

Nightshade

A Tale of Ancient Prophecies, Magic, and Love



SHEA GODFREY



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Synopsis

In a land torn by war for generations, Princess Jessa is sent as a peace offering to the country of Arravan, understanding all too well that she is being sacrificed upon the altar of her father's ambitions—and condemned to an uncertain and possibly short-lived future, if the machinations of her own family are any indication.

But what she finds at Blackstone Keep is not what she expects, and for a daughter of royal blood who has known little of freedom and even less of love, the members of the Durand family are proving to be a very pleasant riddle to be solved—the youngest daughter, Darrius Durand, is the most surprising of all. A captain in the King's elite guard, Darry's considerable charms pull Jessa rather happily into an unexpected friendship that quickly becomes something more, promising passion and the fulfillment of her deepest desires.

Jessa and Darry's relationship threatens the fragile peace, and the future of two countries might very well hang in the balance. When family secrets and hidden agendas begin to surface, as well as an ancient majik that Jessa has been preparing to use since the day she was born, a prophecy is set in motion that will thrust both lands into a bloody war of revenge and retribution—a war that love alone will not be able to stop.

Nightshade

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Nightshade

by

Shea Godfrey



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NIGHTSHADE

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Dedication

A change came o'er the spirit of my dream.
—Lord Byron



Chapter One

Winter 1032

The Year of Attia's Spear

The Jade Palace, the city of Karballa, Lyoness

The dogs attacked when they caught the scent of Princess Jessa-Sirrah's flesh, brought up short by their leads after a violent rush. The chains scraped against the marble floor and dragged along the smooth stone as the dogs retreated, the iron links that had cut into their flesh easing when they did so. The broad, muscular animals were bred for killing, the black hair on their backs bristling and their claws left long for the hunt. When their barking rose, it echoed against the domed ceiling high above.

Jessa walked straight among them, a dark green sari wrapped about her lower body in turns of silk and draped forward over her left shoulder with a long-sleeved golden choli blouse beneath it. She wore a burka that covered her head and face, though it was not quite long enough to hide the ends of her hair.

The men lounged upon the dais. The raised platform curved about the head of the vast oval room like a horseshoe and closed in on the wide aisle that led to the throne at its deepest point, the Jade Throne, which was the seat of all power within the land of Lyoness. The massive chair was made of purest gold, its surface littered with polished hunks of jade, some as broad as a man's hand. Its back rose nearly six feet with a wide cushion of rare Damascus silk upon its seat.

Seven chairs lined each side of the curved platform, smaller by far than the throne but no less gaudy, each made of gold and decorated in some way, though not with jade. Jade was the province of the throne and these were the chairs for the sons of King Abdul-Majid de Bharjah of Lyoness. Only twelve of the seats were occupied, one upon each end of the broken circle left empty for the two sons that had not lived.

Jessa was the only daughter of King Bharjah, and her brothers watched with interest as she strode to the foot of the throne. Several smiled at her with lazy contempt. Some were amused. She tried to walk with strength and grace. Though the dogs frightened her, she could keep her shoulders back and hold to the center of the aisle. One of her brothers threw his goblet of wine at the nearest animal and the dog spun about, his jaws snapping loudly. During the laughter a second goblet was tossed, another dog hit upon the back of the head and goaded into rage.

Jessa stopped before the foot of the Jade Throne and bowed her head amidst the commotion. She closed her eyes and tried very hard to steady her heart.

"Enough," King Bharjah said quietly. "Serabee."

The man who stood behind the throne, the Lord Serabee El-Khan, stepped forward and spoke. Tall and thin, he wore only black and had two swords fastened to his belt, one low on each hip. Throwing daggers were also attached to the wide leather, and he rested his hands on them in an easy manner. He was pale and his head was shaved clean, his facial features long and harsh.

The dogs heard the softly spoken words, as did Jessa, his spell weaving its way into the very air of the room. The animals slinked away as Serabee's majik touched them.

King Bharjah smiled as his sons let their laughter fade and the dogs became submissive. Once powerfully built, in recent years he had lost his imposing physique. He reclined upon his throne in silk and sandals, a light blue robe about his shoulders, his long braids of dyed hair falling onto his chest. Bharjah displayed no gray hair despite his advanced age, and those who dyed it dark black had no tongues with which to speak of such vain inclinations. His beard and mustache, long enough to curl, featured several tiny braids that dangled from the tip of his chin and were adorned with small pieces of jade. "Remove the headdress, Jessa-Sirrah," he ordered.

As Jessa pulled at her burka, her hands trembled. She bent her head and removed the heavy silk.

"Pretty cunta," her brother Malik-Assad taunted, and the others laughed as a sharp whistle cut through their amusement. The dogs responded and dragged their chains in search of attention.

Bharjah lifted a lazy hand and the laughter died away.

Jessa stood before her father with her face lowered, her attention on the rise of the dais as she counted the turns of jade within the stone.

"Look at me."

Jessa obeyed. She studied his face, careful to avoid his eyes. One could become trapped within them, for their darkness was not of color but of spirit, and their dominance and violent sway could devastate. To keep her wits about her and her fear at bay she had to avoid his gaze. She noted that his complexion was ashen and his skin shadowed beneath his lids and puffy about his cheeks. A thin sheen of sweat on his face suggested discomfort, for the air was still cool.

"You shall be the last piece of jade within my tower," he said.

Jessa did her best to ignore the hooded tone.

"What have you to say to that?"

"Whatever is your wish, my Lord King."

Bharjah chuckled and looked to his right, observing his eldest sons. "You should take note, you rabble." He laughed louder. "Respect!"

Sylban-Tenna, Bharjah's firstborn, was seated at Bharjah's right hand. He stared at Jessa's body, something shadowed flaring within his expression. "She's a good little rabbit," he said.

"Up!" King Bharjah snapped, and the power of his eyes instantly caught Jessa. "I have a use for you." Her brothers sat straighter in their seats. "You will travel with Trey-Jak Joaquin and the Lord Serabee El-Khan into the heart of Arravan. You will marry their firstborn."

After a heavy silence, the shouts rang out, more than one prince pushing to his feet in shock and rage. The dogs began to bark and the noise level escalated, flooding the pillared throne room.

"Enough!" Bharjah shouted.

The silence was instant.

"If you do not like it, then you are free to..." His expression was almost playful. "Then you are free to complain to Serabee. And your brother Joaquin, of course." He smiled and sought out Joaquin, who was but a few years older than Jessa. He was

seated on the left side of the platform near the end and had not shouted or moved, nor shown any discontent at the announcement.

“Joaquin?” Sylban-Tenna’s dangerous tone moved in the distance between him and his younger brother like a dagger, though Joaquin merely smiled.

“Yes,” Bharjah said with apparent satisfaction. “On your toes, Sylban.”

The shouting began again and Jessa stood in the center of the storm. One of the dogs, set loose from its chain, rushed across the aisle and was met instantly by two others.

“You may leave,” Bharjah said above the din, never once distracted from Jessa.

She stood extremely still, mindful that if she moved, the dogs would react. At least one of them was now free from its restraints.

Bharjah lifted a hand and Serabee walked down the right side of the dais in answer. The uproar abruptly halted as he moved, the still-chained dogs pulling back as he passed.

He reached into the fight without pause. The largest dog yelped in pain as Serabee tore it from the conflict by the neck and flung it from the dais, where it landed in the aisle with a snapping of bones and a heavy thud. The other dogs scattered and Serabee turned, focusing a subtle challenge on Jessa.

“Leave it,” Bharjah ordered. “Find your ugly witch woman, Jessa-Sirrah, and prepare for your journey. You will depart at the first turn of the spring moon.”

“As you command, my Lord King.” Jessa bowed her head then turned away. During the long walk back down the aisle she could feel the weight of the moment. When she approached the wounded animal she hesitated and a strange rush of understanding engulfed her as he tried to crawl. Crawl to where, Jessa had no idea, but she recognized the instinct. She stepped around his hind legs and kept moving as the animal whimpered.

Yes, child, keep going. You cannot help.

The unexpected words slipped like smoke through Jessa’s thoughts and she breathed in relief as she searched for the source of the warning. She quickened her pace as a new majik moved within the air and was certain Serabee would sense its presence as well. As she left the carpeted aisle for polished marble she saw only shadows, the sun’s rays through the enormous terrace doors bright and sharp as they slashed across the chamber.

*

Jessa waited on the wide veranda beyond her rooms, the cushioned bench she occupied one of her favorite places as she viewed the landscape beyond the palace grounds. In a seldom-used wing of the palace she had made her home, and she had more freedom than perhaps her father had intended when, years ago, he had ordered that she be kept out of his way.

It was still chilly, the winter season reluctant to relinquish its power to the softer winds and warm rains of the spring. The sky was deep blue, streaked with gold that layered into rich pink as the sun slid beneath the horizon. The stars were born within the sky like flints struck upon the weight of its impending darkness, the constellations slow to form.

“You did well.”

Jessa looked to the voice. “Radha.”

Lady Radha was small and thin, her white hair short and tossed by the breeze, the fine curls blown about her wrinkled face. Her tanned skin blended with her black skirt and dark tunic, and several fringed shawls were draped about her shoulders. Her eyes, the palest of blue, ruled her weathered face with a glorious sort of power. She had been Jessa’s guardian and companion since the moment of Jessa’s birth, and she attended to the duties of her position with total love and a cunning sense of responsibility.

“I did nothing but bow my head,” Jessa said. “I didn’t know you were there.”

Radha considered Jessa’s words and assessed her mood, even as she measured their place in a broader tapestry.

The presence of a royal daughter had always been a curiosity and a nuisance, and the fact that Radha had kept Jessa but a ghost amid the palace life was deemed a worthy service. Jessa was there only when summoned, which had always fascinated and pleased Bharjah. Only Radha occasionally tempted him with Jessa’s presence, allowing Bharjah to take credit for her loveliness or her skills, and thus earning her some status.

Jessa was the one thing of beauty that Bharjah had ever produced, and Radha’s skill in handling him had secured Jessa at least some measure of protection from his many sons.

Radha laughed as she walked across the terrace stones and stopped beside the bench before she sat next to her charge with a flutter of shawls and fringe. “That was the point of my spell,” she said, certain that though she had been watched closely for decades and always bowed to Serabee’s apparent dominance, never once had anyone discovered the truth of her abilities. Once nursemaid and now servant to the Princess Jessa-Sirrah, Radha was a high priestess and shaman in the service of the nomadic Vhaelin Gods.

“You will leave this place at last.” Radha studied the beauty of Jessa’s face and saw how troubled she was. “Arravan is said to be a most attractive land, green and ripe with plants and flowers. Blooming things that a woman of Lyoness might only dream of.”

“Yes. And so I shall go from being Bharjah’s chattel to being the slave of a stranger, meant to serve him in his bed and keep my eyes down still. I know very well what traveling to Arravan means for me, Radha. Do not try to dress this up as some sort of grand adventure so I might sleep tonight. I am being sold.”

Radha squeezed her hand. “I wasn’t. I was just happy that we shall see some green things.”

Jessa let out a breath of laughter. “And what else are you happy about?”

“The Vhaelin speak favorably upon this, child. I have seen it within the Waters of Truth. Strong portents,” Radha replied, recognizing Jessa’s doubt. “Do you think you know what the heart of an Arravan king might hold?”

Jessa pushed back the hair that had blown across her face. “I know exactly what the heart of a king may hold, Radha. The land he rules is but a formality.” A touch of temper flared within her expression and Radha smiled at the sight of it. “Must you always bait me? Have you nothing better to do, old woman?”

Radha laughed happily. “Not a thing.”

They glared at one another, neither backing down. Radha smiled and Jessa scowled back at her.

“Would you like me to find out about him? About his family?” Radha asked. “Perhaps you might sew him a pretty shirt while we wait for spring to arrive.”

Jessa yanked her hand free and rose from the bench, then strode to the terrace railing. “And perhaps I should have you beaten for your insolence,” she said, though Radha knew that she would never order a stranger beaten, much less her.

“I shall find out what we need to know, you needn’t fear. And perhaps you might consider the reasons why you’re being sent as a possible bride for the son of your father’s greatest enemy, yes? It is a good question.”

Jessa turned about and then rested against the wrought iron. “*Possible?*”

“Bharjah knows little about Arravan etiquette, I think. It is the woman who must agree to the contract and no one else, and before the witnesses of her choosing. Use your mind, girl. It’s that nuisance that has been hiding beneath all of your curls and rotting with disuse since the weather changed,” Radha said. “I’ve taught you better than to sulk and bow your head when you might look about you instead.”

“Yes, Radha, thank you for reminding me that I’ve been found lacking.”

Radha laughed.

“Joaquin has been busy, I am thinking,” Jessa mused.

“How so?”

“For Serabee to be given over to his authority? There is a deeper play and Bharjah is at the heart of it, whether Joaquin knows it or not.”

“And?”

“And what?” Jessa said. “What does it matter?”

“Perhaps what you will find within Arravan will not be what you expect.”

“And perhaps a year from now I will be ripe with child and mocked by an entirely different country. A unique sort of distinction, to be an amusement to half the known world. I’m not sure that many women may claim such a pleasure.”

“You are the Nightshade Lark and the Woman within the Shadows, Jessa,” Radha said with strength. “You are a mystery to Lyoness but you are here, make no mistake. No one laughs at you. You are the only child of the Blood that people do not fear or hate, and you are a great source of curiosity. You are the wish they do not know enough to make, for what need do a conquered people have for dreams that don’t come true? But you are on the edge of everything and they know it. The people do not speak of you within the same breath as the others. You are spoken of with clean air.”

Jessa ignored the words as she considered her future. “An heir of Bharjah’s blood upon the throne of Arravan.”

“Perhaps.” Radha could feel the challenge within the silence she was met with. “Do you think that is the deeper play, then? It is about as deep as the bowl I soak my feet in.”

Jessa laughed. “Yes, I’m sorry. It was a poor effort.”

“The world is wide, my child,” Radha said softly. “You have clawed at the door since you could reach it, searching for your chance. When the spring moon rises and we leave upon the road east, it shall be a road that you know nothing of and the world shall open to you. You will leave the Jade Palace behind. You shall move beyond the specter of your brothers and the stench of Bharjah’s presence.”

Jessa studied her hands for a moment and then turned about, gazing once again upon an unknown distance. “Yes, I shall trade one cage for another and have Joaquin stepping on my shadow as always.”

“Perhaps.”

“Yes, and if not that, then what?” Jessa said. “Whether I am a possible bride or one that has already been bartered and paid for, Bharjah’s wishes were quite clear and my choice must be yes. I’m not sure where that leaves my *chance*.”

“You do not know everything,” Radha said. “We shall consult the Waters.”

“No. I have no wish to see what they hold.”

“Why not?”

“Because I am tired of my gods taunting me!” Jessa answered with unexpected anger. “I show them respect and I practice their arts, yet they give me *nothing*. Your spell is not what you think, old woman. It never has been.”

“My spell is fine. It is *you* that cannot hold what they show within your head,” Radha said. “Or perhaps your heart.”

“My head is quite capable, thank you,” Jessa replied. “And my heart has nothing to do with it.”

“What is it you have seen that you’re so afraid of?” Radha asked, not for the first time.

For years Jessa had been plagued by what the spell had shown her, sulking within her visions and her temper flaring easily at any mention of them. She held them tightly to her heart, claiming that she could not remember or that they were smoke within her thoughts. Whether or not Jessa was being honest Radha had no idea, but it was a mystery she had tried to solve for many years. She suspected that Jessa lied, though for what reason she could not decipher. Jessa did not seek the Waters as she once did.

Jessa searched the stars of the warrior Attia’s spear and did not answer for Radha to hear, though she heard Jessa’s whisper on the rising breeze. “And my heart...my heart is very tired and of no use to anyone.”

Chapter Two

Spring 1032

The Lowlands of Arravan

Jessa stood in the long grass and stared down into the green lands of Arravan. Their caravan had traveled for nearly three weeks and had reached the well-guarded border at the Emmerin Gap, passing from Lyoness beneath the curious eyes of several thousand soldiers. First the Eastern Forces of her father bowed to their knees as they passed, and then the Western Army of Arravan gathered at the strongholds of the Gap, showing their might as they stood tall. Within the same week they had crossed the Taljah River and entered the Lowlands, traveling deeper into the country that might well become her home.

The land had changed in subtle ways as they had moved east from Karballa, but once they had crossed the Taljah, Jessa's knowledge of the world had swung like a pendulum from what was familiar to what was extraordinary and uncommon. The world had come alive. The weather was warm and the rains more frequent, the earth transforming into an exotic landscape of growth and vitality.

Radha was right, I've never seen such color, Jessa thought as the breeze washed over her. The sun was setting as the sky grew dark, thin clouds drifting high up and pushed to the north by the wind.

Their party consisted of one hundred of her father's soldiers that answered to her brother Joaquin. The men rode sleek, beautiful horses. The steeds of Lyoness were famed throughout the world, the envy of all who saw them. Within the camp the broad canvas tents had been set quickly and the red flags of Lyoness had been raised, almost as if warning any who saw them. Jessa could smell the cooking fires and the meat roasting above the flames, though it did little to stir her appetite.

Arravan soldiers had met them at the border between the stone citadels of the Gap, more than double their own number and led by the First Councilor to the King of Arravan, a man called Armistad Greyson. He was older, most likely in his fiftieth year or more, his hair streaked with gray. His crisp black uniform bore the insignia of the Kingsmen, the elite guard of Arravan that protected the High King himself.

Lord Greyson had insisted Jessa leave her wagon and remove her headdress, so that he might look upon her face. Joaquin had agreed to his wishes and Jessa had obeyed, meeting the stranger's eyes for but an instant before she bowed her head.

He had been a kind man and thanked her in a quiet voice, then begged her forgiveness that such a formality was necessary.

She had not expected to be treated with respect. The man had ignored Joaquin and spoken directly to her. She was uncertain of the reason for the ritual, though. She had never met a man of Arravan and so how should he recognize her? They might have sent a girl from the streets. When she had suggested this to Radha, she had laughed and kissed her cheek.

In the growing darkness she could see the many campfires of the Arravan soldiers farther along the road and amongst the trees that were blooming to the south. And behind us as well, I should imagine, she mused, though no fires signaled their presence. Jessa knew they were allowed very little liberty, and once through the Gap their numbers had become insignificant. These were the Lowlands, and they were a most holy place to both countries. Arravan would protect them at all costs.

It was said in Lyoness that the world had birthed the First Man within the soil of the Lowlands and that the god named Hamranesh did not like the damp and cold, and so walked west until he found the comforting heat of the desert. There he called forth his wives and servants from the fires of the sand, and thus gave blood to Lyoness. The land he was born of, however, was still sacred beyond all other places.

The Lowlands were said to have also been the birthplace of the gods of Arravan. Firstborn and most powerful, the god Gamar was said to have roamed these hills and considered the servants he might create and what gifts to bestow upon them. While deep in this contemplation he failed to notice the subtle birth of his cunning sister Jezara or the screams of the earth when his dark brother Amar was born after her.

That indifference had led to the rivalry between them all, and though Jezara and Amar would bow to Gamar if forced to, both of them were their own entities and decidedly powerful. Or so it was told and Jessa did not dispute the claim. Though Hamranesh was the main deity worshipped within Lyoness, Jessa followed the ways of the Vhaelin and her gods taught respect for all faiths. The Vhaelin were champions of free will; to them nothing was more sacred than to be allowed the devotions of your choice.

Jessa knelt and set her hand upon the damp earth, closing her eyes. She could feel the pulse and the life, and something deeper as well. Perhaps the blood of their southern gods, coursing through the rivers far beneath the earth. Perhaps the shudder that the land gave when the sun creased the world at the end of the day. Perhaps merely her own pulse. She would have to wait and see.

It was a holy place, though, and she understood that now, standing upon its soil. The place was rich with life and it was said that those who tilled and worked the soil within the Lowlands tilled the flesh of gods. It was so in Arravan and it was the same in Lyoness.

The Lowlands were the greatest source of dispute between their two lands, and Jessa realized it was here that the war would be waged for her hand. Arravan had seized the Lowlands several generations past, and in that victory over Lyoness they had endangered what her family held most precious: the assertion that the blood of the Bharjah line hailed directly from the veins of Hamranesh.

Jessa knew it was a lie, but the claim was a potent one and had been made since the first of her blood had seized power.

What is the truth of this place? Or did you give birth to all gods, even my own?

The Vhaelin walked the Ibaris Plains, but where they had come from was a long-standing mystery. In the city of Karballa their followers were scattered and few, but Jessa had learned at Radha's knee and had known from the start that the Vhaelin were hers to keep and pay homage to, no matter where she made her home. Perhaps it was here, in this most holy of places, that all gods were born and sent out into the world.

She could not deny her excitement. She could not deny her joy at being freed from

her prison of the Jade Palace. That she was quiet in this happiness and careful of her emotions seemed only prudent to her. Despite the fresh air she encountered each morning, air that held the remnants of a thousand dreams of freedom, she knew that they were a lovely illusion.

Joaquin still dogged her steps, as did Lord Serabee El-Khan. And whether this would change if a son of Arravan wanted her for his bride, she had no idea. She was Joaquin's advantage over his rivals and she could do nothing about it. She did not doubt he had played a significant role in brokering the contract for her hand. Now he would be closer on her heels than ever before. *But what shall it gain you, my brother, if Arravan's son finds me lacking? Or more to the point, what will that mean for me?*

If she returned in disgrace to the Jade Throne, Bharjah's plans, whatever they might be, would be dashed to nothing because she was not beautiful enough. *Or not enticing enough for a son of the Blood to get his sons upon. Not sweet enough, perhaps, in my temptations. How awful I shall feel, you old butcher, to disappoint you.*

She had no clue how to seduce a man. And she had no such desire. She still believed the words she had spoken to Radha, that she would be exchanging one cage for another. *Though perhaps the cages of Arravan are prettier, and I might gain some small amount of liberty if I am the mother of his sons.*

Her annoyance was sudden and fierce. She was joining a game already in play, and she would be forced to move the pieces on the board with great care if she were to win some measure of contentment. Her only remaining task was to decide whom she would rather be a pawn to.

She did not like the complete uncertainty of her position. She had never possessed even the smallest degree of power and had always been but a step away from someone's blade. And now she was being sold, her body offered up as the vessel for a stranger's seed. She felt ill and her head throbbed, but this was perhaps the only currency available to her, to open her legs to him and offer her spirit. With years of practice behind her, she changed the direction of her thoughts, her heart hardening to stone as she searched the far horizon.

She needed more information about what to expect and more confidence in order to meet it with grace and dignity. Radha had unearthed some small scraps of information about the family that would greet her, and some of their history as well, though not as much as they liked. Lyoness was unkind to the legacies of any but those of Bharjah's blood. Radha had promised more and Jessa hoped that she could deliver on that pledge.

Jessa knew she was to visit a small family and that the High King, Owen Durand, had taken but one bride in his lifetime, to whom he was married still. This woman, Cecelia Lewellyn, had borne him five children, three sons and two daughters. Radha assured her that their knowledge would increase as they traveled farther into Arravan, but for now, Jessa understood only that the Durand reputation was far different from that of her own blood.

She took a deep breath and cast a final glance across the landscape, with its richness and utter beauty. She rose and returned to camp, lifting her skirt above her boots when the grass grew tall and smiling at the novelty of such a simple thing. If she were to finally receive a clear answer from the Vhaelin as to her fate, it would be in a place such as this, upon sacred and holy ground.

“*Vhaelin essa ahbwalla,*” she whispered in blessing as she walked. Beneath the first full moon of spring, Jessa would seek the Waters of Truth.

*

Radha spoke the words that would bring the truth. The changes that took place in Jessa’s face caused her to proceed with caution. The abundance of power Jessa possessed was vast but well-hidden, rushing blindly through Jessa’s soul and, for now, unattainable. It had been that way since Radha first held her. The mark of the Vhaelin surged so fiercely in Jessa’s tiny body that when she had cried, Radha caught her breath. Jessa’s mother had felt the power also, laughing that first time and weeping in her happiness at the singing of her gods.

When Radha called upon the Waters of Truth she could sense Jessa’s buried potential struggle to free itself, even as she had in that first breath. Its staggering promise made the stars hang like ripe fruit, ready to tumble from the sky if Jessa could only seize her strength and call them down.

Radha lifted her hands to the brass bowl that sat between them, the ancient metal vibrating against her skin. Jessa’s eyes were closed as she sat cross-legged before the low table, her hands within her lap.

“Look, Jessa,” Radha said, “and see what the Vhaelin would show you.”

Jessa took a deep breath and let it out slowly, opening her eyes.

Jessa’s eyes were unfocused and blind in the majik, soaking up the light in a shocking fashion. No one Radha had ever known understood the power of the trance as Jessa did. *You give yourself so completely, my love, that you lose your control.* “Jessa, pull back.”

Not responding to Radha’s order, Jessa became trapped in the waters of the bowl, the dark liquid swirling slowly toward the center in smooth ripples as the scent of sage and obee root wafted around them.

She saw nothing but the words, the letters and runes floating before her and slipping into order as if written in blood in the air. She saw Radha as but a shadow, a figure of smoke beyond her comprehension. Their tent had receded into darkness, though she could still sense the things within: the pillows of her bed and the trunks for travel, the lamps that hissed and filled her head like the buzzing of summer bees.

The water was the purest of light and her eyes reacted to it with pain. She grabbed the edge of the table even as her mind let go, her consciousness pulled within the shallow depths of the bowl as if they had no end. The breath that she took felt as if it might be her last.

Jessa saw the midday sun high above the hard-packed earth of a courtyard and watched as her boots touched the steps of her carriage and carried her to the ground. A light dust rose from the contact and scattered as she felt someone firmly grip her hand. The touch was like the bitter cava root, for it lingered and tainted the things that followed it. It was Joaquin.

The stones of the structure rose before her, black rock set within dark mortar, its massive presence oddly soft and warm as the sun spilled against its surface.

“What do you see?” Radha whispered. It was unwise to interrupt a vision or to prompt the seeker, but if Jessa were telling the truth about the loss of her visions, there

would be questions.

“Blackstone Keep,” Jessa said.

Jessa saw him instantly within the greeting courtyard, dressed in some form of state regalia, his lips curling up under a dark beard and mustache that covered the skin about his mouth. He was handsome, his eyes blue and deep as they caught the sun beneath a shock of black hair. But the sun is at your back, Jessa thought, and was uncertain where or when she thought it. His expression was one of surprise and delight as he spoke to her. The gold medallion about his neck flared boldly against his white tunic and she reacted, wincing in pain.

Jessa was trapped by the movement of water against the side of the bowl, caught within a rush of vertigo as a ribbon of brilliant blue pulled at her senses and coaxed her into the recesses of a much darker pool.

She heard the sound of her own laughter and the tone was strange to her ears. This was not as she was used to laughing, hidden and covert so as to not draw attention to herself. This laughter was open and full, so full, in fact, that she could feel the joy in her chest as if she would drown if it were not released.

Jessa’s face felt flushed. She blinked in surprise, the touch of something soft and familiar gliding against her skin and teasing her lips. It was hair, and she ran her fingers through it, laughing once more as she took the curls in her grasp. A hand wrapped about her wrist, then skated down the inner surface of her arm, the caress sending a shiver along Jessa’s spine.

She felt the press of a body on top of her and her blood surged at the heat and the softness of the flesh, at the weight and the scent of it, at the intimate connection of her body against another. She lifted her legs with slow enjoyment, wrapping them in a possessive manner around slim hips. She smiled at the lips against her throat. They were full and moist in their warmth as they pulled at her skin, and the tongue was sweet as it tasted of her flesh, teeth nipping gently.

Jessa’s shoulders trembled and her head dropped back. “I smell...I smell the ocean,” she whispered, and heard a tender voice beside her ear but failed to understand what was said.

“What do you see?” Radha asked again.

Laughter rose within Jessa’s throat once more and she set it free. She lifted her left hand and it trembled, the bangles she wore on her wrist clinking in a soft rain of sound.

“And musk,” Jessa said, surprised.

“But what—”

Jessa’s head tipped forward with a jerk and she plunged her right hand into the bowl. The water splashed and Radha grabbed the small table to keep it from overturning. The waters were not to be disturbed, and Radha hissed in warning as a cloud of steam mushroomed from the confines of the bowl.

“A child,” Jessa spoke in a strained voice. “A child of the Durand line.”

“Do you bear him a son?” Radha was shocked. *But that cannot be! That is not what the Vhaelin promised.*

Jessa opened her eyes, her pupils expanding completely until nothing but black was left. She was blind to all but the truth.

Radha jerked her hand away, startled as a thick finger of water curled from the bowl