakell to take off her cloak. "Was I not, I would have been beaten many times over by angry husbands and fathers. Not for nothing do the men of Korthage trust me with their women!"

Rakell meekly submitted to the measurements, being careful to keep her eyes downcast. She turned her head away, chin to her

Syndyl vanDeelan

shoulder. She refused to engage in the friendly banter that the Topazes man was trying to make so he turned his conversation back to Mikal and they chatted amiably.

Ty watched with fascination as the tailor took off the girl's cloak and began taking her measurements. The poor thing looked so embarrassed. Born to a culture with little to no modesty, such shyness was endearing to him. It didn't take long for beast in blue to realize the stares she was getting from the Ryordans present, though. His scowl fell directly upon Tyberius in the center of the square. Not to be intimidated, Ty just shrugged and went back to his notebook—but he wasn't writing anymore, he was sketching the fragile beauty before him.

Once the pair had left the market, Ty approached the tailor.

"Good morning, patron," the man greeted him warily. "I'm not experienced in Ryordan fashion, but I have many fine bolts of cloth that you may take to your usual tailor." The man had correctly sized up Ty's status simply by the clothes he was wearing and his confident manner. Zareli did like to keep to themselves, but not a one would turn down Ryordan money.

"Anything white?" Ty asked.

"White?" the man hesitated. "But of course, patron." He promptly disappeared behind his stall and reappeared with several bolts, which he laid out for Ty's inspection.

Ty was no expert on cloth, having all his clothes already made by his own designers, so he asked the man for help. "If someone was going to give a gift to his servant in white," he began—noting the shopkeeper's immediate look of surprise— "like a travelling cloak for instance, what would be the correct material?"

"For the Korthagian weather, I would recommend the stygian cotton," he said.

"Seems too plain though," Ty commented.

"But my lord!" the tailor protested. "Once it has been sewn into a garment it will flow just like silk."

"I'll trust your judgement," Ty conceded. "But what else would you recommend?"

"A colored trim, but subtle, perhaps the color of the house she serves?" he offered, assuming Ty might be buying a gift for a love interest.

"No, it's for me," Ty said, surprising the tailor yet again.

"I don't wish to presume," the man whispered confidentially, "but you aren't the first Ryordan lord to want to walk undetected among the Zareli. Our women are beautiful to be sure, and there are more than a few fathers that would welcome a wealthy Ryordan match."

"You are a shrewd businessman," Ty complimented. "I am at your mercy."

"You are very observant to ask for the White. I can make you a cloak in the cotton and trim with a fine grey. I can also make you appropriate clothing to wear underneath. You'll be able to walk anywhere you choose—as long as you keep your hood up—and you will be treated with respect."

"I might get more respect in black," Ty suggested.

"Respect you may get," the shopkeeper snapped, making the ward sign across his chest, "but if you're looking for maidens, *that* will send them running! Nor would I make you a black cloak for any price. I may be greedy, but I'm not a blasphemer!"

"I've insulted you," Ty said. "Apologies. It wasn't my intent. I was just—"

"Best you stay away from anything concerning the Brides of Onyx," the man warned him, confusing Ty even more.

After the trip to the tailor, Rakell followed Mikal to the only bathhouse in the Zarel Quarter. It was the last day of the week—what the Zareli called the *Enday*. It was a traditional day to gather at the baths, so there were many people already there.

Mikal was immediately swamped by the influential men of the Zarel Quarter, leaving Rakell by herself. She cast a discreet eye at him as he was undressing and noticed the line of purple scar tissue across his well-sculpted gluteus. She gasped and looked away. That had to be the scar from the hot poker.

Rakell had never been alone in a bathhouse before. She made her way over to the women's side. She undressed awkwardly, setting her clothes neatly in pile on the benches around the bath. A group of girls passed by and gave the bench a deliberate knock, causing her clothes to fall to the wet floor. "...see her back...?" she heard a snip of a whisper as they passed. Rakell stifled her anger as she picked her clothes back up.

As she was descending the stairs into the water someone shoved her aside so forcefully that she tumbled awkwardly into the pool. Rakell could only fume in silence. The People were not so rude back home. The lowliest peasant could bathe in peace there. At least—she had always assumed so. She was always accompanied by Hannah, Lilah, or both, and surrounded by servants.

As she waded over to the trough that held the soap and washcloths, Rakell could still hear the girls tittering at her. She shouldered her way gently through the cluster of girls but refused to push—she had no right to anyway. To her dismay, every single cloth and bar of soap was gone. Sighing, Rakell hovered by the trough and waited. The girls had taken enough soap for twice their number and it was clear that they weren't bringing it back any time soon. She didn't know what she had done to draw their contempt, but she wasn't going to let them see her upset.

Finally, a frail old lady returned a small piece to the trough. When Rakell tried to take it, someone threw a soaking towel at the back of her head. She turned indignantly to see who the culprit was, but no one was looking her way. When she turned back to the trough, the soap was gone. Rakell exhaled in frustration.

As a girl was exiting the pool, she tossed her used towel right over Rakell's head like she was a towel rack. Rakell yanked it off her head furiously. It was bad enough that the maidens were acting that way, but she wondered why none of the matrons chastised them. Another girl passed and tossed a towel right in her face. I am not the towel girl! – Rakell thought furiously – Even a towel girl gets treated better than this! She handed the rags up to the real towel girl for lack of anything better to do. The girls still in the pool laughed louder. She heard their whispers.

"...Mikal's towel girl..."

"...his whipping girl..."

Under the water, Rakell clenched her fists in impotent rage.

"How low the People have fallen when the member of a R'hab's household can be treated with such contempt," Mikal's baritone voice suddenly rang out. The laughter instantly stopped, and indeed, most of the conversation in the bathhouse did as well.

Oh no, please, don't draw any more attention to my shame! – Rakell begged silently. She stayed hunched over the trough, while everyone else looked up at Mikal. He was standing at the top of the steps on the women's side, leaning on the rail. He cut a handsome figure with only the towel swathed around his hips.

"I know some men who will be having a talk with their daughters and wives this evening," he continued. There were murmurs of agreement from the men's side.

"Forgive me R'hab," an elderly matron said. "I should have said something."

"Forgive us R'hab..."

"Sorry, R'hab..." came whispers from the bowed heads of the Zareli maidens.

"You've all been away from the Motherland too long," Mikal scolded. "Some of you have never even seen the Mountains—and it shows. The Ice-Mother would be ashamed to call you her daughters. Come, Rakell, I don't want you around such slovens," he announced, holding a towel out for her.

Rakell burned with embarrassment. Now she had to walk up the stairs with everyone watching, her whipped back exposed for all to see, but she obeyed with her head bowed. Mikal swathed the towel around her shoulders and led her over to the men's side.

"Gentlemen, would you kindly make some room for my slave since she cannot bathe in peace with her own sex?" There was some

Syndyl vanDeelan

nodding of heads and drones of assent. Mikal shoved Rakell gently toward the water, but not before pulling the towel away from her shoulders. Rakell huddled under her own arms as she waded in, but thankfully no one was staring. This was far worse than being on the women's side. Why was Mikal drawing all the men's attention to her?

Too embarrassed to bathe properly until all the grown men were out of the pool, Rakell waited. Once done, she handed her used washcloth to the towel boy and accepted a dry towel from him as she got out.

Mikal had long disappeared behind the curtain dividing the area where the men could get massages and grooming. She sat, huddled in her towel on the bench next to the curtain and waited some more while eavesdropping on the conversations. She could hear Mikal's clear voice the easiest.

"It is a tragedy to be sure sir, I am sorry that your daughter ran off with the barbarian. Was there no way to convert the man?"

"I would rather see her dead than married to one of those lesser mortals!" was the harsh response. "She *is* as good as dead! *Gadai*, fah!"

"What is your opinion of all the legions flooding into Korthage, R'hab?" someone else changed the subject.

"The barracks were almost empty less than a year ago, now they are almost full," someone else said.

"Do you think they're planning an invasion of the Motherland?"

Rakell was startled. She had no idea such a thing was a possibility. She began to worry about Hannah and Lilah, and all the rest of her people under the Lord-General's regency.

"If they are, they aren't making a secret of it," Mikal said. "That doesn't seem like a good strategy to me, not with so many Zareli in Korthage coming and going."

"Their arrogance will be their downfall. We defeated them three hundred years ago and we will do it again," commented a gruff voice that was used to authority. "What was Ryordan activity like in the Motherland, R'hab?" "I saw nothing amiss, Lord Sol," Mikal said. "But don't trust my judgement—I am not a military man. The Lord-General Boaz was drilling the army harder than usual but was doing little else."

"Do you think we should go back home?"

"Anyone with large holdings may want to inspect things," Mikal advised, "but be discreet. A mass exodus of Zareli nobility will raise suspicions."

"And what should we do?"

"I don't think the Emeraldis, or the Topazes need to worry," he said. "Many of you have Ryordan citizenship already. I think if an invasion was truly in the works, they would have barred us all from travel already."

"You must forgive my Nella, R'hab," the gruff voice said, after a pause. "She is a jealous one—most likely she was the one who instigated that nonsense with your girl. You are right, she's never been to Zarel. I should send her there to be educated."

"A wise decision Lord Sol."

"The maids of Korthage are all in mourning," someone else laughed. "They think you will be married to the slave-girl before long."

Rakell was taken aback. She had never considered the idea that Mikal would want to marry her. Her heart fluttered slightly before his next words dashed her hopes. "Taking a wife is not in my plans," Mikal laughed. "The sooner her service is done the more peace I will have." There was some knowing laughter.

"Although, I may have to take a wife before she goes," he said jovially. "Else I may end up losing the skin on my back in penance. Alas, I know of no eligible widows in Korthage."

"Widows!" Lord Sol snorted. "There are plenty of willing maidens here for you Mikal!"

"I am too old to impose myself on a maid!"

"Nonsense, R'hab—"

Rakell got up and moved away, having heard enough. She was happy there were no eligible widows in Korthage and that the R'hab didn't want any of those snooty maidens. A wife would not appreciate Rakell in her home. She would probably insist on a bigger house and more servants anyway. Rakell would become just one of many—but maybe that wasn't such a bad thing?

The pool was mostly empty now. Rakell got herself dressed and began the saan't'sar, not an unusual thing to do on the pool deck, but she was the only one just then. Fuming in resentment, she converted to the zaar't'sar. She didn't understand why she was feeling hurt and jealous over Mikal. She didn't own him!

Rakell didn't know which girl Nella had been but figured she must look like a typical warrior maid, all tall and shapely of form with beautiful blue eyes and hair the color of polished gold. She imagined striking her nose with the heel of her hand. *Nella*... *What a stupid name!* It didn't even sound Zareli. Rakell pulled down her hands and brought up her knee, imagining pulling the bitch down by her hair and kneeing her in the face.

"Stupid cunt," she muttered, turning into the move that symbolized a throw. As she spun, she found Mikal dressed and staring at her. She covered her mouth, hoping that he had not heard her swearing.

"You are still here," was all he said.

"I didn't know what else to do, my lord," she replied.

The elderly Lord Sol, dressed in red, ducked out from behind the curtains. "Hah, a loyal little girl you have there, R'hab, not like my Nella, not at all," he chuckled. Rakell bowed low as he passed. Lord Sol didn't seem to take notice—and why would he? Did she ever notice all the servants bowing to her when she still wore red?

"You need never wait for me when I am talking with the men," Mikal said, snapping his fingers. "Let us be off home now."

Mikal regarded the figure of the sleeping girl. He had been watching her for hours. She was so beautiful it was heart-breaking. Without the cares of the world on her face as she slept, she looked serenely angelic; her platinum hair spilling around her face. Her impossibly pale skin so delicate that the paths of her very life's blood could be seen underneath. The Lady Opal, the last child of the Ice-Mother could not have been fairer. The most touching thing of all though, was that the doll that he had bought was tucked under her arm. She had slept with it every night since they had arrived in Korthage.

I cannot let her beauty weaken me – he thought – I must harden my heart.

"Wake up!" he shouted rudely, knocking her in the shoulder.

Rakell came awake with a startled gasp, her serenity broken. The girl flew from the covers with a yelp, running past him through the bedroom curtains on the way to the water room.

"You are going to make me late for worship!" he shouted after her. "The All-Father *help* you if you embarrass me in that way!"

After rushing through her ablutions, Rakell tried to make up the covers of her settee and received a severe scolding about working on the Sabbat. She cringed, expecting to be punished, but Mikal was not even looking at her during his tirade. The rest of the morning he said nothing. In fact, he behaved as if she were not there at all.

They attended the service at the Temple, in which Mikal was preaching that week. When the service ended, and the faithful began to file out, Rakell found herself abandoned—again. Just like the week before.

That first Sabbat she waited on the Temple steps for hours, but Mikal never came out to get her. Taking a chance at being punished, she wandered back to the flat and spent the rest of the day alone. Mikal came back in the evening—didn't say anything, and just walked right on by her to his room.

Unsure of herself, but unwilling to waste another precious day of freedom, Rakell slipped quietly out of the Temple, and began to explore the place that was her new home. Rakell marveled at how flat everything felt. In the Zarel highlands it always seemed as if one was walking either up or down hill.

Shopping for anything except the bare necessities was forbidden on the Sabbat, so she knew the Market Square would be quiet. She had no money anyway, but she didn't know how to get anywhere else and didn't want to get lost.

Syndyl vanDeelan

As expected, the Ryordan stalls were still open, but the nonessential Zareli shops were not. The jewelers of both cultures were closed, and Rakell ran her hand along the glass windows, looking at the precious objects within.

There weren't a lot of the People to be seen. At the center of the square, some Ryordan youths were talking, and idly splashing in the fountain. A lone figure in white sat on the steps, writing away in a notebook. Bored, Rakell sat on the steps beneath him.

"Hello," she heard in the common tongue, but didn't answer as she didn't think the greeting was directed at her.

"Hey, you with the white hair."

Rakell touched her hair in a self-conscious reaction. She realized it was the Freeman behind her speaking. She looked over her shoulder at him.

"Yes, I'm talking to you," he said.

His head was still down over his notebook and his hood obscured his upper features. Rakell wondered why he was speaking in the common tongue.

"Greetings, Freeman," she whispered, then looked around apprehensively.

"What do you think of this?" he asked, handing her his notebook.

Rakell took the book and found herself staring at her own face. The subject looked over her naked shoulder, her eyes modestly downcast with a sad expression. "That me!" Rakell exclaimed, and then became subdued. "Only—I not that beautiful." She passed the book back to the Freeman.

"No, you're not that beautiful. You're even *more* beautiful than that," the Freeman corrected. "My crude skill doesn't do you justice."

Rakell let the words sink in for a moment. He was talking too fast. She blushed when she worked out what he meant. Then she became agitated, remembering Mikal's jealous warning.

"What's your name?" he asked.

Rakell assumed he was speaking in the common tongue so other Zareli would not understand them. Maybe he knew she belonged to Mikal already. "Freeman, I not disrespect," she said, "but you should no talk to me."

"Is it a crime to engage a slave in conversation?"

Rakell turned to rebuke him; "No, but—" She found herself staring directly into unbelievably dark eyes. He was looking up from his book so she could finally see his face. "You not—"

"Zareli?" he finished. "No, I'm not. Pretty good disguise though? Did I fool you?"

Rakell only stared in open mouthed surprise.

"What's your name?" he asked again.

"Please, go way!" Rakell begged, turning from him. "I no talk to you!"

"Do you remember me?"

"Yes!" she hissed. "Please—go way!"

Ty couldn't understand why, but he could see that she was terrified. "Are there too many of your people around, maybe?" he asked.

She hunched her shoulders and gave a barely perceptible nod. He pulled his hood further over his face and descended one step lower so he could speak more quietly. "Listen carefully," he whispered. "There is a park not far from here. I'll leave first, and if you're feeling brave enough, you could follow me. Then we can talk and you won't need to worry."

He didn't wait for a reply. He just stood up and began walking away. Rakell looked around. It didn't seem like anyone was paying him any mind, so she waited until he was almost out of sight. Curious, she got up and walked casually to the buildings where she had seen him disappear.

Ty was out of the main square of the Jewelry Box when he turned back to see if she was following. He noticed the flap of her drab cloak in the wind. Smiling, he turned forward and walked on. He stopped occasionally, pretending to look at something, allowing her time to catch up. The streets weren't crowded on the Last Day—what the Ryordans called the Sabbat—but he didn't want her to get lost. The Park the man led her to was vast and beautiful. It reminded Rakell of her father's estates. She knew it was not part of the Zarel Quarter, but since there were some Zareli there, she thought it had to be safe enough for her as well. Her countrymen's eyes slid away from her as was proper, but all other eyes gawked for a few moments before passing. Rakell became increasingly uncomfortable at some of the open stares, until she became convinced that they were just plain rude. What was the matter with these Ryordans? Didn't they have any common courtesy? No wonder the Zareli youth of Korthage didn't have any manners if this is what they were used to.

As she walked on, she noticed that the man had stopped again this time on the bridge traversing the river meandering through the park. Rakell walked up to the middle and leaned on the opposite side. When she thought she had been there long enough, she went beside him leaving a good arm's span between them.

"What's your name?" he asked again.

"What yours?" she countered.

"Lord Ty-Rahlo Antonius, at your service," he said. He didn't know why he told her that he was a lord. He was always trying to get everyone else to forget it. He wanted to impress her, but quickly found that it had the opposite effect.

"Oh, a lord," she said, sounding very unhappy. "I, Rakell ben Levi Yzra."

That doesn't sound like a peasant name – Ty thought. "Pleased to meet you," he replied, offering her his hand to shake.

Rakell side-stepped away. "No. No touch me."

"Why? Are my hands dirty?" he joked, looking at his nails.

"No laugh!" she seethed, then looked around nervously. What if someone recognized her and told Mikal? "I in danger here! You already make for me trouble before!"

"I was trying to help you!" he protested.

"Friends make fun! I no understand, but Mikal do. Was so angry at me!" "I apologize for them," he said, feeling guilty. "They're young and rich with way too much time on their hands—a combination that tends to lead to trouble."

"They rude, no excuse," she chided, after she had processed his words. "You talk slow, slow, please."

"I'm sorry for that too," he apologized, speaking slower, "and I'm sorry you got robbed. What a way to be welcomed to Korthage!" He shook his head. "You'd think with all the legions around things would be better, not worse."

Rakell only grunted in response. Despite her grievance, she was enjoying talking to him. He didn't seem like the sex-mad maniac she was led to believe that all Ryordan men were. Well, perhaps his friends still were. She looked over at him again. He pulled off his hood and was shaking out his long black hair.

"Stuffy under these things, isn't it?" he smiled.

"Long hair, I like," she said.

"Thanks!" he answered, pleased.

"Why Ryordans cut hair short, short?" she asked. "Even women! Short hair is shame for Zareli."

"It's the heat," he said. "Short hair is more comfortable."

"But not you?"

"I'm a bit of a bohemian," he laughed.

"Oh," she replied, having no idea what that meant.

"Do you think that we could go somewhere a little more private so we can speak freely?" he asked.

"Think me a fool?" she said, pushing away from the railing and turning to leave.

Ty sighed. It was a stupid thing to ask. She would assume the worst, but had good reason to, he conceded. He let her get away a few steps before he called out to her. "Rakell! Could I see you again sometime? You choose the place." He got exactly the reaction he was expecting. She rushed over to him, trying to shush him with her gestures.

"You barbarian! So loud!" she scolded.

"I'm the barbarian?" he laughed. "That's what we call you Zareli."

"No!" she said incredulously.

"Yes!" he smirked. Why was he so intrigued by this girl? There were so many beautiful women to choose from, and much more accessible than she was! "Look, I don't know how to get you to trust me," he said. "But there are laws in this city that protect women from unwanted advances. You've probably heard the worst about us, but not all of it is true."

It was all Rakell could do not to break into a run. Why was she staying and listening to him at all? She lingered there, twitching nervously.

Okay, she's not outright refusing – Ty thought, feeling some hope. "I won't try to meet you in the market anymore if that's too dangerous for you. My family estate is not far from here," he explained, pointing up-stream. "You see those woods? No one walks in there even though it's not technically our property. If you follow the creek and you walk in far enough, you'll see the trees marked with my family crest—a twoheaded eagle. Not long after that you'll find a hunting cabin. I don't keep servants but sometimes they are there. You don't have to go in but stay away from the front because there is a guard post there. Or you could just go up to them and tell them who you are. They can get word to me."

"I think you nice," Rakell said after a long pause—it took her a while to process all those words. "I like to go with but no think I should. Please, no try to talk to me again."

"Wait," he called, as she was turning to go.

She turned with a sigh of frustration.

He pulled out his notebook, tore a page out and handed it to her. She took it hesitantly and looked at it. It was the sketch of her. "But how you will remember me by?" she asked.

"All up here," he tapped his head. "I could never forget."

"Good-bye, Lord Ty-Rahlo Antonius," she said sadly. When she turned to go, he didn't stop her. She walked away slowly, he liked to think it was because she didn't really want to leave, and he stood there like a sap watching her go until she was out of sight. Just like the last time. "Good-bye Rakell ben Levi Yzra," he whispered. "Till we meet again."

The house was dark when she entered. There was only a faint light spilling through the curtains to Mikal's room. Rakell cleared her throat politely just outside the bedroom curtain to let Mikal know that she was at home. When there was no response, she went over the window and opened the drapes to let in the noonday sun.

Her bed was still unmade, and she tidied it up with embarrassment. She hoped Mikal wouldn't scold her for slovenliness—but no, he wouldn't. It was still the Sabbat. He was more likely to yell at her for working again.

"Rakell?" she heard him call.

"My lord?" she answered. He didn't call her again, so she sat on the settee looking at the sketch.

Mikal parted the curtains and peered into the room. "What do you have there?" he asked.

Rakell jumped when she heard him speak. He was standing there with no shirt on, staring at her. It was too late to hide the drawing, so she got up and handed it to him.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"An artist, my lord," she said, thankful she didn't have to lie. "I was in the Market Square." When he looked at her sternly, she said: "Was that wrong, my lord? Should I not have gone there?"

"I suppose it was alright," he said finally, to her relief. "But you should not leave the Zarel Quarter. It isn't safe, you *know* that."

"I had nothing to steal this time, my lord."

"You are wrong about that," he said, looking down at the picture again. "This is very good. The artist is skilled."

"I am not that beautiful," she muttered.

"My lord," he corrected her. "And you are that beautiful—why else would he choose you as his subject?" His voice sounded strained.

Rakell swallowed nervously when Mikal correctly guessed that the artist was a man. Hopefully, he would not assume he was anything but

Zareli. "Are you still angry at me, my lord?" she asked, trying to draw his attention away from the paper.

Mikal made a sound that might have been a laugh. He didn't sound well at all. "What made you think I was angry at you?" he stated.

"Well, you left me alone again today—"

Mikal stepped back into his room without waiting for her to finish.

"Are you alright, my lord?" Rakell questioned.

"In time, I will be."

Rakell bit her lip and hesitantly peeked through the curtain. The window curtains were drawn against the sun, but it made the room so dark. Mikal was leaning over his desk staring at the piece of paper again. It didn't look like she was going to get it back.

"Forgive my presumption, my lord," Rakell said, pulling the window curtain just enough to let in some light. When she turned to look at him, she gasped at the sight. His back was a mess of angry red welts. They were swollen in ugly crisscrossed patterns across his flesh, some weeping watery blood.

"Who did this to you?" she hissed in a rage, but she knew from whence the marks had come. He had been to see a Black-Robe. "The-the Dread-One did this on the Sabbat?" she was aghast; she made the sign of the x-cross without thinking.

Mikal stood up and turned to her, smiling sadly. His eyes were glazed as if he was not quite seeing her. "The work of the Brides of Onyx never ceases—just as sin never ceases, Sabbat or not."

"My lord are you ill?" she whispered, taking a tentative step towards him.

"No," he said sharply, but his face was flushed. Rakell wondered if the wounds were bad enough to make him feverish. She walked up to him and reached up to feel his head.

He pulled back. "Do not touch me," he whispered, twisting his body away.

"Let me help you, my lord," she said, "Is that not what I am here for?"

98

"It is because of you, I need to be helped," Mikal frowned, "Because of you."

Rakell understood what he meant. She was a temptation, and he was scourging himself to be purified of it. But his wounds still needed attending, and she had to help him.

When she tried to get him over to the bed, he co-operated. He lowered himself onto his stomach with an agonized groan. She sought out the supplies she would need in the water room and quietly set about ministering to him. First, she washed his welts with cold water, squeezing the towel out over and over in the basin until the water was tinted with his blood. Next, she warmed the healing lotion between her palms, and began to rub it into Mikal's back. He hissed sharply and pulled away. Rakell paused for a moment.

"No, don't stop," he said between gritted teeth. "It has to be done."

"This is too brutal. Why would a Shriver be so merciless to you, my lord?" Rakell whispered.

"Fah! I do not need a *priest* to tell me what to do," Mikal answered scornfully. "I know my own sins well enough. I called for a Black-Robe and one came!"

"And you told the Dread-One to do this?" she protested.

"Did I not deserve it?"

"No..." she answered hesitantly. "No, my lord—not like this. This is too much."

He looked up at her. "How gracious you are!" he said sarcastically.

"I am not being gracious!" she said. "If you deserve this, how much more must I deserve for being the cause of it?"

"No doubt the Shriver told you that you were not to blame in the matter." Mikal put his head back down.

"But," Rakell whispered. "I never..."

Mikal looked up at her incredulously. "What?"

"I never went to be shriven, my lord," she said hastily. "I cannot even *remember* the last time I saw a Shriver. The thought of going to one never even occurred to me." "You never went?" he repeated as if he hadn't heard anything else.

"No, my lord."

"By the Blessed Ice-Mother!" he exclaimed, getting up and seizing her by the arms.

"Don't hurt me!" Rakell cried. "I will go and confess everything!"

"Why would I hurt you?" he practically laughed. "Such loyalty! Already you act with the mind of a White!"

This wasn't true, but if it made him happy, she let him believe it. "A Shriver's trust is sacred. I should have gone," she breathed.

"You are too naive," he said coldly, dropping back down to the bed. "Things are not always as they should be. Nor are they as ideal as you thought they were inside your father's walls." His words put her into an embarrassed silence. She bowed her head, acquiescing to his remark.

"Pray, continue," he insisted. Rakell resumed massaging his skin with a gentler stroke. Every now and then, Mikal would groan. She couldn't help but think that he sounded the same as when she stroked him elsewhere. She dismissed the thought as foolishness.

As she was wiping her hands off with a towel Mikal reached out and took her by the wrist. She gasped, and looked over at him, afraid that she had done something wrong. "Thank you, *mokushlah*," he said. "May I keep the drawing?"

"If it pleases you, my lord, of course," she said with some regret. "Everything I have belongs to you anyway."

"No," he groaned. "I won't take it from you if you want it."

"I want you to have it, my lord," she replied. She didn't want to protest too much or make it seem like it meant nothing either. Why she felt reluctant to part with it confused her. She barely knew the Ryordan lord.

"The way we were before—on the Mermidian ship," Mikal whispered. "That all must come to an end now, *mokushlah*. You understand that, yes?"

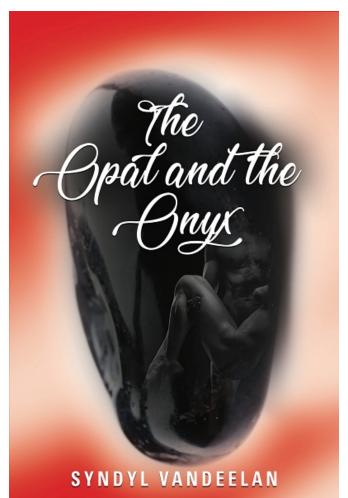
"Yes, my lord," Rakell said, sadly. She was confused again unable to decide if she felt relief or sadness over the announcement. "You must go now," he said. "I know it will not be easy in this little house, but you must do your best to keep away from me from now on. Understand?"

"Perfectly, my lord," she answered.

"Go then," he snapped his fingers.

Rakell paused at the curtained doorway and looked at him lying on the bed with his head pillowed on his arms.

"Go!" he said more forcefully. Rakell obeyed.



After her father is executed, a sheltered noblewoman is put into indentured service to redeem the family honor. Displaced and confused she falls into progressively dangerous and erotic situations until she finally finds her true identity.

The Opal and the Onyx

By Syndyl vanDeelan

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