

The Rindoran Archives
Book One: The Oracle

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Before...

The planet Keroer has only been inhabited by people for a thousand years. Land masses are still being discovered and settled. My parents, a Witch and Warlock, founded the country of Rindor only years ago.

I was brought up from a young age to be an extraordinary person. I spent the majority of my adolescence being groomed by my parents to take over their empire. They have no other child but me, so despite the fact that I have no desire for the throne, it is mine. I will take over when they pass and run this country until my own heir is able to succeed me.

Now I am on the World Council. The council was formed when each country elected a certain number of esteemed officials to represent them among the other countries. The World Council decides upon a caste color system for all of the planet's people. The people and their affinities need to be discernible.

"Will this be a true caste system?" my best friend, Reswyn, asks one meeting. Reswyn is a Water Oracle, and she represents the country of Rindor with me.

"No," Zinien responds forcefully. "We are only designating a color system so that the people can be more easily identified. If we establish this worldwide, there will never be any confusion among the countries. But it is *only* a way of distinguishing abilities. There will never be a true caste system. All people will always be equal." Zinien is a Lord and one of the representatives of Zudowed.

"I agree," I say. "Equality is above all."

And so it is that we establish a color system for all of the people of the planet. For decades, the planet is peaceful. There is no war and everyone is equal.

Until the day I have a prophecy.

I foresee an end to the planet. Violence and war will break out. Entire castes will be annihilated. The planet will suffer,

damaged by the actions of its inhabitants, until it becomes so weak that it dies.

I know I am given this prophecy in order to change these events. Witches are servants of the planet Keroer. Our bodies are vessels for the planet's magic. We do the bidding of the planet and the planet alone. If the planet has given me such a vision, it is because I am to use the planet's magic in order to change the future events.

I tell the others of the World Council what I have seen. We agree that I must enact the magic needed to stop the prophecy from happening, but that no one should know. Changing the events of this prophecy entails tampering with entire castes for centuries to come. The citizens will never forgive us if they find out what I am to do.

I do not tell the others, but I know this magic will kill me. A Witch does not die until the planet is finished using her as a vessel, and I know that after I perform this last bit of magic, I will die. Even if the planet is not finished with me, the magic will be too strong for me. It will rip my body apart. No one can alter the lives of so many people and get away with it, regardless if they are mandated to do so by the planet.

Reswyn alone knows that I am sacrificing myself. She is furious, but she understands. The future of the entire planet hinges on this sacrifice. I do not tell her of the sacrifice she will be making. She knows that she must remain alive to aid the future daughters of the prophecy, but she does not know that her existence will be a very lonely one. No one is meant to live for centuries. I wish it was in the prophecy for one of us to remain alive with her, but soon, the castes will separate and turn on each other. The people will not be free. Even if my magic works to keep one of the others alive, I know they would not help Reswyn, but only hurt her in the end.

When I resign myself to my fate, I seclude myself in The Woodlands of Rindor. With the guidance of the planet, I perform magic for the last time. I feel it in my body as the

planet's people are altered. Memories are erased, women are made sterile. So much magic, so many people.

My eyes open, and a wave of exhaustion washes over me as I die. It is finished.

Preface

I, Pejelle of Rindor, a natural-born Oracle, offer my full account of the World War of Keroer as I lived through it. I do hereby swear that the subsequent testimony of the War's events are the full truth in the manner that I experienced them. Long live the planet.

Prologue

Nature was aware of what took place that evening. The twin twisters had torn through the countryside, destroying the land, heralding the births that were soon to take place. As the two women shuffled through the woods, the trees leaned in on them, protecting them. Not a sound echoed through the trees as nature held its breath in anticipation.

The water Nymph waded into the river, her swollen stomach quivering with a contraction. Across the planet, oceans roared in tumult, responding to the Nymph's anguish. The river, once ripping rapidly through the woods, had stilled the moment its master touched the water.

The wood Nymph, Sister to the water Nymph, followed close behind.

"This child is going to kill me," the water Nymph groaned as she massaged her belly. A tiny hand pressed against hers through the warm skin.

The water Nymph waved behind her at the water. The river responded immediately to her, the water rising up and fashioning itself into a seat. The Nymph sat down, spread her legs, and dropped her head back, trying to concentrate on anything but the pain that tore through her body. She felt her Sister's fingers slip inside of her, checking for the progress of the baby.

"How is she coming along?" she whispered.

"She is nearly here," the wood Nymph answered. The trees rustled at her response, the leaves whispered amongst one another. A cluck of her tongue, and the woods were quiet once more. She did not chastise the trees for leaning in even closer, as long as they remained quiet.

The water Nymph clenched her fists and teeth against the pain of another contraction. Water slid lovingly up her neck, caressed her cheek, and pushed her hair back from her face.

"Marinda."

She opened her eyes to find her Sister looking upon her with a grave expression. “Yes, Kerina?”

“Are you certain this is what you want to do?”

Marinda nodded fervently, her eyes flashing with determination. “I will not hand my daughter over to the Lords so that they can inject her with their poison for her whole life.” She traced a slow circle on her belly. “This is one Oracle they will never get their hands on.” Then she sat up and placed her hands on the wood Nymph’s belly. It was also swollen with pregnancy, and contractions could be felt within. Kerina was in labor as well, but her baby would be arriving later.

“Tell me, Kerina,” the water Nymph continued seriously. “Tell me you do not wish a better life for your daughter.” She shook her head in anger. “No. Our girls deserve better.”

Kerina stared into her Sister’s eyes for a long moment before nodding fervently. “You’re right. I know you’re right. It’s just...*what if they catch us?*” she finished in a whisper.

“They won’t. The Healers are smart and they are trustworthy. They will protect our girls, Kerina. And plus, they have no choice. *We* have no choice. These are the babies from the prophecy.” At this pronouncement, the woods shivered with excitement. Lightning streaked across the sky, and the trees wove their branches together into a canopy overhead, ready to protect the women should the storms from earlier decide to return.

The wood Nymph nodded, having been reassured by her Sister.

All of nature attuned itself to The Woodlands of Rindor. The planet itself quaked with anticipation. Beneath the night sky, in the center of a river surrounded by woods, Marinda gave birth to a baby girl, an Oracle. Fine gold fuzz covered a perfect little head. Marble white skin stretched across perfect baby features. Cornflower colored eyes, shining like gems, blinked confusedly.

“Oh, she’s perfect,” Marinda whispered, pressing a kiss to the baby’s hand. Water slid up her arms, eager to caress the

baby. The baby sighed in content as the water swaddled her against her mother's breast.

"What will you name her?" Kerina asked, stroking the baby's hair.

"Pejelle."

Kerina smiled. "After your grandmother. How fitting. That woman was always a spitfire."

Marinda was only able to cuddle her baby for a little while longer before the time for Kerina's own delivery arrived. The river swirled itself, forming a basin into which Marinda placed her baby. Pejelle fell asleep instantly, cocooned in a cradle of warm and dotting water.

The women returned to the cover of the trees for Kerina's delivery, since the wood Nymph would be able to draw strength from her own affinity with the forest. The earth tilted up, forming itself into a seat for Kerina. She collapsed, and as Marinda disappeared between her legs to check the baby's progress, branches leaned down to brush her face with their spindly fingers, offering her comfort.

As the world once again held its breath, Kerina gave birth to a Shifter. Olive skin, black hair, and emerald green eyes, the Shifter stood out in stark contrast to the Oracle.

"What will you name your darling girl?" Marinda asked.

"Elnyn." At the sound of the baby's name, the branches leaned forward to caress her soft baby features. Leaves trembled in awe as they stroked the baby's cheeks.

"She is beautiful, Kerina."

"As is Pejelle."

Marinda took a deep breath. "Are you ready for the ceremony?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

The two women sat, Marinda on the bank of the river, Kerina on the solid earth beside it. As they cradled their babies, the women adjusted the babies' hands so that they rested on the other. Pejelle's left hand rested on Elnyn's heart, Elnyn's left hand rested on Pejelle's. Marinda reached forward and placed

her own left hand over Kerina's heart, and Kerina did likewise. A shiver rolled through each of them as the Sisters completed the age old symbol of the Sisterhood. The trees quaked, and the water trembled in reverence.

In their arms, both Pejelle's and Elnyn's palms glowed, signifying their first time performing the symbol of the Sisterhood.

Marinda spoke first. "As a water Nymph of the Sisterhood, I hereby witness that my daughter, an Oracle, has been inducted into the ranks of the Sisterhood."

"As a wood Nymph of the Sisterhood," Kerina began, "I hereby witness that my daughter, a Shifter, has been inducted into the ranks of the Sisterhood."

They spoke together. "As Sisters, we hereby witness that our daughters have bonded as Sisters, and are now members of the Sisterhood."

Light exploded from the babies' palms, bathing the woods in a white glow. The trees began to chitter in excitement once more.

As the women rose to their feet, the woods died down immediately. The Nymphs stood and eyed each other, both their eyes alight with longing.

"I will see you soon, Sister," Marinda said. She leaned forward, pressed a kiss to Elnyn's head, then one to Kerina's cheek.

"Very soon, Sister." Kerina looked at Pejelle with a sad smile and stroked the baby's soft cheek.

After one last sad look at each other, the two mothers turned and disappeared their separate ways into the forest. The trees deflated in sadness. The oceans began to roar once again, battering the landmasses with their rage.

Chapter One

Each morning I wake up just before dawn, and each morning it gets harder to wake up so early. I'm definitely a morning person, but not a *way* in the morning person. As the elderly housekeeper shook me awake, I wanted to cry. I groaned my disapproval at her and burrowed my face deeper into the blankets.

"Miss Pejelle," the housekeeper said patiently. "You must wake up. You know Master will require your service at sunrise."

"Yes," I moaned. "I know." My Lord, Jelnor, would never wake up on his own. As I was the only person in the household permitted into his private chambers when he was in them, I had to be the one to wake him up so early.

I threw the blankets off of me and sat up in bed. A cold, fast wakeup was the best. Slowly easing out from under the warmth of my covers was too difficult. I had to throw them off of me in one fell swoop. Sunrise would be in an hour, at which time I would have to wake my master up to get his day started. I needed to get moving.

I eyed the elderly housekeeper before me. Yelna was an Elf, and she had been serving the same family her whole life. As an Elf, she was in Caste Nine, the third lowest caste in our country. She was very humble about her upbringing because she had accepted long ago that things were not going to change for her.

I, however, could never understand why Elves were so underappreciated in our society. Gifted with an affinity for metal, Elves were the backbone of the construction of our world. Instead of being permitted to realize their full potential, they were forced into service for people with far less abilities than the Elves had themselves.

"Thank you for waking me up, Yelna. You can return to your more pressing duties now."

She bowed her head. "Is there anything else you need?"

"No, thank you."

She bowed again and left the chamber. I made my bed and afterwards drew back all the curtains covering the windows. There was a slight chill in the room, and the open curtains would serve to allow the warmth from the sun to heat up the room. In the small washing room attached to my bedchamber, I began my grooming process. My gold hair fell to the backs of my knees, a requirement for all Healers. As personal servants to the Lords, we used our own hair to bathe them. Naturally, we had to keep our hair in perfect condition. I brushed it out to perfection and added all the oils that would make it glossy and silky.

Once my hair was done, I changed out of my nightgown and into the day gown I wore every single day. I owned a dozen of them, all made in the exact same style. The dresses were white, the caste color of Healers. They had long sleeves that flowed well past my hands, since it was improper for a Healer to ever show her hands to anyone who wasn't her master. There was an empire waist, used to accentuate our busts, and it was coupled with a square neckline that ended about two inches below the collarbones. Last but not least, the gowns swept all the way down to the floor. The only skin visible was from my collarbones to my face. All Healers dressed in the same manner. It was frowned upon for women to show much skin, but Healers were affected most of all.

When I made my way to Master's bedchamber, I found him still passed out in his bed. I took a moment to study him. Jelnor had thick chocolate colored hair and matching warm brown eyes. His skin was a nice gold color from the amount of time he spent swimming in the property's manmade lake. He was not a bad looking man, not at all. In another life, I would have definitely been attracted to him. I just wasn't too keen on the fact that I had no say in bedding him.

The moment the sun began to show its face over the horizon, I pulled back all of the curtains to let the warm light shine through the windows. His brow furrowed as the sunlight fell

across his face, but he didn't budge. Waking him in the mornings was a pain in the ass.

"Master," I said softly, stroking his back. As I rubbed his bare skin, I sent healing magic through my palms and into him, healing any injuries he might have suffered during the night. "Lord Jelnor. The sun is up. Time to get ready for the day."

He groaned and rolled over away from me. After a little more coaxing from me, he was finally awake. He rolled toward me, looking up at me with sleepy eyes. Then he suddenly grasped my face and pulled me down for a kiss. The first time Jelnor had made a move toward me, I had been shocked into immobility. He was, after all, married. However, I had come to learn that many married Lords had such affairs with their Healers, and it was not in the Healers' place to deny them. As much as I did not want to be with him, rejecting him could mean deadly consequences for me.

"I do so love the way you wake me up, Pejelle."

"Well, then, Master, it is a good thing I wake you up every morning."

Jelnor threw the covers off of him, only to reveal that he was stark naked. I averted my eyes as my cheeks flared with heat. I had no doubt his appearance was due to the fact that he had spent the previous night with his Lady. Apparently he had not been fully sated last night, for he was very much aroused this morning.

"You're blushing." He brushed his thumb across my cheek.

"I apologize."

"No need to." His hand traveled down my neck until he was fondling my breast.

I fought off the immediate urge to deny his wishes, but knew it was not my place to say no to my master. He would probably beat me for that. Even if I did reject him, he could always use his gift of mind control to force me into compliancy. As a Lord, he had the power to force anyone to do as he pleased. While I was technically immune to mind control, he certainly didn't know that, nor could he. I'd have to obey him, immunity or not.

My punishment for denying him would be both physical and mental.

Clenching my teeth against the sudden anger, I spurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“It’s my female time,” I lied.

His hand dropped, and he looked disappointed. He gave me a deep kiss. “Until next time.”

I went to the dressing room to collect Jelnor’s clothes for the day. As I moved about selecting his outfit, I thought of the proposition he had just made me.

There was rarely ever a time I enjoyed sex with Jelnor. Despite the fact that he obviously cared for me, and I had grown used to him over the years that we’d been together, it didn’t sit well with me. He was married, and we didn’t love each other. While I’d love to go out on my own and find someone to share my bed with, I knew that would never be possible. My bitterness over the fact never allowed me to truly enjoy myself while being intimate with my master.

Back in his bedchamber, I helped Jelnor dress for the day. He slipped into breeches with thick wool socks and riding boots and a coarse purple linen shirt with suspenders. I combed back his hair neatly and shaved the slight stubble from his face, just as I did each morning.

“All set for the day, Master. Are you ready for breakfast?”

“I am.”

Out in the corridor, Jelnor’s personal bodyguard, Licander, was waiting outside the door. Licander was a Swordmaster, as indicated by the navy colored uniform he wore, and the swords attached at each of his hips. He was even taller than Master, and his body was bulky with muscle. All Swordmasters were excellent fighters, having an affinity for swords, but I knew that Licander was an especially gifted swordsman, as evidenced by his position as a personal bodyguard for one of Rindor’s highest ranking Lords.

“Good morning, Licander,” I said amicably.

“Miss Pejelle.” He bowed his head slightly.

Jelnor didn't even acknowledge him. Licander followed behind us at an arm's length.

In the dining hall we met up with Lady Harning and the young ones, the Misters Reyorn and Ferind, and Miss Stelba.

"PJ!" Stelba cried and left her spot at the table to throw her arms around my waist. Stelba's greetings were always so warm. She didn't get much affection from her own parents, so she had latched on to me. Since she constantly trailed her father, Stelba was often with me. I knew she had grown to view me as a mother figure.

"Good morning, Miss Stelba." I lifted her onto my hip, careful to ensure my hands stayed hidden in the sleeves of my gown. I sat down in her seat with her on my lap. One of the serving ladies immediately brought plates for Jelnor and me.

"I hurt my finger," Stelba pouted, holding up a small chubby finger before me.

I puckered my lips for her, and she pressed her finger to them. Through the kiss, I sent healing energy to her finger. I wasn't sure if it was actually hurt or not, but I indulged her anyway. The kids loved for me to heal their fake wounds.

"Is that better, Miss?"

"Yes!"

I took bites of my breakfast in between feeding bites to Stelba, who still sat in my lap. It was a challenge getting her to eat, for her favorite pastime was to make anyone's life more difficult than it should be. She liked me much more than others, so she only put up a little bit of fight.

Lady Harning made polite conversation with me, as she always did. As usual, I had a hard time meeting her eyes. I felt terrible for the predicaments I put Harning in. Not only did her husband prefer me over her, but even her own children would rather me most of the time. Lady Harning was such a kind woman that it seemed a crime to take her family from her.

Unfortunately, she was not totally present mentally. Harning was incapable of harboring any ill will toward anyone. I knew it was from some mental compulsion her father had

placed on her when she was a girl. Everyone knew this. Servants sometimes fought for the chance to serve the family because they knew of Harning's condition. Every Elf servant dreamed of working for a kind mistress.

After breakfast, Jelnor and I left the home as we did every morning. The carriage was already waiting outside. Licander joined the driver up on the seat, and Jelnor and I slipped into the carriage. A sharp crack of the whips, and the horses were off. Jelnor and I were jostled around in the carriage, the bumpy ride causing us to slide against each other. The only noise was the sound of horse hooves beating along the ground.

"How much longer will your female time last for?" he asked sullenly.

"It's only just the first day." I had to fight a triumphant smile from stretching on my face. Seven whole days before he would be on my case. I'd deal with the aftermath of lying to him later. He'd figure it out the second my *real* female time started in two weeks.

"Don't worry, Master," I said, taking his hand in mine and giving it a gentle squeeze. "Only seven days, and I'm all yours again."

He smiled, extremely satisfied with himself. Good. My work at appeasement was done. I did not feel like spending the day with a cranky, horny Lord. Let him think I looked forward to bedding him again.

In the carriage, we made the hour or so trip to Goderiv City. Goderiv City was the heart of the whole country, where King Goderiv himself lived. As the political leaders of Rindor, Lords were spread equally throughout the country. Only the most prominent Lords lived in Goderiv City. They were the Lords who were responsible for the running of the entire country. Jelnor was one of these Lords, but he didn't live in the city. He lived in Yensé, the pastoral land surrounding the city. We were headed to Goderiv City, as we did every day, so Jelnor could attend his daily Lord meeting. All the Lords of Goderiv City met every single day to discuss the running of the country. The King

usually headed these meetings, but the sickness that had plagued him for a year now had gotten even worse about a month ago, so the Lords had been on their own since.

We made our way through the city to the Lord's Hall. After we rode through the gate into the courtyard, an Elf maidservant came to escort us to the hall. We were some of the last to arrive.

In the meeting room, there was a long table at the center, surrounded by three separate rings of chairs. The innermost ring of fourteen chairs that directly surrounded the table was for the Lords. The second ring seated the Healers, the third the bodyguards. Once all the Lords were there, the meeting commenced. Lord Beldon, Goderiv's right hand, opened the meeting.

"I would like to begin this meeting with a word of prayer." Everyone bowed their heads. "We would like to thank the planet that we live on for giving us life. We would like to acknowledge both the space magic and elemental magic that help to keep our planet alive. May they always be plentiful. Lastly, we would like to send forth prayers to help King Goderiv recover his health as soon as possible. Amen."

"Amen," everyone repeated.

"First and foremost," Lord Beldon said, "I would like to update everyone on our king. His secondary Healer, Verley, is still unable to find what is ailing him. She says that any healing magic she puts into him is only destroyed by the disease. Please continue to keep him in your thoughts. We do, however, have a message from him." He unraveled a scroll, made sure he had the attention of everyone, and began to read.

"I would first like to thank all of you for your continued work for the country. Even without an official guide, your work has remained diligent and has been duly noted. Word from Prince Travendek has come, and he will return to the city within the week to take my place as chair of the meetings. I thank you in advance for continuing your good work until he returns. May the planet bless you. King Goderiv."

There was a moment of silence.

“Now, let us begin,” Lord Beldon began again. “We must alert the whole country that an attack is imminent on the horizon. Our efforts at peace with Zudowed have not prevailed. They seem intent on spreading their ideas of *democracy*.” He sneered the word. “When it was clear we did not plan on adopting their way of thinking, they withdrew contact immediately. We are expecting a declaration of war at any moment.”

The royal “we” Beldon spoke of was the King’s Circle. Although all the Lords in this room were charged with running the country, there was an even smaller group of Lords who, along with the King, were the only people who knew all of the secrets of the country. Goderiv City’s Lords were only charged with keeping up the face of the country. The King’s Circle was truly responsible for making sure the country didn’t fall to its knees.

As the Lords discussed our options for war, I tuned them out and thought about Zudowed’s democracy. Zudowed was a country, a little bit larger than our own, that was located just across the Pahandra Ocean from us. Anyone who said they didn’t know a single person (out of the common citizens) who would prefer Zudowed over our own country Rindor was a severe liar. The people of Rindor were suffering under the king’s reign. Anyone from Caste Seven and below was carrying the brunt of the oppression most heavily upon their shoulders. Those people were the ones who tried to escape the country for greener pastures, and those people were the ones who were severely punished if caught.

I had been tuning out the Lords the whole time, but a single word snapped me back into reality.

Beldon had a disgusted look on his face. “The second they begin trying to press their ideals on how to treat Oracles, then we will have a serious problem.”

My whole body was as taut as a bowstring. Any mention of Oracles had my heart pumping, body flooding with adrenaline, and muscles tensing. Oracles were people in our world born

with the ability to see the future. They were the most harshly treated people in our country. Adult Oracles were immune to Lord mind control, but child Oracles were not. From the age of four, Oracles were injected with poison by the government. The poison kept their minds in a forever state of childhood so that they remained pliant and obedient and much susceptible to mind control. They were used by the Lords of the government strictly for selfish purposes. The Oracles were the ones who were truly responsible for making sure the country remained standing. The Lords ran the outside operations, but the Oracles were on the interior, driving everything from the inside. The country would fall without them, and everyone knew it.

Forced into having visions of the future of our country, the Oracles saw if something might go wrong, and it was their responsibility to change it. Most Oracles couldn't control their visions, but no one could help doing what the Lords forced them to do. So when a Lord compelled an Oracle into having a vision, the Oracle had no choice but to delve into the future. The way they were treated was horrible, but there was nothing anyone could do about it. The Lords controlled everything and everyone in the country. There was no acting against them.

"Speaking of the Oracles," Jelnor said. "You said war was imminent. Have the Oracles not seen it happening?"

Beldon shook his head. "It seems that they cannot see anything too concrete until Zudowed has officially made up its mind."

Jelnor nodded, as if this made perfect sense to him. "Are preparations being made?"

"Of course. All Warriors have dispatched throughout the country and their training is more rigorous than ever. We will be prepared for any attack that comes."

In our world, there were Swordmasters and Bowmasters. Swordmasters had an affinity for fighting by sword. They were the policemen of our world, and most often used as personal bodyguards to the Lords. Bowmasters were gifted with an

affinity for the bow. They provided the food for the country through their diligent hunting and cattle raising techniques.

Then there were the Warriors. Warriors were people born with the gifts of both Swordmasters and Bowmasters. These were the men charged with the defense of our country. They made up our military and were so elite that most people went their lives without ever meeting one. Rindor had one of the top militaries in the world, and I knew that if an attack were to come, we would be well prepared for it. I just hoped that Beldon was wrong and that Zudowed wouldn't attack. The last thing this country needed was to be attacked while our king was practically on his deathbed.

The Lords continued to talk of preparations for war. I slowly began to relax as it became clear there would be no more mention of Oracles. The Lords discussed the navies moving in to fortify the coasts, the foot soldiers moving in to all the cities and towns to protect the civilians in case of an invasion. Our country was practically impossible to invade, but they were still preparing.

When midday arrived, everyone went their separate ways for a lunch break. Jelnor and I walked to a small inn just a little ways from the Lord's Hall with Licander following close behind. The inn was our usual lunch place, for Jelnor knew the inn mistress, and we ate for free. Even if that wasn't the case, we still would have gone there. Milnerd's Inn had the best food in the whole city, except for the food served in the royal palace itself. The inn was definitely a close second.

As we walked along the small stone path parallel to the dirt road, I placed my hand to the small of Jelnor's back. I sensed for any injuries, my healing power probing into him. My brow furrowed.

"You were compelling?" I asked quietly.

"Yes. Beldon. I compelled him into speaking about the war. I knew there was something important that the King's Circle was hiding. A matter of war concerns the whole country, not just the Circle."

I continued to push healing energy into his back. I had known he was compelling because there was a slight clog in his chakra points. This was the true reason all Lords needed Healers. The action of compelling another's thoughts and actions corrupted Lords beyond belief. The corruption caused their chakras to clog, which restricted their life-force from flowing. Without a Healer to de-clog their chakras, the Lords would die.

As much as I wanted to, I wouldn't be able to de-clog Jelnor's chakra points at this time and not in public. I ceased healing him and clasped my hands before me.

"That makes sense."

He snorted. "Of course it does."

At Milnerd's Inn, we were seated at our usual table. Lords were in Caste Two, and no one below Caste Three, the Healers, was allowed to dine with them. So Licander took up his usual post at the door to the inn, his eyes searching for threats the whole time. I tucked the skirt of my gown away from Jelnor's clumsy feet and settled my hands in my lap. I made sure that all inappropriate skin was covered.

Jelnor was watching me like a hawk. "I find myself quite glad no one but me can see all that pretty skin, Pejelle. I think it might make me angry if someone else did."

This wasn't the first time Jelnor was showing extreme possessiveness and jealousy over me and my body. It definitely wasn't the first time that it really made me want to deck him in the eye. Instead, I forced a smile on my face and nodded my head slightly without saying a word.

The serving girl stopped by our table with two mugs of the inn's homemade mead. Jelnor told her we would have two lunch plates. She came back with a tray that held half of a fresh-baked loaf of bread and two steaming bowls of stew. The stew consisted of a thick, brown broth and was a medley of meat and vegetables.

"Do you think an attack will actually happen?" I asked.

He shrugged. "It would have to depend on just how badly Zudowed wants us to adopt their democratic ideals."

"And the country *will* be prepared for such an attack, right?"
"Of course."

Jelnor had the tendency to be cocky and arrogant when it certainly wasn't needed, but he always spoke the truth when it came to the country. If he said that Rindor would be prepared if an attack were to come, then it was what he truly believed, and Jelnor only believed anything about the country if it was true.

After our lunch, we went for a short walk around the town. We didn't go far, just enough to stretch our legs since we would be sitting for a few more hours to come. We returned to the Lord's Hall at the appointed time and the meeting picked back up again.

The meeting ended in the early evening. Jelnor and I set out for the manor in the carriage at the beginning of sunset. Our trip back took a bit longer, for at this time of day, the roads were filled with people. When we returned to the estate, dinner was prepared and waiting, just as it was every night when we returned from the meeting.

"I won't be dining with the family tonight," Jelnor told me. "Just return to my chamber when you're finished eating."

"I can perform the nightly ritual now, Master."

"Go have dinner with the children. I'm sure Stelba is looking for you."

I smiled at that and waited for Jelnor to leave first, Licander close behind him, before I made my way to the dining hall on my own. Anyone below the Lords' caste was not permitted to leave a room before them and without their permission. Only when Jelnor was fully out of the room could I make my own way in the opposite direction.

Lady Harning was in an especially strange mood, so dinner was a quiet affair. Stelba didn't sit in my lap, but in the chair next to mine. She kept glancing at her mother, then at me, before she would hurriedly glance back down at her food and

begin eating again. The boys never spared anyone a glance and just stared at their food while they ate. The only noise came from Harning, who randomly kept blurting things to herself. The evening was especially awkward.

After the servants had cleared off the table, I made my way upstairs to Jelnor's bedchamber. Licander was standing guard at the door, and the second I appeared, he would leave. His duties only required him to be at Jelnor's post from sunrise to Jelnor's bedtime, when I stopped by each night to perform the nightly rituals.

"Good evening, Licander."

He bowed his head. "Thank you, Miss Pejelle. Have a good evening."

"You do the same. Tell your wife I said hello."

He smiled at that. "I will. We actually just found out that Brehana is expecting."

"Congratulations!" I squeezed his arm lightly. "You're going to be a papa!"

He was positively glowing. "Yes, I am. I'm going to have a son."

"I am so happy for you, Licander. Please tell Brehana that I am happy for her as well, and I wish her the best of luck."

"Will do. Good night, Miss Pejelle. I shall see you in the morning."

"Good night, Licander."

A light knock on the door to Jelnor's bedchamber granted me access. He was seated in his favorite chair in the sitting area, flipping through the pages of a book.

"Are you ready for your bath?"

"Yes."

I went to the bathing chamber to change into my bathing gown. The bathing gown differed in my day gown in that the sleeves were short, and it stopped at my knees. I needed proper access in order to give Jelnor his nightly bath, and my usual day gown just didn't cut it. Jelnor joined me in the bathing chamber, and I undressed him. He lowered himself into the

tub, and I began the ritual of bathing him with my hair. I scrubbed his body with the usual salts and oils. It was a supreme show of deference. Some Lords were uncomfortable with being washed with their Healer's hair, but Jelnor displayed no such qualms. He'd always enjoyed his baths.

When I was finished, I dried him off. He wrapped the soft towel around his waist, then made his way to the large bed where he laid on his stomach. I gathered the oils I used every night, then settled myself on his behind so that I was straddling his back.

I put a few drops of oil in my hands and rubbed them together. Starting at Jelnor's hips, I rubbed my hands slowly up his sides. Once at his ribs, I circled them around onto his back. I rubbed deeply into his shoulders and then back down his spine, popping any tight joints that were there.

Dripping a new oil blend into my hands, I touched the base of his spine. This was where the root chakra was located. Healing energy flowed from the much smaller chakra points in the palms of my hands and into Jelnor's back. My healing energy allowed me to see the clogged point clearly in my head. The blood red orb was a little less than halfway full of a charred-looking black substance. The healing power I sent into him pulsed as a white light that eroded the black ash away. The life-force then flowed more freely there.

I slipped from his back. "On your back please."

He rolled over, and I straddled his hips. Placing my hands just below his navel, I saw the vibrant orange sacral point as it was de-clogged by the healing magic. My hands traveled up to a few inches above his navel, where the lemon yellow solar plexus chakra was located. As I moved up through the chakras, they grew more and more clogged. The solar plexus was about halfway full of the black ash, but of course it stood no chance against the healing magic.

The forest green heart chakra was next, followed by the indigo throat chakra point. The dark purple brow chakra was there between Jelnor's eyebrows, followed by the white crown

chakra point located at the top of his head. The crown chakra was the most important one. It didn't matter just how freely the other points flowed with life-force. If the crown chakra was not permitted to flow properly, it was only a matter of time before the person would die. Jelnor's crown chakra was the one most filled with black ash.

My hands locked around the top of his head, healing energy pulsing through them. When the chakra point was completely clear, Jelnor breathed out a long sigh. He was able to feel the difference now that his life-force was flowing freely.

I slid off of Jelnor and stood next to the bed. "Is there anything else you require for the night, Master?"

"No, Pejelle. You may go."

I changed back into my day gown to return to my own bedchamber. There, I took my own bath and then treated my hair with the usual array of products. After changing into my nightgown, I settled into my bed for the night.

Chapter Two

A couple of weeks later, I was woken to Jelnor shaking my shoulder. I startled out of the bed, wondering why *he* was waking me up, and not the other way around.

“Get dressed and meet me downstairs.”

I frowned, looking at him in a daze. He was already dressed for the day, the stubble on his face freshly shaved. As he stalked from my room, I rolled out of the bed. I could detect his sense of urgency, so I cut my usual morning routine in half. When I met Jelnor in the foyer, I had donned my day gown, but I wasn't fully awake yet. I was more confused than anything.

“Master...?”

“You'll see where we're going soon enough, Pejelle.”

The carriage pulled up into the courtyard in front of the manor. Jelnor shuffled me to it. Licander was already seated up with the driver, and I shot him an alarmed look. His face was grim as he glanced away from me. Dread flooded through me. This couldn't be good.

Once Jelnor and I were seated inside, the carriage took off. My mind was racing as I tried to think of where we could be going. An hour later, we stopped at the city gates. Licander spoke quickly to the guards, and we rolled through into Goderiv City. When the carriage finally came to a stop, I knew where we were even before Licander opened the carriage door. The sounds of conversation echoed around the carriage. The few words I could make out clued me in. As I blinked at the rising sun, I stepped out into the City Square.

In recent days, the truth behind King Goderiv's ailment had been revealed. The king was slowly but surely dying due to his own Healer's betrayal. Outside Healers had been brought in to take a look at the king, only to find that his chakra points were so clogged there was no hope of healing him. Apparently, the Healer had been slowly killing the king over the past few years she had been with him.

The young woman had been immediately sentenced to death upon the revelation of her betrayal. I was horrified to realize Jelnor had dragged me from my bed to come witness the execution. Once the truth of her betrayal had come out, I had received many threats from Jelnor. The first of them had come during the throes of sex. He had stopped suddenly while on top of me, grabbed my face, and stared deeply into my eyes.

“If you ever betray me like that, I will kill you so slowly and painfully you will wish you had never been born.”

I hadn't been able to think of anything to say, so I had simply leaned forward and pressed my lips to his own. That had satisfied him for the time being. Honestly, I'd been a bit disgruntled by the fact that he even thought I could be capable of doing such a thing to him. No matter how much I detested the things he did to me, the thought of killing him would never even cross my mind.

Despite my reassurances, it now seemed that he wanted to be sure I understood exactly what would happen to me if I ever betrayed him.

The crowd seemed disgustingly excited as they waited for the sun's full emergence to execute the Healer. I looked around, my breath shallow. On a wooden stage at the front of the crowd were four powerful-looking men and two servants. The king, the prince, and their two personal bodyguards. The king was old and frail, slumped into his wheelchair, but he still exuded an air of authority. The prince stood stoically beside him, face grim. I was too far away to be sure, but I thought I saw a flicker of rage in his eyes.

When the sun peaked over the horizon, the Healer was brought forth between two Swordmasters. I watched her as she was dragged across the stage. My heart hammered in my chest as she fought between them, screaming and begging for her life. Nausea rolled through me as a pit yawned in my stomach.

“Please, *please!*” she cried. Her voice broke on the second plea. “It wasn't me, it wasn't *me!*” Her black hair was wild about her face, her blue eyes filled with panic. The white day gown she

wore was dirty and ragged, as if she'd spent days in a jail cell. Horror flooded through me as her hands were bared in her struggle. Neither guard attempted to cover them.

I looked to the king and his son. The king never looked away from the Healer, but he did not look happy about his situation. He seemed disappointed, tired, and...sad. The prince had raised his eyes to the sky, as if he couldn't bear to watch the scene before him. My eyes traveled back to the Healer. She had stopped pleading and now cried silently. Her eyes were glued to the prince who refused to look at her.

One Swordmaster wrestled the Healer down to her knees. The other pushed her head down until her throat rested on the wooden block. One restrained her while the other pulled one of the swords from across his back.

“The Healer Verley is hereby sentenced to public execution for the attempted murder of His Majesty, Goderiv, King of Rindor, and First of His Name. Let her death be a reminder of the everlasting justice of Rindor, where no one goes unpunished for his or her crimes. Long live the king.”

My breath caught in my throat as the Swordmaster swung his blade in an arc and brought it down. I tried to look away, but Jelnor's hand suddenly locked on the back of my neck, forcing me to watch. The sound of the sword meeting her neck, the thump her head made as it hit the stage, had the nausea roaring up through me.

I turned to the side and vomited. I barely heard Jelnor's grunt of disgust as I heaved and heaved. When I finally finished and caught my breath, I straightened in time to see the Healer's body being dragged from the stage. My eyes went to the men on the side. The prince was looking right at me, an unfathomable look on his face.

Jelnor grabbed my arm and tugged me close to him. I looked up into his smug, brown eyes.

“Do you understand, Pejelle?”

I took a deep breath, the taste of bile still stinging my throat.

“Yes, Master.”