

CHAPTER ONE

FINALLY, FREEDOM

Three days. Three freakin' days of waiting, mostly alone, in this little stone room with no windows, not even a television. At least a TV would have given her something to do. Not even a book to read. There were scrolls here at Rossla Haven, and Nalin had brought some in for her, but they were all religious—hermit stuff—nothing that would have staved off the boredom.

And then there was Nalin. Ah, yes, Nalin. He came and went, which seemed odd to Lisen because hadn't he told her that the recognition of him, not of her, could be their undoing? Maybe he'd found another hidden place, hidden from her and the others as well. Regardless, he had *his* freedom, but not poor Lisen of Solsta. She was stuck. After weeks of possession with two souls imprisoned as one in her mind, dispossession had freed her, but now her body was locked up instead. *Damn.*

She hated this body. She'd tried. She really had. She'd tried as hard as she could to accept the lack of what she considered to be *real* breasts, to accept the fur on her belly and the pouch where a bellybutton should be. She'd gone along with all of *their* plans for *her* life, all of the things that they all found quite natural and normal, but the novelty had worn off, leaving her with just an ugly, flat-chested, no-breasted, furry-bellied, open-holed body. *Yuck.*

"You know who would have loved this," she said to the emptiness of the room, standing up and pacing around, pontificating in English to no one but the walls. "Dad would have loved this. I remember him coming home—what was it? A year ago?—all excited about something one of his physicist friends at Cal Tech had told him. About how there might actually be alternate universes, and maybe even portals through time and space." She paused, then continued more softly. "Something, it occurs to me now, he already knew." Now *that* was a thought.

She absorbed it and then carried on. "So, did Eloise the Slippery tell me the truth about there being no way back? I mean, how does she know? What if I *could* go back? I could prove to the entire scientific community that there *are* other worlds with people just like us that you don't need rockets to...get...to."

She stopped. "Damn, if I went back there, I'd be the freakin' 'Kangaroo Girl.' Great."

She remained where she stood, wondering how much longer they'd have to wait for Korin's return. He was the only bright star in the dark night of what had become of her life. The only thing worth sticking around for—her Captain Cutie. That and her eighteenth birthday, which, she had realized after making such a point of it with the holder, meant nothing in Garla. She'd already reached her "majority" at sixteen as far as they were concerned here. Made her wonder why her brother had waited so long to off their mother.

She froze at the sound of footsteps. Nalin was bringing their breakfast. In the three days since she'd regained herself, she'd learned the routine. He got up and pulled on his tunic while she pretended to still be asleep. After a half hour or so, he returned with a tray of food, the same sort of food she'd grown used to at Solsta. Despite the grandness of this haven, the routine and the daily fare from the kitchen remained familiar, even though she was denied the opportunity

to actually participate in that routine.

The latch lifted, and she sat down on her cot and watched as Nalin pushed the door open with his shoulder, a tray in his hands, and then urged the door closed again with one foot.

"Good morning," he said, a little chilly as usual, and he set the tray down on the small table between them and settled onto his cot. "Sleep well?"

Every morning it was the same, as predictable as the haven in which they sat. Three "good mornings," three breakfasts with Nalin eating very little and Lisen scarfing down all her stomach could hold. It was like she hadn't eaten in weeks. *No, wait, I haven't eaten in weeks.* She smiled at her little joke.

"Lisen?" Nalin asked, and she shared her smile with him, though not the joke.

"Yes. Yes, I did sleep well. Thank you." She scooted closer to the table, grabbed the worn wooden spoon, scooped up some of the warm oatmeal-like cereal and put it into her mouth.

"You really have improved," he commented, picking at the small chunk of bread he'd brought for himself.

She looked at him, remembering their first encounter after the dispossession. When he'd walked in to check on her then, she'd already crawled into bed, exhausted and finally able to sleep. To her weary eyes, he'd glowed like an angel, with his flowing blond hair and a smile that had broken through at the sight of her sane once again. He'd felt to her like sunshine breaking through clouds. She shook her head. *Enough, Lisen. You're going all ga-ga, and you've got enough of that in your life.*

"So," she said to distract herself from the foolishness, "what happens once Ko...once Captain Rosarel, I mean, gets back?"

"We'll see when he gets here."

"And until then, I'm locked up in here, the mystery woman in the infirmary."

This inspired a little snort from the young noble. *A chuckle?* Lisen wondered.

He brushed a loose strand of hair back behind his ear. "The less those hermits out there know, the better. What you look like. Why you're here. Means they won't be able to tell Lorain's spies much of anything when they get here except that someone was here and now they're not."

"I know," Lisen said. "You've told me all that before. You know what I think? I think it's just to get back at me for the fact that you had to go back to Avaret instead of riding with us to Halorin."

She *had* hoped for another smile at this reference to his unwilling role as distraction to her brother, Ariel—the brother she'd never met but whose continued existence would allegedly produce all sorts of evil were he allowed to survive. But instead, she watched as Nalin closed up, his light blue eyes chilling to frost. Only then did she realize what she'd actually said; she'd reminded him that he hadn't been there when Jozan, his dearest friend—and her friend, too—had succumbed to a knife wound delivered by her brother's spy. Or Lorain Zanlot's, her brother's lover. The two names had grown synonymous in her mind.

The fact that Lisen had dispatched the spy, managing to survive; that Korin, her captain, had removed the threat of the first spy's companion; that the secret of her existence had appeared to have survived intact—none of these things eased Nalin's pain at the loss of his friend. Perhaps it was because only two weeks had passed between the time he'd found himself forced to adjust to the assassination of Empir Flandari—his mentor and Lisen's mother—and the night of Jozan's murder.

"Sorry," she said softly, eyes down, staring at her food. She wasn't very hungry anymore.

"No, no. Don't be sorry." He waved her off. "You're the Heir-Empir and should never apologize for anything."

He had no idea what statements like this did to her. It got her feeling all gooey inside, and not the good kind of gooey. She'd been the Heir-Empir for how long? It had been barely a month since her return from Earth, and thinking of parentage, *her* parentage, always brought her back to the Holts who'd loved her and guided her and pretended they were her parents for seven years. And God, she missed them.

Stop it, she ordered herself and urged that pain back into the part of her brain that could cushion the hurt.

"You must have some idea what the plan is. Come on. Tell me. Please?" she asked, steering the conversation towards what she hoped would be a more comfortable topic.

Nalin sighed. "I'll be returning to Avaret, of course."

"Of course. And me?" She thought she knew the answer. Nalin had let it slip that Korin had headed off to the desert as soon as he'd laid her down on the cot where she now sat.

"You and Rosarel will ride to Thristas. The captain has this idea that Garlan spies will find it difficult to trace the two of you once you're over the Rim."

Lisen nodded. "That's what *he* thinks. What do *you* think?" Nalin and Korin hadn't agreed on much of anything during the short time that she'd known them. It seemed that Korin prevailed because he came up with the more devious and, therefore, more effective ideas.

"He's right," Nalin replied. "Thristas is a different world. And although I wouldn't say Lorain has no Thristan spy in her employ, I don't know why she'd need one. Until now, of course."

"Which means that it could take her time to find one."

"Precisely," Nalin agreed.

"That must mean I'm learning, my getting that," she said and found herself fiddling nervously with her hermit ring, slipping it up and down her left middle finger with the fingers of her other hand.

He nodded. "Yes, you're learning," he replied. "But I'm afraid you'll have to leave that behind."

"What?" she asked. "What behind?"

"Your ring. Anything hermit will light the Thristans up like bonfires."

"Oh." She didn't like it. He was ordering her around, and she didn't like it.

With a sudden whoosh, the discomfort of the moment blew wide open, obliterated by someone bursting into the infirmary. Both she and Nalin looked up to the door, she afraid that her brother's spies had found her. But then, with the slamming of the door, Lisen recognized the intruder. *Korin*, she thought with a gasp. Then, "Korin," she said, unable to look away from him.

"Yes, my Liege." The captain pulled up a chair, set it down between the two of them where they sat on their cots and sat down, straddling it, leaning into its back with his chest.

"What the hell happened to your eye?" Lisen had been aware of his presence in the carriage those last days before reaching Rossla, but she had never really focused on him. She did, however, recall noticing something amiss, but she'd been unable to identify it. Now she saw it clearly for the first time – a black patch over his left eye.

"An accident, my Liege."

"When?" Lisen asked, needing to know now, not later.

"The night of Heir Tuane's murder. It's nothing."

"Your eye?"

"Also nothing," he replied with a wry grin. "It's gone." He shrugged. "I'm adjusting."

"And like Jozan, it's gone because of me?"

Korin sighed. He seemed uncomfortable under the glare of her attention. "It's gone because your assailant's companion got lucky before she got unlucky. I have no complaints."

"I'm...I'm so sorry," Lisen managed and saw Nalin's quick glare at the apology. If it weren't okay for her to apologize to a noble, how bad must it be to do so to a lowly captain of the Guard? She didn't care, and she shot Nalin an equally quick glare back, then returned to Korin.

"You seem more yourself, my Liege," Korin said. Lisen noticed that his face, streaked with grime, reflected a long, dirty ride.

"Nearly," she replied.

"Then the possession...?"

"Jozan is gone," she said, "three days now." She spoke bluntly to avoid any confusion.

"Good," her captain said. "That's very good."

Did she see a smile hinting at the corners of his mouth? *Yes*, she decided. *Definitely a smile.*

"Captain, she appears better than she actually is," Nalin said.

"My lord, I'd prefer hearing it from her." Korin turned his attention fully on Lisen. "My Liege?"

"I'm fine," she stated flatly.

"Then let's talk about why I'm here."

"I know why you're here," Lisen said. "You're here to take me to the desert."

"Aye, my Liege."

The holder no longer existed – only this man of the dark hair, the dark patch over what once had been a dark eye. And something else, something in his manner she couldn't define. A quickness of thought, not out of character, but more pronounced somehow.

"I think it would be wise if we leave today, immediately," he pronounced.

"No," Nalin objected, and Lisen turned to him, away from the enticing enigma with the missing eye, and got the chilly blues again.

"Nalin, I'm ready. The sooner, the better." So much moving about. So many farewells to one place after another.

"You need more rest, more time," the holder insisted.

"I don't have more time," she answered.

"I've brought appropriate apparel," Korin said and tossed the pack he'd carried in with him to her. She caught it and nodded. "The outer robes are for when we've crossed the Rim. Besides that, you may wear whatever you please."

"Thank you." She wanted to thank him for his sacrifice, too, but she'd already caused him enough discomfort about that.

"My Liege," Nalin pleaded, reaching a hand across the table between them to touch her arm.

She pulled away. "No. You said it yourself. The longer I'm here, the more vulnerable the hermits will be when questioned and the easier it will be for someone to know for sure that I *was* here. I'll be safer in Thristas."

"Are you sure you're able to travel?" Nalin asked. She could tell this was the last protest in his arsenal.

"I'll be fine," she replied. He looked sad, and she couldn't figure out why this moved her so.

"All right," he whispered.

"Good. You," Korin said, pointing at her as he rose from his chair, "get changed, and we'll meet you outside."

"Outside? Really? Outside?" She spoke with sarcastic enthusiasm, but neither of them responded. Nalin simply rose, and the two of them left her so she could change into her travel gear.

She dressed quickly, slipping out of the nightshift she'd worn for far too many days, pretending to be sick when she wasn't. Remnants of Jozan remained – she'd lied to Korin about that – but the effect was minimal. She couldn't wait to get out of this room, out into the world again, even if what that meant was escape into the unknown of the desert.

Once she finished, she threw the pack and its remaining contents over her shoulder and stepped to the door. There she paused and looked back at the room. Here, she'd been freed of the possession and let go of Jozan. She had survived – a miracle if she could believe what they all said, that possession never ended well. Lisen had been lucky that the Other smothering her soul had also been a strong-willed woman. A woman who, in the end, had shown Lisen all about the man she'd likely end up marrying one day. He wasn't a bad man, this Holder Nalin Corday. Nor was he bad looking, with his pretty blond hair and baby-blue eyes. But truth was, Nalin Corday could be just plain boring.

Lisen sighed. *One last look* as she realized she would never forget this room nor what had transpired here. *Too many deaths, and it must end.*

She opened the door and found the holder waiting for her. They stood alone in the hallway, staring at one another.

"The captain and I have firmed up the plan," he said. "He'll fill you in."

"How long will I stay in Thristas?" she asked.

"He'll bring you back in time for the Council session in May. He hopes to have you prepared by then to confront your brother. He tells me you've grasped the skills; you just need more practice."

"I've killed one man," she countered. "What makes you think I couldn't challenge my brother now?"

The holder shook his head. "You need to heal. Hermit Teran was very clear. The possession left you weak physically *and* emotionally."

All bravado aside, Lisen *was* beginning to feel a bit lightheaded out here in the world. Back there in the infirmary, just a door away, the four rock walls had provided her with a sense of inner solidity. Now, out where she might at any moment run into others, she felt disconnected from her surroundings, this hallway alone potentially more space than her still slightly scattered soul could manage. But she would not let on. "So Korin will fill me in?"

"Yes. And he's assured me that he will let me know if anything happens while you're out there."

"Sounds like the two of you have everything figured out."

"Not everything," Nalin replied, "but everything we could think of. It's all subject to change of course."

"Of course. Oh, and then there's this." She pulled the hermit ring from her middle finger and offered it to him.

"I can't take this," he said.

"Then give it to Hermit Teran. Tell him to hold on to it for me." With no true connection to the hermits, other than the childhood that lay a lifetime ago for her, she still felt odd handing the ring over.

"All right then," Nalin said and took it. Then came a brittle silence to which Lisen surrendered first.

"Well...I guess I should be going." She felt there should be more to this but knew there wasn't.

"Yes, I suppose you should," the holder replied.

She didn't know what she was looking for. Some acknowledgement of what they'd been

through together? A magical word that would make the prospect of spending the rest of her life in this wretched world less unpleasant because he was in it?

But the magic didn't arrive, and at last she simply nodded and stepped past him down the hall. She'd nearly made it to the turn when he called out, "Lisen?"

She turned back. Waiting. For the magic. "Yes?" She looked at him—this proud, golden holder of Felane with the deep blue eyes—and waited for him to speak.

"May One Be, Lisen of Solsta."

Well, that shut her out pretty plainly, but it still required a response. So, after a brief hesitation, she said, "One Is, Nalin of Felane." Then she turned again and left him there, alone, in the hall.