The thrill of the chase is nothing compared to this...

WARRIOR

Crackles with adventure, a rich sense of place, and terrific characterization.

—Mary Jo Putney

Zoë Archer
“I’M WITH YOU UNTIL THE END.”

As he said this, he felt the oddest surge of happiness—a feeling with which he hadn’t much experience, not since he’d resigned from the army. At that point, Huntley had settled on his makeshift plan to return to England, get an ordinary job, find a sweet wife, and install her in some snug home while they made armfuls of babies, but, strangely, the plan hadn’t raised his spirits as he thought it would. But throwing himself headlong into a cause he hadn’t known about a week earlier, a cause in which he’d face unknown, supernatural dangers…somehow that had done the trick. Huntley felt the blood moving in him, the old excitement of a campaign.

It was made all the better knowing that Thalia Burgess would be by his side.

Hearing his vow, she let out a breath she probably hadn’t known she was holding and smiled at him again. Seeing her smile, something hot and animal slid through him. But this wasn’t the time, and it wasn’t the place; he had his cause and his duty, so he tried to push that roused beast aside. It was a fight, though.

Instead of reaching for her, as he wanted to do, he asked, “And what are these paragons called, who safeguard the world, and save England from herself?”

Before she even spoke, he knew everything was about to change. And change forever.

“The Blades of the Rose.”
The Blades of the Rose

Coming Soon

SCOUNDREL

REBEL

STRANGER

Published by Kensington Publishing Corporation
For Zack:
my warrior,
my hero
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Kevan Lyon, Megan Records, and the late, great Kate Duffy. The road to the Blades of the Rose has been an amazing adventure because of these daring women.

Thanks to Kent Madin of Boojum Expeditions for his insight on Mongolia, and thank you to Yu-Huei Layton for help with key Chinese words.

And to everyone else who has provided encouragement and support for this eccentric, wonderful series—thank you.
Contents

Chapter 1: Trouble at the Docks
Chapter 2: A Mysterious Message Delivered
Chapter 3: Followed
Chapter 4: Captain Huntley’s Mysterious Disappearance
Chapter 5: The True Hammer of Thor
Chapter 6: Karakorum
Chapter 7: The Tortoise Speaks
Chapter 8: A Curious Means of Seeing
Chapter 9: The Lion and Lamb
Chapter 10: Another Form of Magic
Chapter 11: Nadaam
Chapter 12: Surprising Outcomes
Chapter 13: An Expanding Knowledge
Chapter 14: Within the Clouds
Chapter 15: Allies or Enemies?
Chapter 16: Oasis
Chapter 17: A Good Place to Stand and Fight
Chapter 18: The Siege Begins
Chapter 19: The Walls Are Breached
Epilogue: Winter’s Benefit
Chapter 1

Trouble at the Docks

Southampton, England. 1874.

Gabriel Huntley hated an unfair fight. He had hated it as a boy in school, he had hated it during his service in Her Majesty’s army, and he hated it now.

Huntley ducked as a fist sailed toward his head, then landed his own punches on his attacker in quick succession. As his would-be assailant crumpled, unconscious, to the ground, Huntley swung around to face another assault. Three men coming toward him, and quick, cold murder in their eyes. Their numbers were thinning, but not by much. Huntley couldn’t keep a smile from curving in the corners of his mouth. Less than an hour in England, and already brawling. Maybe coming home wouldn’t be so bad.

“Who the hell is this bloke?” someone yelped.

“Dunno,” came the learned reply.

“Captain Gabriel Huntley,” he growled, blocking another punch. He rammed his elbow into someone’s gut. “Of the Thirty-third Regiment of Foot.”

His ship had docked that night in Southampton, bringing him back to British shores after fifteen years away. As he had stood at the bottom of the gangplank, his gear and guns strapped to his back, he’d found himself strangely and uncharacteristically reticent. He couldn’t seem to get his feet to move forward. After years of moving from one end of the British Empire to the other, following orders sent down through the chain of command, he was finally able to decide on his fortune for himself. It was a prospect that he had been looking forward to for a long while. After resigning from his captaincy, he had booked passage on the next ship to England.

However, that idea had already begun to pale on the voyage back, with days and weeks of shipbound idleness leaving his mind to pick and gnaw at whatever fancy struck him. Yes, he’d been born in England and lived there for his first seventeen years—in a dismal Yorkshire coal mining village, more specifically. But nearly the other half of his life had been spent on distant shores: the Crimea, Turkey, India, Abyssinia. England had become no more than a far away ideal of a place recreated again and again in company barracks and officers’ clubs. He had barely any family and few friends in England besides Sergeant Alan Inwood. The two men had fought side-by-side for years, and when a bullet had taken Inwood’s leg, the trusty sergeant returned to England. But he’d written Huntley steadily over the years.

In Huntley’s pocket was Inwood’s latest missive. He’d memorized it, having read the letter over and over again on the voyage to England. It promised a job working with Inwood as a textile agent in Leeds. An ordinary, steady life. The prospect of marriage. Leeds, Inwood claimed, had an abundance of nice, respectable girls, daughters of mill owners, looking for husbands. Huntley could have a job and a wife in a trice—if he wanted.

Huntley knew how to fight in the worst conditions nature and man could create. Monsoons, blizzards, scorching heat. Bayonets, sabers, revolvers, and rifles. He’d eaten hardtack crawling with maggots. He’d swallowed the most fetid and foul water when there had been nothing else to drink. None of it had broken him. He had nothing left to fear. Yet the idea of truly settling down, finding, good Lord, a wife, it turned a soldier’s blood to sleet.

After the ship had docked, Huntley had lingered at the foot of the gangplank, jostled on all sides by the shoving and cursing mass of the crowded dock. He had tried to make himself take the first step toward his new life, an ordinary life, and found that he couldn’t.

Not yet, at any rate. Instead of rushing toward the inn where mail coaches waited to take passengers to English towns and cities near and far, Huntley had begun to walk in the opposite direction. Though he’d been at sea for months, he needed more time. Time to think. Time to plan. Time to grow accustomed to his strange and foreign homeland. Time for at least one pint.

He walked without real purpose, winding his way through the maze of narrow, lamplit streets that led from the pier. He hadn’t gone more than thirty yards from the docks when the crowds thinned, leaving him on a quiet, dark street bathed in seaside mists. A large orange tabby cat slunk by, heading for the docks and promises of fish. At the end of the street was a tiny pub, casting yellow light onto the slick stone pavement outside, and full of raucous laughter and rough talk, not unlike the kind that could be found in any military barracks.

It seemed like heaven.
Huntley had started toward the pub, the desire for a pint of bitters strong in his mouth. At least that part of him was a true Englishman. As he strode toward the welcoming chaos, his soldier’s senses alerted him to trouble close at hand. In the gloom of an alleyway leading off the street, he heard it first, then saw it, the sight that turned his blood to fire and overrode all thought: one man, badly outnumbered, wounded and staggering, as half a dozen men attacked him and several others stood nearby, ready to throw themselves into the fray should they be needed. He knew at once that what was happening was wrong, and that he had to help the injured man.

Huntley had launched himself into the fight, needing to even the odds.

Three men now came at him, throwing him against a damp brick wall. Fortunately, his pack kept him from smashing his head against the bricks. Two men took his arms while the third pinned his middle. Before any of them could land a punch, Huntley slammed his knee up into the chest of the man pinning him, knocking the air out of him with a hard gasp, then he wedged the heel of his boot against the man’s ribs and shoved. Winded as he was, the man could only scrabble for a hold before being thrown into a pile of empty crates, whose sharp edges made for a less than cushioned fall as the crates broke apart. Huntley swiftly rid himself of the other two men.

He considered going for his rifle or revolver, but quickly discarded the idea. Firearms in tight quarters such as alleyways were just as dangerous to whomever wielded them as they were to the intended targets. Striking distance was too close, and it would be far too easy for someone to grab the weapon from him once it was cocked and turn it on him.

Fists it was, then. Huntley had no qualms with that.

Huntley sprinted toward where the victim was being pummeled by two men. As Huntley came to the victim’s aid, one of the attackers managed to graze a fist against Huntley’s mouth. But it was nothing compared to the damage the victim had taken. Blood was splattered all over the man’s shirt and waistcoat, his jacket was ripped at the seams, and his face was swollen and cut. Huntley had been in enough brawls to know that if the victim made it through the fight, his face would never be the same, even under his gingery beard. He was still swinging, though, bless his soul, as he staggered and struggled.

“I don’t like bullies,” Huntley rumbled. He grabbed the man who’d just punched him and gripped him by the throat, squeezing tightly.

The man scrabbled to pry Huntley’s fingers from around his neck, but the hand that had grown strong gripping a rifle through fifteen years of campaigns couldn’t be removed. Still, the man managed to choke out a few words.

“Whoever...you are...,” he rasped, “walk...away. Isn’t your...fight.”

Huntley grinned viciously. “That’s for me to decide.”

“Fool,” the man wheezed.

“Perhaps,” Huntley answered, “but since these are my fingers around your throat”—and here he tightened his hold, squeezing out an agonized gargle from the other man—“it wouldn’t be wise to start tossing out names, would it?”

The man’s answer never came. From behind Huntley, an abbreviated cry shot out, sharp and dreadful. Turning, Huntley saw a flash of metal gleam in the half light of the alley. One of the attackers stepped back from the victim, a long and wicked blade streaked with bright red in his hand. Blood quickly began to soak through the front of the victim’s waistcoat and run through his fingers as he pressed against the wound in his stomach.

“Morris isn’t going anywhere,” the knife-wielding man said. His accent was clipped and well-born, as neatly groomed as his gleaming blond hair and moustache. He seemed comfortable with the red-smeared blade in his hand, despite his aristocratic air. “Let’s go,” Groomed Gent commanded to the other men.

Huntley spent half a moment’s deliberation on whether to go for the upper cruster with the knife or attend to the fellow who’d been stabbed, Morris. He released his grip on his captive’s throat at once and barely caught Morris before the wounded man collapsed to the ground.

The attackers quickly fled from the alley, but not before someone asked, pointing at their unconscious comrade slumped nearby, “What about Shelley? And him,” gesturing toward Huntley.

“Shelley’s on his own,” Groomed Gent barked. “And the other one knows nothing. We have to move now,” he added with a snarl. And before Huntley could stop them, every last one of the assailants disappeared into the night, leaving him cradling a dying man.

And he was dying. Of that, Huntley had no doubt. He’d seen similar wounds on the battlefield and knew that they were always fatal. Blood seeped faster and faster through the gash in Morris’s abdomen. It would take something akin to a miracle to stop the advance of death, and Huntley had no store of miracles in his pack.

He gently lowered himself and Morris to the ground. “Let me fetch a surgeon,” he said. He slipped the straps of his pack from his shoulders so the weight eased off.

“No,” gasped Morris. “No use. And time’s running out.”

“At the least, I can get the constabulary,” Huntley said. He recalled the icy cruelty of the knife-wielding
gentleman, the sharp angles of his face that likely came directly from generations of similarly ruthless people’s
intermarrying and breeding. “I had a decent enough look at those men’s faces. I could describe most of them, see
them brought to justice.”

A mirthless smile touched Morris’s lips. “That would be the fastest way for you to wind up dead in an
alleyway, my friend.”

Huntley wondered who those men were, that attacked a gentleman in an alley like common footpads but had
enough power for retribution. Perhaps a criminal organization. With a well-heeled gentleman as a member of its
ranks. Was such a thing possible? He couldn’t think on it now. Instead, knowing that his face would be the last that
Morris would ever see and wanting to make the remaining time more personal, he said, “Name’s Huntley.”

“Anthony Morris.” The two shared an awkward handshake, and Huntley’s hand came away smeared crimson.

“Is there anything I can do for you, Morris?” he asked. Not much longer now, if the dark blood drenching
Morris’s clothing was any indication.

Frowning, Morris started to speak, but then Huntley’s attention was distracted. The remaining attacker, who
had been slumped unconscious against a wall, had somehow come to without making a sound. But now he was
crouched nearby, whispering into his cupped hands. Looking closer, Huntley was able to see that the man held
something that looked remarkably like a small wasps’ nest—but it was made of gold. The close air of the alley was
suddenly filled with a loud, insistent droning as, incredibly, the golden nest began to glow.

Not once, through the many places around the world he had been posted, had Huntley ever seen or heard
anything like this, and he had seen some of the most incomprehensible things anyone could envision. He was
transfixed, his mind immobilized by the sight.

The buzzing grew louder still, the nest glowed brighter as the man whispered on. Then something appeared in
an opening in the nest, a tiny shine of a metallic wasp. Of its own volition, Huntley’s hand came up, trying to reach
out toward the mysterious spectacle. A line of wasps suddenly shot from the nest, directly toward Huntley and
Morris. And Huntley still could not move.

With a grunt and groan, Morris managed to shift himself around in Huntley’s arms and shove him down to the
ground. They both splayed out onto the slippery pavement. And just in time. Dozens of wasps slammed into the wall
behind them, their noise and impact against the brick like a round of bullets shot from a Gatling gun. Chips of
mortar and brick rained down onto Huntley as he raised his arm to shield himself and Morris. He quickly reached
out and grabbed a wooden board from a crate that had been broken apart in the fight. Several nails stuck out from
one end of the board, and this he hurled at the man with the wasps’ nest. The man yelped in surprised pain as the
board hit him in the head, then staggered to his feet and scurried away, cradling the nest and pressing a palm to his
bleeding scalp. It wouldn’t be difficult to catch up with the wounded man, but in those few minutes, Morris would
be dead, and Huntley had seen enough death to know it was better with someone, anyone, beside you.

He might have joined Morris in the afterlife, though. Huntley looked up at the wall behind him. Two dozen
neat holes had been punched into the solid face of the brick. Exactly where his head had been. If Morris hadn’t
pushed him, those holes would now be adorning his own skull and his brains would be nicely splattered across half
of Southampton, where they wouldn’t do him much good.

“What the hell was that?” he demanded from Morris. Huntley heaved himself up into a sitting position, with
Morris leaning against him. “Wasps like bullets? From a glowing golden nest?”

Morris coughed, sending another bubble of blood through his fingers. “Never mind that. Something I have to
tell you. A message to deliver. Must be delivered...personally.”

“Of course.” Huntley owed Morris his life. That bound him to his service. It didn’t matter that, in a matter of
minutes, Morris would be dead. It was an unbreakable rule, one that was never questioned, never doubted. Honor
was held at a premium when the rest of the world went to hell. “Have you a letter? Something I should write down?”

There were a few books in his pack, but of any of these he would gladly sacrifice a few pages to transcribe Morris’s
message.

Morris shook his head weakly. “Can’t write the message down. Even so, there are no mail routes to deliver it.”

A message that could not be written. A destination beyond the all-encompassing reach of the British postal
service. Things began to get stranger and stranger. Huntley started to wonder if, perhaps, he was lying drunk in a
gutter somewhere, already deep in his return to England alcohol binge, and everything that had happened, was
happening, was a whiskey-induced delusion. “Where’s it going?”

“To my friend, Franklin Burgess.” Morris gritted his teeth as a wave of pain moved through him, and Huntley
did his best to comfort him, brushing clammy strands of hair back from Morris’s forehead. “In Urga. Outer
Mongolia.”

“That is...far,” Huntley managed after he found his voice.

Another ghostly smile curved Morris’s mouth. “Always is. Was headed to a ship to take me there when,” he
nodded toward the horrible wound in his stomach as his smile faded. With his free hand, he clutched at Huntley’s jacket. The strength left in Morris’s grip surprised Huntley, but Morris was growing more and more agitated. Huntley tried to calm him, but to no avail. Morris became nearly frantic, spending the last of his energy as he tugged Huntley closer. “Please. You must deliver the message to Burgess. Thousands of lives at stake. More. Many more.”

Huntley hesitated. Inwood’s letter was in his pocket. The promise of a quiet future beckoned. What Morris asked was huge, a deviation from plans to settle in Leeds, and yet, to Huntley’s mind, an adventure into unknown lands was infinitely preferable to tranquility. The fact that he’d thrown himself into a fight minutes after arriving in England told him so. Intelligent, probably not, but Huntley never put much stock in dry logic. And Morris had saved his life, the ultimate obligation. He could not refuse the dying man.

He said, “Give me the message. I’ll deliver it to him.”

Morris seemed momentarily surprised that Huntley had agreed, but then pulled him down so his ear was level with Morris’s mouth. In words barely audible, he whispered into Huntley’s ear. Huntley didn’t quite know what to expect, but certainly not the two lines of nonsense that Morris faintly gasped. How could the lives of thousands or more rest on something not even Edward Lear would comprehend?

“Repeat them back to me,” Morris insisted. He was waxen and pale, his lips growing stiff and awkward. The blood from his wound was slowing now. The source was nearly tapped out.

Feeling not a little ridiculous, Huntley repeated Morris’s message—three times at Morris’s urging—until the dying man was satisfied.


Huntley, who hadn’t been relishing the idea of his return to England, was still surprised by the speed with which he was supposed to leave it. He had some money from his army discharge, but he doubted he had enough to pay for a trip to the other side of the world. Soldiering was not the way any man could make his fortune, though perhaps that was the reason it attracted such a variety of reckless fools, including himself. As if anticipating his objections, Morris added, “In my coat pocket. My papers. Take my place on the ship.”

His head still swimming with all that he had seen and heard within the span of an hour, Huntley could only nod. Then a thought occurred to him. “This man, Burgess,” he said. “I doubt he’ll trust me if I show up at his door with some ridiculous…er, coded message, and say that you’ve…” He let his words trail off, even though it was clear that they both knew Morris wasn’t going to make it out alive from the alley.

Morris’s eyes were dull and sinking into his face. Huntley could barely hear him when he said, “Waistcoat inside pocket.”

As carefully as he could, Huntley reached into the small pocket sewn into the lining of Morris’s waistcoat. He pulled from the pocket a small circular metal object that turned out to be a compass. In the dimness of the alley, he was just able to see that the exterior of the compass was covered with minute writing in languages Huntley could not read, though he suspected they were Greek, Hebrew, and, yes, Sanskrit, of which he had a small knowledge. He opened the lid. Each point of the compass was represented by a different blade: the Roman soldier’s pugio, the European duelist’s rapier, the curved scimitar of the Near East, and the deadly serpentine form of the kris from the East Indies. A classic English rose lay at the center of the compass. Huntley realized that the compass was exceptionally old, with the heaviness of precious metal. Whispers of the past seemed to curl from it like perfumed smoke, and the lure of distant shores beckoned from within it, more powerful than any siren’s call. It was extraordinary.

“Give that. To Burgess.” Morris’s breath grew even more shallow. “Say to him, ‘North is eternal.’ He’ll know.”

“I’ll do that, Morris,” Huntley said, straight and solemn.

“Thank you,” he gasped. “Thank you.” He seemed to relax at last, no longer fighting the inevitable.

“Is there someone else I should tell about you? Some family?”

“None. Only family I have. Will learn soon enough.” And with those words, a final spasm passed through Morris, the body’s last struggle to cling to the knowable world. He arched up, almost flinging himself from Huntley’s arms as a strangled sound ripped from his throat. Then he fell back, eyes open, and Huntley knew it was done.

He looked down at the dead man’s face. Morris couldn’t have been more than forty or forty-five, a hale man who, though he wasn’t a soldier by trade, had kept himself well-conditioned. He was dressed finely, without ostentation, the quality of his clothing revealing a certain level of status few, including Huntley himself, would enjoy. Shame to have Morris’s life end so abruptly, shame to meet death in an ignominious, dirty alley, the victim of an unfair fight.

Huntley reached down and closed Morris’s eyes. He sighed. No, he never quite got used to death, no matter how familiar it had become.
Two hours later saw Huntley standing on the deck of the Frances, watching the lights of Southampton grow smaller and fainter in the dark of night.

Good-bye, again, he thought.

After Morris had expired, Huntley took the travel papers from the dead man’s pocket and saw that the ship on which he was intending to sail would be leaving shortly. There wouldn’t be time to call for the police, since a lengthy inquiry would surely follow with the real possibility that Huntley would be forbidden to leave the country until the matter of Morris’s death had been resolved. That could take weeks, weeks that Morris had assured him he did not have. So Huntley carefully lay Morris’s body upon the ground and used the man’s coat to cover his face. His own clothing was utterly soaked in Morris’s blood. Getting on a ship in gore-drenched clothes was not an attractive or likely option. He had gone through his pack and found a fresh change, wrapping the ruined garments in a small blanket and stuffing them back into his pack. No point in leaving any clues to his identity when the constabulary did finally discover Morris.

Huntley had felt not a little guilty, leaving Morris alone in that dank alley, but there was nothing to be done for it. When he had presented the papers to the steamship Frances’s first mate, he was taken at his word to be Anthony Morris, of Devonshire Terrace, London, and was shown to a cabin far more luxurious than the one Huntley had voyaged in on his return. As the ship raised anchor and prepared to sail, the elegance of the cabin, with its brass fixtures and framed prints, could not compete with the restlessness of Huntley’s heart, and he found himself standing on the deck with a few of the other passengers, watching the shore of England recede.

“We’re going to Constantinople.” Huntley looked over and saw a young, genteel woman at his shoulder beaming at him. A sharp-eyed mama stood nearby, watching the flirtation of her charge, but had evidently gleaned enough information about “Mr. Morris” to render him an appropriate target for a girl’s shipboard romance. Huntley felt the stirrings of panic.

“This is my first international voyage,” the girl continued brightly. “I cannot wait to get away from boring old Shropshire.” She waited, smiling prettily, for his suitably charming response. A light sweat beaded on his back.

“Knew a fellow from Constantinople,” Huntley finally said. “Excellent shot. I once saw him shoot a mosquito off a water buffalo’s rump.”

The girl gaped at him, flushed, then turned and walked away as quickly as she could toward the protective embrace of her mother. After the mother glared at him, both females disappeared. Presumably they were off to spread the word that Mr. Morris was the most uncouth and ill-mannered man on the ship, including the one-eyed cook who was both a drunkard and an atheist.

Perhaps a little more time away from England would be for the best. Huntley would have to start his bride hunt when he came back, and, if that last exchange was any indicator, he sorely needed some refinement where his conversation with ladies was concerned. Fifteen years out of the company of respectable women tended to leave a mark on one’s manners.

He had an even larger enigma on his hands than the workings of the feminine mind. Reaching into his pocket, Huntley pulled out the remarkable compass and stared at its face. He rubbed his thumb over the writings that covered the case as if trying to decipher them by touch, then flipped open the lid to look at the four blades that comprised the four directions. Priceless and old, even he could see that. And full of mystery.

Yes, things were about to get very interesting. No Leeds and job and wife, at least, not yet. A wry smile touched his lips, and he turned his back on the receding English coastline to make his way back down to his cabin.
Chapter 2
A Mysterious Message Delivered

Urga, Outer Mongolia. 1874. Three months later.

An Englishman was in Urga.

The town was no stranger to foreigners. Half of Urga was Chinese; merchants and Manchu officials dealt in commerce and administering the Qing empire. Russians, too, had a small foothold in the town. The Russian consulate was one of the only actual buildings in a town otherwise almost entirely comprised of felt ger tents and Buddhist temples. So it was not entirely unexpected to hear of an outlander in town.

But Englishmen—those were much more rare, and, to Thalia Burgess, more alarming.

She hurried through what passed for streets, jostling past the crowds. Strange to be amongst crowds in a land that was mostly wide open. Like a typical Mongol, Thalia wore a del, the three-quarter-length robe that buttoned at the right shoulder to a high, round-necked collar, a sash of red silk at her waist. Trousers tucked into boots with upturned toes completed her ordinary dress. Though she was English, as was her father, they had both been in Mongolia so long that their presence was hardly remarked upon even by the most isolated nomads. No one paid her any mind as she made her way through the labyrinth of what approximated streets in Urga, toward the two gers she and her father shared.

She tried to fight the panic that rose in her chest. Word had reached her in the marketplace that an Englishman had come to this distant part of the world, which, in and of itself troubled her. But the worst news came when she learned that this stranger was asking for her father, Franklin Burgess. Her first thought was to get home at once. If the Heirs had come calling, her father would be unable to defend himself, even with the help of their servants.

As she hurried, Thalia dodged past a crowd of saffron-robed monks, some of them boys training to become lamas. She passed a temple, hearing the monks inside chanting, then stopped abruptly and threw herself back against the wall, hiding behind a painted pillar.

It was him. The Englishman. She knew him right away by his clothing—serviceable and rugged coat, khaki trousers, tall boots, a battered broad-brimmed felt hat atop his sandy head. He carried a pack, a rifle encased in a scabbard hanging from the back. A pistol was strapped to his left hip, and a horn-handled hunting knife on his right hip. All of his gear looked as though it had seen a lot of service. This man was a traveler. He was tall as well, half a head taller than nearly everyone in the crow. Thalia could not see his face as he walked away from her, had no idea if he was young or old, though he had the ease and confidence of movement that came from relative youth. In his current condition, her father couldn’t face down a young, healthy, and armed man with an agenda.

Thalia pushed away from the pillar and dodged down a narrow passage between gers. Whoever he was, he didn’t know Urga as she did, and she could take shortcuts to at least ensure she arrived at her home before him. Thalia had been to Urga many times, and, since her father’s accident, they had been here for months. The chaos still did not make sense to her, but it was a familiar chaos she could navigate.

As she raced past the light fences that surrounded the tents, she had to thread past herds of goats and sheep, horses and camels, and dodge snarling, barely tamed dogs that stood guard. She snarled at a dog who nipped at her leg, causing the animal to fall back. Nimble, she leapt over a cluster of children playing. As Thalia rounded past another ger, she caught one more glimpse of the Englishman, this time just a brief flash of his face, and, yes, he was young, but she did not see enough to ascertain more.

Perhaps, she tried to console herself, he wasn’t an Heir, merely a merchant or some scientist come to Outer Mongolia to ply his trade, and in search of the language and faces of his homeland. She smiled grimly. It didn’t seem likely. No one came to Urga without a specific purpose. And the Englishman’s purpose was them.

At last, she reached the two gers that made up the Burgess enclosure. Thalia burst through the door of her father’s tent to find him reading. The furnishings here were exactly as they might be in any Mongol’s ger, with only books in English, Russian, and French to indicate that she and her father were from another country. She allowed herself a momentary relief to see him unharmed and alone. Franklin Burgess was fifty-five, his black hair and beard now dusted with silver, green eyes creased in the corners with lines that came from advancing age and nearly a lifetime spent out of doors. He was her sole parent, had been for almost her entire twenty-five years, and Thalia could not imagine her world without him. She might as well try to picture what life might be like without the sun.
Cold. Unbearable.

At her hurried entrance, he set aside his book and peered at her over his spectacles.

“What is it, *tsentseg*?” he asked.

Thalia quickly explained to him what she had learned, and her father frowned. “I saw him,” she added. “He didn’t know where he was going, but he wasn’t panicking. He seemed used to dealing with unfamiliar situations.”

“An Heir, perhaps?” Franklin asked as he removed his glasses.

She shook her head. “I could not tell.”

With more calm than she felt, he said, “Be a dear and hand me my rifle.” Thalia hastily retrieved her father’s gun, one that could open up a nicely sized hole in anyone who sought mischief. Franklin checked to be sure it was loaded, then tucked it behind the chair in which he sat, within easy reach. He was careful not to disturb his right leg, propped in front of him on a low stool. The bones were finally beginning to repair themselves after the accident with the horses, and neither Thalia nor her father wanted any kind of setback to the healing process, not when it had taken so long for the nasty double break to mend at all. It was amazing that, after being trampled by a herd of horses, her father had sustained only a few cuts and bruises in addition to his broken leg. It could have been much worse.

“We don’t know if he is an Heir, though,” Franklin said. He looked over to the kestrel they kept, perched quietly near the bookcase. The bird didn’t seem uneasy, a good sign. “Just in case it isn’t an Heir, perhaps it would be wise if you…” He gestured toward her *del.*

His own clothes were a mixture of European and Mongol, and while it might be more common for European men to adopt some aspect of native dress outside of their home country, it was entirely different for women. Should this strange Englishman turn out to be nothing more than a trader or scholar, it wouldn’t do to raise suspicions. To the outside world, Franklin Burgess and his daughter Thalia were simply anthropologists collecting folklore for their own academic pursuits.

Thalia looked down at herself and grimaced. “The things I do for the Blades,” she muttered, and her father chuckled. She gave him a quick kiss on his bristly cheek and rushed into her *ger.* Most Mongolian families did not have separate *gers* for parents and children, but as soon as Thalia had turned thirteen, her father thought it best to stray from native custom and give his daughter some privacy.

“Udval,” she called to her female servant in Mongolian, “can you please grab my dress? The English one? It’s in the green chest. At the bottom.”

Thalia began pulling off her *del,* her boots to follow, as the woman set aside her brewing of milk tea to look for the seldom-used gown.

“Here is your dress, Thalia *guai,*” Udval said, holding up the pale blue gown in question. She looked at it, then looked back at Thalia, doubt plainly written on her face. “I think, perhaps, it has grown smaller.”

Standing in the middle of her *ger,* wearing a chemise and drawers, Thalia fought back a sigh. “No, it has stayed the same, but I have gotten bigger.” Three inches taller, to be more precise. The last time Thalia had worn that gown, she had been fifteen, and though she had been a relatively average-sized girl, she was now a tall woman who stood nose-to-nose with most men. She and her father had purchased the dress ready-made from a Regent Street shop, and it was now the sole remaining relic of their long-ago trip to England. Fashions, no doubt, had changed considerably, but into what, Thalia hadn’t the vaguest idea. *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* seldom reached Outer Mongolia.

“We’ll have to do the best we can,” she said to Udval, who held the dress open as Thalia struggled into it.

“Do Englishwomen have fewer ribs?” Udval asked as she valiantly tried to close up the back of the dress.

“No,” Thalia gasped, trying to suck her sides in as far as she could, “they prefer to have all their ribs shoved into their innards with a corset.”

“Ah! It is closed now, but do not take deep breaths. What is a corset?”

Thalia tugged at the cuffs of the dress, but unless she wanted to tug the sleeves right out of the shoulder seams, her wrists were going to be pitifully exposed, the cuffs ending in the middle of her forearms. “A torture device that compresses a woman’s ribs and stomach.”

Udval looked shocked. “Why do the Englishmen punish their women like that?”

“Because the women are much smarter than the men,” Thalia answered. She shook out the full skirts that hung limply to the ground. Without a crinoline to support the fabric, the dress looked like a deflated circus tent. Thalia remembered that she hadn’t a single pair of the dainty shoes she had worn with the dress, and even if she did, her heels would now hang off the back. She shoved her feet back into her Mongolian boots. There wasn’t much time left.

She started for the door, but then remembered her mother’s hand mirror, and pulled it from the small box of jewelry and other mementos left to her after her mother had died. Thalia scanned her reflection critically. Englishwomen kept their hair up, so Thalia took her mass of heavy, dark hair and hastily pulled it into a bun that almost immediately began to slide loose. She found a few pins in the box that managed to tame her hair, but just
barely. She hadn’t any cosmetics, so there would be no way to hide the telltale flush of color in her cheeks, or the gleaming brightness of her jade green eyes, all of which came from years on horseback beneath the expansive Mongolian sky. She recalled that Englishmen liked their women pale and delicate. Thalia failed on both counts.

What did it matter? Her primary concern was making sure that the inquisitive stranger was not an Heir, or anyone else who might cause her and her father harm. Fashion could go hang.

Thalia ran back to her father’s ger, cursing as the narrow dress bit into her sides. Their other servant, Batu, followed her inside, and he made a choking noise when he observed her dress. She gave him a fierce scowl that would have sent lesser men running for cover, but Batu had known her since she was a child, and only chuckled to himself as he moved to put away the books scattered throughout the ger.

When Franklin saw her enter, his eyebrows rose.

“You look…”

“Hilarious,” Thalia supplied.

“Well, yes,” her father agreed. “But I was also going to say ‘lovely’.”

Thalia went to one of the painted chests and pulled out her father’s seldom-used revolver, then checked to ensure it was loaded. “I can’t very well be both.”

Before her father could answer, there was a knock at the wooden door to the tent. Her father called out, “Enter.” The door began to swing open.

Thalia tucked the hand holding the revolver behind her back. She stood behind her father’s chair and braced herself, wondering what kind of man would step across the threshold and if she would have to use a gun on another human being for the first time in her life.

The man ducked to make it through the door, then immediately removed his hat, uncovering a head of close-cropped, wheat-colored hair. He was not precisely handsome, but he possessed an air of command and confidence that shifted everything to his favor. His face was lean and rugged, his features bold and cleanly defined; there was nothing of the drawing room about him, nothing refined or elegant. He was clean-shaven, allowing the hard planes of his face to show clearly. He was not an aristocrat and looked as though he had fought for everything he ever had in his life, rather than expecting it to be given to him. Even in the filtered light inside the ger, Thalia could see the gleaming gold of his eyes, their sharp intelligence that missed nothing as they scanned the inside of the tent and finally fell on her and her father.

“Franklin Burgess?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” her father answered, guarded. “My daughter, Thalia.”

She remembered enough to sketch a curtsy as she felt the heat of the stranger’s gaze on her. An uncharacteristic flush rose in her cheeks.

“And you are…?” her father prompted.

“Captain Gabriel Huntley,” came the reply, and now it made sense that the man who had such sure bearing would be an officer. “Of the Thirty-third Regiment.” Thalia was not certain she could relax just yet, since it was not unheard of for the Heirs to find members in the ranks of the military. She quickly took stock of the width of the captain’s shoulders, how even standing still he seemed to radiate energy and the capacity for lethal movement. Captain Huntley would be a fine addition to the Heirs.

There was something magnetic about him, though, something that charged the very air inside the ger, and she felt herself acutely aware of him. His sculpted face, the brawn of his body, the way he carried his gear, all of it, felt overwhelmingly masculine. How ironic, how dreadful, it would be, if the only man to have attracted her attention in years turned out to be her enemy. Sergei, her old suitor, had wound up being her enemy, but in a very different way.

“You are out of uniform, Captain Huntley,” her father pointed out.

For the first time since his entrance, the captain’s steady concentration broke as he glanced down at his dusty civilian traveling clothes. “I’m here in an unofficial capacity.” He had a gravelly voice with a hint of an accent Thalia could not place. It was different from the cultured tones of her father’s friends, rougher, but with a low music that danced up the curves of her back.

“And what capacity is that?” she asked. Thalia realized too late that a proper Englishwoman would not speak so boldly, nor ask a question out of turn, but, hell, if Captain Huntley was an Heir, niceties did not really matter.

His eyes flew back to her, and she met his look levelly, even as a low tremor pulsed inside her. God, there it was again, that strange something that he provoked in her, now made a hundred times stronger when their gazes connected. She watched him assess her, refusing to back down from the unconcealed measuring. She wondered if he felt that peculiar awareness too, if their held look made his stomach flutter. Thalia doubted it. She was no beauty—too tall, her features too strong, and there was the added handicap of this dreadful dress. Besides, he didn’t quite seem like the kind of man who fluttered anything.

Yet…maybe she was wrong. Even though he was on the other side of the ger, Thalia could feel him looking at
her, taking her in, with an intensity that bordered on unnerving. And intriguing.

Regardless of her scanty knowledge of society, Thalia did know that gentlemen did not look at ladies in such a fashion. Strange. Officers usually came from the ranks of the upper classes. He should know better. But then, so should she.

“As a messenger,” he answered, still holding Thalia’s gaze, “from Anthony Morris.”

That name got her attention, as well as her father’s.

“What about Morris?” he demanded. “If he has a message for me, he should be here, himself.”

The captain broke away from looking intently at Thalia as he regarded her father. He suddenly appeared a bit tired, and also sad.

“Mr. Morris is dead, sir.”

Thalia gasped, and her father cried out in shock and horror. Tony Morris was one of her father’s closest friends. Thalia put her hand on her father’s shoulder and gave him a supportive squeeze as he removed his glasses and covered his eyes. Tony was like a younger brother to her father, and Thalia considered him family. To know that he was dead—her hands shook. It couldn’t be true, could it? He was so bright and good and...God, her throat burned from unshed tears for her friend. She swallowed hard and glanced up from her grief. Such scenes were to be conducted in private, away from the eyes of strangers.

The captain ducked his head respectfully as he studied his hands, which were gripped tightly on his hat. Through the fog of her sorrow, Thalia understood that the captain had done this before. Given bad news to the friends and families of those that had died. What a dreadful responsibility, one she wouldn’t wish on anyone.

She tried to speak, but her words caught on shards of loss. She gulped and tried again. “How did it happen?”

The captain cleared his throat and looked at Franklin. He seemed to be deliberately avoiding looking at her.

“This might not be suitable for...young ladies.”

Even in her grief, Thalia had to suppress a snort. Clearly, this man knew nothing of her. Fortunately, her father, voice rough with emotion about Tony Morris’s death, said, “Please speak candidly in front of Thalia. She has a remarkably strong constitution.”

Captain Huntley’s gaze flicked back at her for a brief moment, then stayed fixed on her father. She saw with amazement that this strapping military man was uncomfortable, and, stranger still, it was her that was making him uncomfortable. Perhaps it was because of the nature of his news, unsuitable as it was for young ladies. Or perhaps it was because he’d felt something between them, as well, something instant and potent. She did not want to consider it, not when she was reeling from the pain of Tony Morris’s death.

After clearing his throat again, the captain said, “He was killed, sir. In Southampton.”

“So close!” Franklin exclaimed. “On our very doorstep.”

“I don’t know ‘bout doorsteps, sir, but he was attacked in an alley by a group of men.” Captain Huntley paused as Thalia’s father cursed. “They’d badly outnumbered him, and he fought bravely until the end.”

“How do you know all this?” Thalia asked. If Tony’s death had been reported in the papers, surely someone other than the captain would be standing in their ger right now, Bennett Day or Catullus Graves. How Thalia longed to see one of their numbers, to share her family’s grief with them instead of this man who disquieted her with his very presence.

Captain Huntley again let his eyes rest on her briefly. She fought down her immediate physical response, trying to focus on what he was saying. “I was there, miss, when it happened. Passing by when I heard the sounds of Morris’s being attacked, and joined in to help him.” He grimaced. “But there were too many, and when my back was turned, he was stabbed by one of them—a blond man who talked like a nob, I mean, a gentleman.”

“Henry Lamb?” Franklin asked, looking up at Thalia. She shrugged. Her father turned his attention back to the captain and his voice grew sharp, “You say you were merely ‘passing by,’ and heard the scuffle and just ‘joined in to help.’ Sounds damned suspicious to me.” Thalia had to agree with her father. What sort of man passed by a fight and came to the aid of the victim, throwing himself into the fray for the sake of a stranger? Hardly anyone.

Captain Huntley tightened his jaw, angry. “Suspicious or not, sir, that’s what happened. Morris even saved my life just before the end. So when he gave me the message to deliver to you, in person, I couldn’t say no.”

“You came all the way from Southampton to Urga to fulfill a dying man’s request, a man you had never met before,” Thalia repeated, disbelief plain in her voice.

The captain did not even bother answering her. “It couldn’t be written down, Morris said,” he continued, addressing her father and infuriating Thalia in the process. She didn’t care for being ignored. “I’ve had it in my head for nearly three months, and it makes no sense to me, so I’ll pass it on to you. Perhaps you can understand it, sir, because, as much as I’ve tried, I can’t.”

“Please,” her father said, holding his hand out and gesturing for Captain Huntley to proceed.

“The message is this: ‘The sons are ascendant. Seek the woman who feeds the tortoise.’”
He glanced at both Thalia and her father to see their reactions, and could not contain his surprise when her father cursed again and Thalia gripped a nearby table for support. She felt dizzy. It was beginning. “You know what that means?” the captain asked.

Franklin nodded as his hands curled and uncurled into fists, while Thalia caught her lower lip between her teeth and gnawed pensively on it.

She knew it was bound to happen, but they had never known when. That time was now at hand. If what Captain Huntley said was true, they would have to move quickly. But that was presuming he was speaking the truth.

“We don’t know if we can trust you, Captain,” Thalia said. She stepped around her father’s chair and, despite the tight discomfort of the dress, walked straight up to Captain Huntley, pausing only a few feet away from him. He stiffened slightly at her approach. His gaze flicked down to the revolver in her hand, and he raised an eyebrow.

“A nice welcome for a tired traveler,” he drawled.

“Hopefully,” she answered, “I won’t have to use it.”

“Hopefully, I won’t have to take it from you,” he corrected.

She deliberately eyed him from the tips of his heavy, worn boots to the top of his sandy head—a long journey that, unfortunately, brought her an even greater awareness of his size and strength. He may have been out of uniform, but there was no missing the discipline of his bearing, nor his physicality. He was no bookish scholar, but a man who made his way through the world with action. Few men who weren’t Blades had the same presence. Thalia tried to make herself ignore it, but now that she was within touching distance, the task was impossible. She could smell the dust of the road on him, the scent of wind and leather. A man’s scent.

Forcing herself to concentrate, she said, “You could have killed Anthony Morris, yourself, and could be trying to lead us into a trap.” Both she and her father glanced at the kestrel on his perch, but the bird seemed untroubled. It wasn’t enough of a sign, though.

“I’m tired of your hounding,” Captain Huntley answered, his voice a low rumble and his eyes amber fire. He was obviously not a man used to being questioned. Too bad.

“If you know anything of what is at stake,” Thalia shot back, “you would understand my need for caution.”

“I don’t know what’s at stake,” the captain growled. “But here’s further proof.” He reached for his pocket, and Thalia’s hand tightened on her revolver, moving to cock it. Captain Huntley looked over Thalia’s shoulder with a shuttered expression, and she followed his gaze to her father, who now had the rifle trained on the captain’s head. As if used to having large guns pointed at him, Captain Huntley calmly reached into his pocket then held out his hand. What she saw there made her gasp.

It was the Compass.

“Morris gave this to me,” the captain continued. “I was to give it to you and say, ‘North is eternal.’” He handed it to her father.

Thalia stared at the Compass in her father’s hand as she felt the gears of a global machine begin to turn. Everything Captain Huntley had said was true. Their enemy was on the move.

She and her father managed to remember their manners enough to offer Captain Huntley a seat and some English tea. She handed the captain a cup of the steaming beverage, which he took with large, work-rough hands. Their fingers brushed against each other. The sensation of his touch ran through her like wild horses. He breathed in quickly as her skin went sensitive and alive, feeling everything at once, but mostly him.

They stared at each other, manners forgotten. A blaze there, in his golden eyes, and an answering flare within her. Hot and sudden, like wildfire on the steppe after a dry season.

He broke the contact first, pretending to study his cup as he took a sip of tea. Thalia tried, but failed, not to watch the shape of his mouth on the painted rim of the cup. How might those lips feel against her skin? She knew better than this, she chided herself, and as soon as Captain Huntley had finished his tea, she would show him the door and never see the man again.

Though he seemed to have other ideas.

“I can’t pretend to know what any of those messages mean,” he said to her father. He glanced down at her father’s braced and bandaged leg. “But it’s clear that you need some help. Let me give it.”

“I thank you, Captain,” Franklin answered, “but no. We can manage on our own.”

Batu had found a small folding camp chair, and now the captain sat in it, but the chair did a poor job of containing him. He kept stretching out his legs and trying to fit himself into the seat that had, in the past, comfortably held Thalia, and nearly every other man who had come into their ger, but it was like trying to put a waistcoat on a tiger.

He looked at her father, then at Thalia, sitting nearby. She struggled to ignore the leap her stomach gave when she felt his golden scrutiny.
“I doubt that,” the captain said bluntly. “You need me.”

Thalia ground her teeth together at his presumption. How like a military man to step in where he knew nothing and didn’t belong, and start issuing orders.

“Rest assured,” her father replied, “that we do not. You did your duty to Anthony Morris with honor, but now you have discharged that duty and can return home to England.”

That prospect did not seem to elate Captain Huntley. He worked the clean square line of his jaw as he contemplated the fragile china in his hand. “Sir—” he began.

“Thank you, Captain,” Thalia said, cutting him off, and he didn’t care for that one bit. A flare of anger gleamed in his eyes as he looked at her. “We do appreciate your offer of help, but this is personal business.”

“Personal enough to get a man killed?”

Thalia stood. She didn’t care if she was being rude, violating every principle of Mongol and English hospitality, but she had to get rid of the tenacious, irritating captain immediately. It had nothing to do with her reaction toward this man. It was purely a matter of protection. She walked to the door and held it open.

“Thank you,” she said again in a clipped, frosty voice. “Everything you have done has been extraordinary, but you can go no further in your task. My father and I are perfectly capable of managing the situation on our own.”

Her father kept his expression carefully neutral, providing neither assistance nor resistance.

After a moment, a wry smile curved in the corner of Captain Huntley’s mouth, and he set his teacup down on the table with a sharp clack. He unfolded himself from the chair with surprising grace, then picked up his pack and shouldered it. With a slight clicking of his heels, he bowed to her father with a murmured, “Sir.” Her father, not much inclined to ceremony, took the captain’s hand and shook it.

“You stood up for Tony, which I wish I could have done,” Franklin said. “And your honor does you credit. Godspeed to you, Captain, and good luck.”

The captain offered no similar reply, but shook Franklin’s hand gravely. He then strode to the door, stopping in front of Thalia. She kept her gaze trained on the space just over his shoulder, trying to avoid that sharp jolt of sensation that came from looking into his eyes. “I’ve sailed half way ’round the world,” he said quietly, his voice like whiskey, rough and warm, “including chugging through the Bay of Bengal on the leakiest, rustiest, and least seaworthy freighter that ever insulted the ocean, which, after the luxuries of the first steamship, did little for my constitution. I’ve taken the most damnable journey through China, and most of my coin is now lining the pockets of every single government agent between here and Peking.”

“I am sorry about that,” Thalia said, and meant it. “We haven’t much money, ourselves, but surely we can spare some for your return.”

He looked coldly at her. “I don’t want sympathy, and I don’t want your coin.”

“What do you want, then?”

“Tell me what Morris’s message means.”

She shook her head. “That is one thing I cannot give you, Captain. It would imperil not only you, but many others as well.”

Though her answer clearly didn’t satisfy him, he pressed for no more. He gave Thalia a small bow, but there was an intangible something that was deeply ironic about the gesture. He stared at the ground for a moment, and Thalia followed his gaze to the tops of her muddy, heavy boots, which stuck out from the hem of the dress. Yes, she was a genuine elegant English rose. Thalia drew herself up to her full height and resisted the urge to twitch the gown’s fabric over the boots. Their gazes met and held. Dangerous, she thought. He might not be a Blade, but he was a man, and not any man, but one who could inflict serious damage on her, if she let him. She could see that plainly. Oh, God, she was glad he was leaving. She would have had to be on her guard constantly, had he stayed.

“Miss Burgess,” he rumbled.

“Captain,” she said coolly.

With a nod, he placed his hat upon his head and walked out into the dusk. He never hesitated, instead moving straight and steadily through the still-crowded lanes. Without any urging on his part, the throngs parted to let him pass. Rather than watch him disappear into the mass, which she felt possessed to do, Thalia shut the door, then turned and looked at her father. The confines of the tent, or, more accurately, the confines of her own body, still vibrated with Captain Huntley’s presence. He lingered there, the sun’s afterimage burned into her.

“You may be a Blade,” she said to her father, “but you also have a broken leg. Both of mine are whole and hale. The responsibility now falls to me.”

“Only you, my dear?” Her father found the crutches next to his chair and pulled himself up, waving away the solicitous Batu. He limped toward her, his expression concerned and dark. “This will be a dangerous task. I cannot send my only child, my only daughter, into such peril.”

“There’s no choice, Father,” she answered levelly. “I must go.”
“But you aren’t a Blade, Thalia,” he countered. “I am.”

Thalia knew he was trying to protect her, but his words still stung. “You cannot ride, not as fast as you need to go. I can ride fast, I can shoot straight, and I will make sure that whatever needs protection will be kept safe.”

After a few moments, her father sighed and shook his head. She knew then that, though he did not like it, he understood that she spoke the truth and was giving her leave to carry out the work of the Blades. As she had longed to do ever since she was ten years old and had first learned of their existence.

He pulled out a chain that hung around his neck. Hanging at the end of the chain was an old locket. “You recognize this, don’t you?”

Thalia nodded, stepping forward. Her father had never been without that locket, not once. Carefully, he unclasped the chain, put the locket in his palm, and then opened it.

Her and her father’s faces were bathed with a soft glowing light. On both sides of the locket appeared a pair of tiny people, barely two inches high. They smiled and waved, though neither of them seemed really to see either Thalia or her father.

“You mother,” her father murmured. “And you.”

Thalia bent closer, even though she had seen the locket many times. It still sent a shiver through her. One of the little figures was Thalia herself, and it was strange to see herself in miniature form. But the most amazing thing was Thalia’s mother, healthy and happy. It had been years since Thalia had seen her mother as anything other than this small magical image. Looking at Diana Burgess’s tiny figure, Thalia felt her throat ache.

The locket enabled the wearer to see whomever they loved most dearly. It wasn’t always such a gift.

“I shall look at this every day while you are gone,” her father said quietly.

He shut the locket and then refastened the chain around his neck.

She tried to make herself smile, but her heart was pounding with mingled fear and anticipation. Nearly everything she knew about the world of the Blades had been related to her by her father or other members of the group. Their activities were shrouded in danger and mystery. Some Blades never returned from their missions. She might soon be added to that number. But there was no room for failure. There was much more than her own life at stake.

“I set out at first light,” she announced.
Chapter 3

Followed

Though it was only September, the predawn air was bitterly cold. Huntley stood in the darkness, hidden from view by a fence surrounding one of the large felt tents, his breath curling in warm puffs before dissipating in the chill. He kept his icy hands in his pockets and didn’t stamp his feet to warm his almost-numb toes, since he was too well trained to make any noise while lying in wait.

The same couldn’t be said for his horse. The animal chuffed softly behind him, moving restlessly and tugging on the reins. You’ve gone through the trouble to get me awake, she seemed to say, so why not make use of me? Huntley stroked the horse’s softly bristled muzzle and murmured soothing words into her ear to quiet her. The mare seemed appeased, but only slightly. She wanted to move. He couldn’t blame her.

Huntley had spent the better part of yesterday evening tracking down a horse large enough for him to ride comfortably. Mongol horses were sturdy beasts, adapted well for the steppes and hard weather, but they were also remarkably small, almost the size of ponies, and unless Huntley wanted his knees knocking against his jaw as he rode, he needed to find a horse that could fit his tall frame. He’d also bought himself a Russian saddle of soft leather. The wooden Mongol saddles were beautifully ornamented, but deuced uncomfortable.

He hadn’t any idea how many miles he would cover on the journey ahead, but he wanted to be prepared for any eventuality. He tried to think of anything that could happen, be ready for whatever came his way, for good or ill. That was something else that had enabled him to rise to the rank of officer when others who’d enlisted at the same time languished as sergeants.

Huntley was no longer an officer, no longer a soldier, but his senses in the frigid morning were still sharply alive as he kept watch over Franklin Burgess’s compound. After sleeping a few hours in a hospitable Mongol’s tent in exchange for splitting firewood, Huntley had taken up position opposite Burgess’s own group of tents to wait. The man had insisted that he didn’t need Huntley’s assistance, but it was clear that the blasted message Huntley had delivered yesterday meant that trouble was coming, and a middle-aged man with a badly broken leg wouldn’t be able to face it properly on his own.

Though Burgess wasn’t entirely on his own. There had been his daughter, too. Julia. No, that wasn’t her name. Thalia. A young woman with bold eyes and a bolder mouth, neither of which he had been able to forget, even while he had slept. His mind also kept circling back to those muddy boots peeking out from under the hem of her dress, what they meant, and why he’d even care about some girl’s boots.

He hadn’t expected to find a young Englishwoman in such a wild place as Urga, and her presence inside Burgess’s tent immediately threw him when he entered. He had been so focused on delivering the message, finally learning what it meant, that Huntley had never considered that Burgess might not be a single man like himself, but a father, and worse, the father of a daughter. Huntley didn’t like having genteel ladies around. He didn’t know what to say, where to look. Genteel ladies seldom had much to do with enlisted men, but when he had become an officer, he’d had to associate with the other officers’ wives. Their fripperies and fragility made him nervous. Somehow, he almost always wound up offending them, though God only knew how.

Strangely, he hadn’t offended Thalia Burgess, but they riled each other. He wasn’t used to being questioned. Fifteen years of steady and good service for Her Majesty meant something.

Damned aggravating, how difficult it had been to tear his eyes from her, how, from the moment he had set foot inside Franklin Burgess’s tent, Huntley had been aware of her, every movement, every word, even, for the love of the devil, her breathing.

His only explanation was that it had been six months since he’d taken a woman to bed. He had to think for a moment, and then only barely remembered Felicia, Lieutenant Colonel Calvin’s wife. Huntley generally avoided sleeping with married women, but everyone in the camp knew that Calvin kept at least two native mistresses and had given each of them a handful of babies. When Huntley had sold out, he finally gave in to Felicia’s advances. They’d spent a single pleasant, but not particularly remarkable, night together. And that was really six months ago? Great Gideon! Being near any woman was bound to attract his attention, and Thalia Burgess was definitely a woman. That had to be the reason.

He’d found her manner to be a peculiar mix: on one hand, she was trussed up in a dress that looked ill-fitting.
Wrinkled and seldom worn. The fabric had been tight across her bosom, but he’d tried like hell not to look. He’d tried, and failed. She could fit quite nicely in his large hands, filling them but not spilling over.

He clenched his hands into fists, as if the feeling of his fingers curling into his palm might erase the desire to peel that damned dress off Thalia and see if his intuition was right.

That didn’t stop his mind from wandering back to her, though. It didn’t help that he had nothing to do but wait, no task to keep his thoughts busy but think of her.

Thick, dark hair, meant for tangling in a man’s fingers. Her cheeks were so full of lively color, her green eyes so vivid and brilliant, she must wear some of the womanly paint that ladies always claimed they never used but often did. And then there were those boots, spattered with mud and soft from use, though the dress’s hem was clean. A strange tangle of contradictions.

Besides the way she looked, he had also been struck by her manner. He remembered the officers’ wives, even Felicia, complaining about the heat or their servants, and trying so hard to be genteel and pleasant and proper in the middle of “heathen backwaters,” as they called them. Thalia Burgess had said nothing derogatory about Mongolia, never apologized, and didn’t yell at her native servants.

He and Thalia Burgess had stood close to each other, within touching distance. His body had reacted immediately to her nearness as he saw that she was tall for a woman and prodigiously pretty. She wasn’t a smooth and oval-faced porcelain doll, but had high, clear cheekbones, a strong chin, and an equally strong, straight nose. A full, rosy mouth. Even her annoying mistrust of him couldn’t shake his interest.

Damn it, he needed to get a hold of himself, and he needed to do it now. Which meant he couldn’t think about Thalia Burgess any longer.

Think about the message, he told himself. It was important, whatever it meant, and Franklin Burgess was going to do something about it. And when he did, Huntley would be right there, giving the stubborn man and his even more stubborn daughter the help they needed. He couldn’t just turn around and head back to England, to Leeds, which probably had more than its fair share of textile merchants. He was needed here, halfway around the bloody world, picking apart dangerous enigmas that had already cost one man his life. Despite Burgess’s insisting that Huntley had performed his duty to Anthony Morris, there was too much unresolved in Urga.

To keep his fingers from freezing off, Huntley counted the number of bullets in his kit, and reviewed his preparations from the night before, including taking his guns apart and cleaning them thoroughly. All routines he’d done more times than he could remember.

It didn’t seem likely that the task at hand, whatever it was, would be done in the chaotic maze of the city. Broken leg or no, Burgess would be traveling, and when he did, Huntley would be shadowing him. He’d be remiss in his duty if he let Burgess venture out into danger without reliable protection.

With that in mind, Huntley now waited near Burgess’s compound, eyes adjusted to the dark, trying to calm an impatient horse, freezing his goddamned rump off, and looking for signs of activity from the tents.

Finally, there was movement. The door to Burgess’s tent opened and a man in native dress came out. Huntley recognized him as Burgess’s Mongol servant. The servant walked quickly to where several horses were tethered and began saddling two of them. As he did this, another man came out of the tent. Huntley didn’t recognize him; he was taller than the servant, but he wore native dress, also, and carried saddlebags. It couldn’t be Burgess, since this man walked easily and confidently, not a crutch in sight. His long, dark hair was pulled back, and he wore a small wool hat. In the quiet of the morning, Huntley heard the man speak softly to the other in Mongolian, and realized with a start that it wasn’t a man, but a woman, and no ordinary woman, but Thalia Burgess.

She moved much more comfortably now than she had the day before, striding around the yard that surrounded the tent, confident and intent. She made several trips to and from the tent, easily carrying bags and equipment, as the servant finished saddling the horses. The final time she emerged from the tent, she carried a rifle, the same heavy old Beattie that Burgess had pointed at Huntley yesterday. She put the rifle in a scabbard hung on her saddle. The servant took an ancient muzzleloader and also hung it from his saddle. Thalia Burgess and the servant loaded the horses together, hardly speaking, working quickly. They put most of the bags onto a third, unsaddled horse, keeping the smaller items for the horses they planned on riding. It was clear they had packed for a journey before.

As they were finishing, Burgess himself came out of the tent, a crutch propped under one arm and using the other to lean on a Mongol woman beside him. His daughter gave her reins to the male servant before stepping forward, just in front of her father. Burgess handed her something, and she stared at the object in her hands for a moment. Burgess then wrapped one arm around his daughter’s straight shoulders and held her tightly as her arms came up to clasp him. She pressed her face against his shoulder, and he struggled with his crutch as he caressed the back of her head with a loving and protective hand. It was the embrace any parent, regardless of nationality or race, gives his child before he or she sets off on a dangerous journey. The servants watched, emotion plain in their faces. The female servant dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve. Feeling like an interloper, Huntley almost looked away from
the intimate family scene.

He reminded himself that whatever that message meant, it surely was something important if Burgess was willing to let his daughter embark on the mission, since he could not. That meant that Huntley was going to be stuck with her for some time now. May the Archangel Michael descend from the skies and kick Huntley straight in the rocks.

After finally breaking away from her father’s embrace, Thalia put the object her father had given her into her pocket. She then moved without hesitation toward one of the saddled horses, taking back the reins. She put her booted foot into the stirrup and swung herself up into the saddle with a fluid ease that would make any cavalryman proud. The male servant also mounted up. Burgess raised his hand in a farewell as his daughter and servant wheeled their horses about and kicked them into a canter. They disappeared into the remaining night.

Huntley waited until Burgess and the female servant went back inside before mounting up on his own horse. The mare responded eagerly to the press of his heels into her flanks, leaping into its gallop and ready to run. Mongol horses needed movement, needed freedom. For Huntley, the feeling was mutual. He wasn’t familiar with this city, and knew nothing of this country; however, despite all this and the darkness, he could find Thalia Burgess’s trail.

She may have been one of the more confounding women he’d ever known, but, whether she wanted his help or not, he was sticking with her. No matter where the journey took them.

“We’re being followed.”

Batu turned in his saddle and looked around, but aside from the rolling hills full of gently browning grass and the huge expanse of blue sky, they seemed to be alone as they rode west from Urga. The sun had risen several hours ago, and they had slowed their horses to a brisk trot to conserve the animals’ energy.

“I see no one, Thalia guai,” Batu said.

“He’s too skilled to let us see him,” Thalia answered. She kept her eyes moving across the landscape, touching the undulating hills, the scattered rocky outcroppings, the shadows of clouds slipping over the steppe, blown on dry winds from the northwest. She breathed in deeply, felt the crisp autumn air fill her and cleanse away the dirt of Urga. God, it was good to be out of the city!

“Who?”

“Captain Huntley.”

“The man with the golden hair and golden eyes? He seemed fierce.”

Thalia gave a clipped nod, remembering darkly not only the captain’s extraordinary appearance and manner, but his immediate effect on her, as well. “He’s been following us since we left Urga,” she explained. She tried to tell herself that what she was feeling was irritation. She had not the time nor energy to worry about an annoyingly persistent soldier. And she had even less room for her own unwanted reaction to him. “It seems he did not take my father’s refusal of help to heart. The captain is determined to sneak after us and force his assistance on us.”

She briefly entertained the idea that perhaps her father had sent Captain Huntley after them to ensure that she and Batu were protected on their mission, but just as quickly rejected the idea. As much as Franklin Burgess didn’t like it, the safety and secrecy of the Blades came first.

“Are you sure?” Batu looked around again. “We seem quite alone.”

“I am sure.” Thalia patted the neck of her horse in encouragement. They had only just begun their voyage, and the animals would need their spirits bolstered to make it the whole distance. She pointed to a rise, and she knew that a small, clear stream flowed at the base on the other side, sheltered in a small valley. “We’ll stop and water the horses once we reach there, maybe have a little something to eat, ourselves. Once we do, we’ll wait for the captain to catch up and politely but firmly tell him to leave us alone.”

Batu still looked dubious that anyone was on the steppe besides themselves and the occasional herd of gazelle, but Thalia’s instincts for such things were seldom wrong, so he did not pursue the matter any further.

She had become aware of someone’s presence behind them shortly after they had ridden past the outskirts of Urga, when the gers had begun to thin into more and more remote ails, or encampments. It could only be Captain Huntley, and though he had been very good at remaining quiet, keeping his horse from kicking up too much telltale dust, she had known he was there.

She had been all too aware of him since he stepped into her father’s ger. He was big and commanding and unapologetic about both of those qualities, and though Thalia had always been at ease in the presence of men, there was something about Captain Huntley, something so specifically masculine, that she could not feel comfortable around him. His golden eyes, his whiskey voice, his very physical nature that the tent could barely contain—these things combined like a drug in her body, a drug on which she could not become dependent. She could never trust such an opiate as Captain Huntley. Her swift and strong reaction to him was unnerving. The very fact that he did
bother her even more, until she felt as though she was chasing her own ghost, grabbing at something that would always slip from her grasp.

In a few more minutes, it would no longer matter. She would confront Captain Huntley and insist that he return to England. Truthfully, it didn’t matter where he went, Brazil or the Maldives or anywhere else, so long as he wasn’t following her in Mongolia. And then her interest in him would disappear, as it must.

She and Batu crested the rise, then rode down into the small valley where she planned on watering and resting the horses. Water was always scarce, even far north of the vast Gobi desert. It would not benefit her and Batu to push the horses, despite the time concerns, since thirsty horses tired quickly. Better to lose a few minutes here and there than to face a larger obstacle later on.

The valley that contained the stream was shaped like a cup, surrounded on all sides by low, rocky hills. A few larch trees dotted the valley, most of them clustered near the water’s edge. As they approached the stream, Thalia remembered the sludge and rubbish floating in the Thames, the children and women walking up and down its muddy banks, looking for anything of value that had been discarded and then churned up. She had heard tales, too, of a noxious fog that rose up from the Thames, blanketing London with a thick yellow haze that made it impossible to see or breathe. She had no idea how anyone could live like that, why Londoners never saw the direct relationship between clean water and the health of themselves and their city.

As if her thoughts had conjured up another Englishman, Thalia heard the rattle of rocks kicked up from the ground behind her. It had to be the captain. She rose, preparing to be very polite but exceedingly firm in her assertions that she and her servant would proceed alone. As she turned, the polite refusal vanished as her blood chilled.

Henry Lamb stood twenty feet away. Impeccably groomed and blond, he smiled without warmth. He was accompanied by an unsmiling Jonas Edgeworth, his black hair gleaming with tonic, his moustache clipped and severe. They were both attired in the most expensive expedition clothing that Bond Street could provide, as well as armed with revolvers on their hips. Nearby stood three Mongols of dubious appearance holding the reins of a half dozen saddled and packed horses. One of the Mongols was exceedingly big—a barrel-chested man with powerful arms and a rapacious look. His del was threadbare, and he wore a battered European hat, with a wicked hunting knife hanging from his belt. He could probably tear a camel apart with his bare hands. However, the large Mongol did not frighten her nearly as much as the well-groomed Englishmen. She instinctively stepped back, trying to reach the rifle strapped to her saddle.

“Please, Miss Burgess,” Lamb said, holding up his hands and giving her another bland smile, “it isn’t necessary to resort to base violence.”

“I believe Tony Morris might disagree with you,” Thalia answered. She tried to hold her voice level, keep the fear out of her words, but she couldn’t keep her thoughts from Tony, lying dead in an alley in Southampton, with only Captain Huntley to bear witness to his passage from this world to the next. Would Batu play the same role for her?

Lamb’s smile faltered only slightly. “An unfortunate, but necessary, casualty.” He took a step toward her, and she lunged toward her rifle. Before she could pull the gun from its scabbard, Jonas Edgeworth and two of the Mongols had their own guns pointed at her and Batu. Lamb did not bother to draw his own weapon, and actually looked a little bored as he drawled, “I think it will be much more civilized if we conduct our conversation without your being armed, don’t you agree? Take your hand off of your gun.”

Thalia obeyed but did not bother to answer. Her mind whirled, trying to figure out how she and Batu could get away, if she could pull her rifle in time. She understood that it had been Lamb and Edgeworth, along with their hired muscle, that she had observed following her, and not Captain Huntley. If only it had been him. She would much rather tell the attractive, persistent captain to go away than face down two Heirs and their brutes.

“What do you want?” she asked, stalling.

“You know what we want, girl,” Edgeworth barked. Unlike Lamb, he hadn’t mastered the art of polished menace, and his pale skin was already reddening with anger.

Again, Lamb held up one finely manicured hand. “Enough, Edgeworth. We don’t have to resort to anything unpleasant. Yet.” Edgeworth reddened further, but clamped his lips together to keep his silence. Lamb continued, tipping his head toward the giant Mongol, “Our friend came to us a few months ago with a riddle about where to find the Source.”

“Well, you know where to find it,” Thalia answered.
“Not quite. But you know this miserable country very well.” He picked at a minuscule piece of dirt on his lapel. Thalia nearly smiled at the Sisyphean labor. “Come now, Miss Burgess,” Lamb added, attempting to sound appealing, “don’t be difficult. You can prove yourself a credit to your sex, and do your country a great service as well, by telling us where the Source is. I am prepared to make it worth your while.”

“So you can enslave the people of Outer Mongolia?”

“With the power of the Source at our disposal, Mongolia would be conquered,” Lamb snapped. “We’d force these shiftless nomads into real work. Mining.”

“And those that resisted?”

“Disposed of.”

“Killed, you mean.”

Lamb shrugged, unconcerned about the possibility of slaughter. “Yellow barbarians don’t matter.”

Instead of answering Lamb, or running up and shoving her knee into his groin as she longed to do, Thalia turned toward the three Mongols standing nearby. “Do you know what these Englishmen mean to do?” she asked them in Mongolian. “They will steal the heart of your homeland and use it against you, to subjugate you, murder you if you resist them.”

Two of the Mongols shifted uneasily. But the large Mongol grunted in an approximation of a laugh. “Who do you think sold them the information about the prize in the first place?” he said.

“But your country,” Thalia protested, shocked, “your way of life as a nomad—”

“Doesn’t buy me a herd of camels,” the Mongol said. “Or put mutton in my belly or women in my ger.”

Batu looked disgusted, and Thalia could not blame him. She was horrified that someone could trade his life and culture for a handful of pound sterling.

“That’s enough of that,” Lamb cut in, speaking in English. He was irritated and impatient, his polish beginning to rub away, revealing greed, ambition, and something uglier, something cruel and brutal, beneath. “I’m tired of niceties. I’ll let my men get the answer out of you.” He gestured toward the Mongols, waving them forward. His men leered at her, concerns about their way of life forgotten in exchange for a chance to assault her, and began to advance. Thalia knew she couldn’t get to her rifle in time, so she went for the knife at her waist just as one of the Mongols reached out to grab her.

He never touched her. There was a loud crack, and the man fell to the ground, blood seeping from a hole in the middle of his chest. He was dead within seconds. Everyone, including Thalia, whirled around, looking for the source of the gunfire. She and Batu immediately drew their weapons from the scabbards on their saddles and crouched low, having no time to register shock.

Lamb ran for the shelter of his horses. A bullet whined, and a small patch of ground exploded near his feet as he sprinted. Edgeworth began firing wildly at the top of the valley as he, too, headed toward the cluster of agitated horses. The large Mongol unshouldered his Russian rifle as he squatted behind some brush. When another gunshot pierced the air, grazing the Mongol’s cheek, the man merely dabbed at the line of blood on his face and shouted at the remaining Mongol thug. The big Mongol pointed at the rise of the hills to the east, and ordered his compatriot to ride up there and take out the marksman while he provided cover fire.

The man looked dubious at first, but the large Mongol shouted that he would tear his insides out and feed them to the hawks, and looked as though he meant every bloodthirsty word. So the man leapt into the saddle to obey. The giant Mongol began firing at the crest of the hill as the other rode closer to whomever was shooting from the valley’s rim. It wasn’t a deep valley, and the rider would reach the crest within a moment. The marksman, whoever he was, could not defend himself against the rider and the huge Mongol’s fire at the same time, and then Thalia and Batu would be on their own.

Another shot rang out, and the rider was pitched from his horse. He groaned, clutching his chest, and went still. The animal reared in fright and sped away, leaving behind the body of its rider. The large Mongol turned toward Thalia with a snarl as she swung the barrel of her rifle away from the dead rider and toward the Mongol’s head.

“My accuracy is even better at this distance,” she said to him as more shots rang out from the top of the valley.

With a vicious sneer, he began to unfold from his crouch, heading toward her.

“Tsend!” Lamb shouted at the big Mongol. He and Edgeworth were struggling to keep the horses under control, the animals snorting and shoving each other as they tried to break free and run away. “We’ll get her later!”

The Mongol, Tsend, looked torn. He clearly wanted to smash the butt of his rifle into her face, and maybe do worse, but another shot from the sniper just missed Tsend’s head. The lure of coin and threat of bullets from the hidden marksman both won out, and the Mongol ran for his own mount. The two Englishmen and their Mongol brawn rode furiously away, bent low over the saddles and casting fearful, angry glances over their shoulders. Batu tried to fire at them, but his muzzleloader was too old and slow to be very accurate when he was hurried. It did not seem to matter as the Heirs disappeared over the ridge, the sounds of their horses’ hooves echoing in retreat.
As soon as they vanished, Thalia leapt to her feet but kept her rifle close. She shielded her eyes from the sun as a figure of a man appeared at the top of the valley, the light behind him turning him into a golden-ringed titan.

“Nice shot,” he said with a familiar gruff voice as he made his way quickly down the side of the hill. “But I could’ve taken him with my revolver had he made it over the ridge.”

Thalia lowered her rifle and tried not to sigh with relief.

“You are an extremely stubborn man, Captain,” she said.

He came down into the valley with long-legged strides, forming from a shape of light into a very real man. A man who was almost smiling as he approached her and she almost smiled back.

“In your case,” he answered, “that’s a very good thing.”

She wanted to say something clever and stoic, something a battle-hardened veteran might pronounce while calmly lighting a celebratory cheroot, but that was precisely the moment her mind and body both realized that she had just shot a man. Killed him. Not an animal, but a human. Her legs gave out from under her as her vision dimmed. She was a murderer. Nausea clutched her stomach.

But then she felt something warm and solid beside her, around her, as she was lowered gently to the ground.

“All right. Everything’s right, lovely,” the captain murmured, his arms cradling her as he eased her onto the grass.

She let him hold her as she tried to find some air but couldn’t find enough anywhere in the world to fill her lungs, let alone take a simple breath. The world retreated. She felt the rifle slip from her fingers, and it was only the quick reflexes of Batu that kept it from clattering to the ground.

“Now, just be calm, lass,” the captain said, quiet and steady. “Have a look at me and be calm.” With one large, callused hand cupped around her head, he turned her to face him. His hat was off, and, through the mists that gathered inside her head, she could see him, as close as he had been the other day, no, closer. She could see the hard planes of his face that seemed, at that moment, just a little softer, the bump on the bridge of his nose that revealed at least one break, the contrast with his beautifully formed mouth, and the small lines that fanned out from the corners of his amber eyes. His eyes, she realized, were not nearly as cold as she had first thought them, but full of living energy, almost animalistic in its intensity. It was that immediate connection to life that started to bring her back from wherever she had been drifting.

“Tell me something,” the captain said.

Thalia tried to make her mind focus. “What?”

“Tell me about your first pet,” he said. “You had one, I’d wager. A cat, perhaps.”

“No…,” Thalia murmured. “It was…a dog.”

Her brain kept trying to bring her back to the dead man on the hill, but Captain Huntley wouldn’t allow it as his voice interrupted her thoughts.

“A dog then. Was he small? A little lap dog?”

Thalia heard herself laugh. “No, God, no. Thief was huge. Paws the size of wagon wheels.” Her thoughts shifted away from death and toward the animal that had been her constant companion for years. “He was…some kind of mastiff. No one knew what he was, maybe part bear. The least subtle dog you ever met. Bashed into everything. Could knock you over with just a wag of his tail.” She laughed again, remembering.

“That’s why he was called Thief,” the captain deduced.

She smiled at him. “Yes. Exactly.” She finally drew in a breath. Her vision cleared. And she became aware that the captain was practically cradling her against the hard breadth of his chest while her hands had managed to grip his jacket, holding him as tightly as one might hold a vow. She pried her fingers loose and tried to move away from him, but, given the strength of his arms, it was no simple task.

“I’m perfectly well,” she said, and hated the slight tremor in her voice.

“You are, at that,” the captain answered easily, “but you’ve also killed someone, which you don’t have much experience with. Give yourself some time.”

“Do you?” She was breathing better now. And she was loathe to believe it was because of him, his reassuring presence, but she had a bad feeling that that was the very reason.

“Do I what?”

“Have much experience killing people?”

“I didn’t become a captain by knitting socks,” he said, and Thalia had no answer to that. He loosened his hold on her, taking her by her shoulders. “Come on, let’s try and get you on your feet.”

“I can stand on my own,” she said immediately.

His mouth quirked. “Indulge me.”

So she allowed herself to be raised up, trying to bear as much of her own weight as she could. The ground wobbled slightly, but not for long. The captain stepped away, which made her sorry. At last, everything had righted itself. Even so, she could not look at the form of the fallen man’s body as it slumped on the hillside.
Captain Huntley stared at her for a few moments, as if waiting for her to crumple to the ground again, but then he seemed satisfied. He turned to Batu.

“Speak English?” he demanded.

“Russian, too,” Batu answered.

The captain gave a clipped nod. “Good.” He pointed at Thalia. “Keep an eye on her. I’ll return in five minutes.”

“Where are you going?” Batu asked.

“I hobbled my horse on the other side of this valley,” was the reply. “I’ll get her and then I’m coming back.”

Thalia stopped as she was reaching down to retrieve her rifle. “Back?”

“Yes, back.” He took up his hat and set it on his head, the broad brim shading his face. She felt, rather than saw, his eyes on her, the interplay of determination and, oddly, humor. “You aren’t taking another step on this journey of yours without me. Someone’s got to knit the socks.”
He didn’t expect her to wait for him, but when Huntley came back into the valley, riding his horse, there she was, her servant nearby. Huntley had expected a long chase across the rolling steppes of Mongolia—it seemed like her contrary nature to do something along those lines—and maybe had been perversely looking forward to it, but she had stayed. Another surprise from the continually surprising Thalia Burgess. The bigger surprise, and one he hadn’t welcomed at all, was how much he’d enjoyed holding her, how good she had felt in his arms. The woman had been in shock, for God’s sake, and there he had been, stealing her touch like a randy schoolboy. Sometimes, he thought disgustedly, he just wanted to punch his own face in.

When Huntley returned, she did not look up from repacking the horses. Some of the baggage had fallen from the horses during the skirmish. They had been frightened by the gunfire, unused to the sound, but they hadn’t been the only ones.

He watched Thalia as she worked, how she stayed with her task and forcibly kept her gaze from straying toward the dead man on the hill and the other body nearby. She wasn’t a killer. Drawing blood had marked her, stunned her. Though she’d handled herself with admirable calm and nerve during the fight—he was still shaking his head with respect at her marksmanship, to take down a man galloping up a hill with one shot—it was in the aftermath that the facts had been laid bare. Her innocence was gone. She was left on the barren plain of guilt and horror.

So he’d done for her what he had done for his men, what he’d had to do for himself, so many years ago: showed the way back from that bleak place. One time, he’d made a trembling private, covered with the enemy’s blood, tell him all the bawdy limericks he knew, until the boy had tears in his eyes from laughter. There was another, a lance corporal, who’d had to hold down his best friend while the surgeon cut off an infected leg. The lance corporal hadn’t been able to sleep for days, hearing the screams of his friend whenever he closed his eyes in the quiet of night. Huntley had sat with him one night and told him to describe each variety of apple grown on his father’s farm in Essex, each tree and leaf, until the lad had slipped off to sleep.

None of them had he commanded to look at him, none of them had he held, but that was something both for Thalia and himself. Seeing guns pointed at her made him need reassurance that she was whole and well. The world for her might one day return to normal, but, he hoped, she would never grow thick-skinned when it came to killing, the way he’d had to in order to survive. He didn’t want her to become like him.

That didn’t seem to be the case, not yet. She was still riding close to the border of shock. The best way to get her fully back to herself was not to coddle her too much. He knew that much about her.

“Don’t fiddle with those packs for much longer,” he said from atop his horse. “Your friends might come back to finish what they started.”

She turned her remarkable green eyes to him as she finished tying down the bags, and that strange, unwelcome flash of heat shot through him. He pushed it down, tried to make himself ignore it, but he recalled the lush late summer color of her eyes when he’d held her after the skirmish. He’d learned then that he had been wrong: she didn’t wear cosmetics. The gem-like brilliance of her eyes and the rosy color in her cheeks were hers through nature and not art. On top of everything else he was discovering about her, about his response to her, it wasn’t a comforting thought.

“How did you know?” she asked. She walked toward her horse and stared at him over the saddle.

Huntley found himself momentarily thrown, and wondered if one of her other unusual qualities included mind reading. That was an even less comforting thought, and he struggled to think only of sunshine-filled meadows and kittens playing with dandelion puffs. “Know what?” he stalled.

“About…about…” She gestured toward the bodies of the men but still could not look at them.

“The ambush?” He shrugged, dismissive. “I knew they were following you just after Urga.”

She recovered enough to glare at him. “You knew all the way back then?” she demanded. “And you didn’t do anything until now? Why the hell not?”

Huntley had never before met a respectable woman who cursed. Despite her unconventional attire and her ability with a rifle, Thalia Burgess was a respectable woman, and to hear such language come from her edible-
looking mouth was something of a thrill for Huntley, not unlike going to a prayer meeting and finding it full of unrepentant strumpets.

“I needed to see what they wanted before I made any moves,” he said. “And there were five armed men against myself. The best chance was to take them by surprise.”

“But it wasn’t five against one,” she protested. “It was five against three.”

“I never count on an untested ally.”

She shook her head, muttering something about soldiers, then swung up into the saddle with a fluidity that caused another unwanted flare of interest to spark inside him. Gone was the awkward, confined miss he’d met the day before. This other Thalia Burgess had grace and confidence in her movement, even in her long robe and heavy boots. She walked her horse beside his until they were side by side. Her leg brushed against his, and his grip on the reins tightened, causing his horse to move and bump their legs again. His night with Felicia seemed very long ago, now. In his mind, he called himself many colorful names that would shock even a sailor.

“I thought they were you,” she said grudgingly. “That is why I was unprepared when they appeared.”

“You wouldn’t know I was coming.” It wasn’t a boast, merely a statement of fact. Huntley had learned years ago how to track and follow without being detected, something else that had come in useful more times than he could recall. Somehow, despite his abilities, Huntley couldn’t manage to avoid touching this one woman. He guided his horse so that there was a decent distance between himself and Thalia Burgess—for now.

“I’m not certain whether that is supposed to comfort or terrify me,” she replied. “But I do thank you for coming to our aid. If you hadn’t been there…” She could not hide the shudder that moved through her slender body, the body he remembered pressed against his own.

“I recognized them,” Huntley said. “The dark-haired bloke and the other one, the blond toff.”

That sharpened her attention. “From Southampton?”

“It was the toff that stabbed Morris.”

A look of fury hardened her features, an impressive sight. She was a woman who gave herself fully to her passions. “Henry Lamb. I should have killed him, too,” she growled.

“That’s the trouble with bloodlust,” Huntley remarked. “It’s a thirst that’s never quenched.”

She finally looked at the man on the hill and the other cooling corpse, still lying on the ground where he had fallen from Huntley’s shot.

“Should I bury them?” Huntley asked.

Thalia shook her head and turned away. “Bodies of the deceased aren’t interred in Mongolia. They’re taken to a hillside and left to nature, returned to the earth and heavens that created them. It’s called ‘sky burial.’”

That explained why Huntley had seen human remains out in the open in Urga. “All the same, I’d rather have my bones covered,” he said. “I’d be right sore if I knew some jackal was running around with one of my ribs in his mouth.”

“If I’m around for that unfortunate event,” she answered, “I’ll be sure to keep the dogs away.”

Before he could reply, she set her heels to her horse. Batu followed right behind her, and, after checking to make sure that none of the attackers were returning, Huntley also kicked his horse into a canter. He came over the rise and saw Thalia and her servant continuing to ride west. She rode well, straight and tall, standing in the stirrups as the Mongols did.

Huntley trailed after them, keeping his gaze alert and attuned should the Englishmen and their giant slab of a Mongol decide to finish their business within the day. Even as he watched for trouble, and as his eyes kept traveling to the slim back and shoulders of Thalia Burgess, the trim span of her waist bound with a silken sash, he could not help but marvel at the landscape. He had had no idea what to expect when he learned he would be traveling to Mongolia; all his mind had come up with was a gray, featureless plain. But what he now saw changed that. He rode a spread of grass and sky so wide and open that he could believe that he was sailing across a stretch of green ocean, an endless banner of azure sky above. And the dark blue robe of Thalia Burgess riding ahead of him was the star by which he set his course.

He was no sailor. He was a soldier. Escort and guardian for a reluctant Thalia Burgess, a woman he hadn’t known existed until yesterday, and who now occupied a goodly portion of his thoughts. His life was a strange one, all right. It didn’t bother him nearly as much as it should. Bloody wonderful to have a mission again, a purpose beyond Inwood’s promises of work and wife in a country that hadn’t been his home for fifteen years. He forced away thoughts of the letter, still residing in his pocket.

He nudged his horse, and the mare responded instantly, ready to gallop across the steppes with almost no encouragement. Within seconds, he had ridden abreast of Thalia. She glanced at him over her shoulder, her dark hair catching the wind and light, but said nothing.

“You’re going to have to tell me what this is about,” he said after they had ridden together for a few minutes.
“Who your attackers are, why Morris was killed, where we’re headed, what’s at stake. All of it. I can’t do my job properly unless I know everything.”

“You don’t have a job,” she reminded him and tried to push her horse farther ahead.

“Everything that happened back in that valley says I do.” He didn’t have to see her face to know that she was scowling. The curse words she muttered in Mongolian were also something of a giveaway. Huntley’s mare sped up without urging, as if goaded by the lead Thalia’s horse had, until the two were again side by side. “Like me or don’t, Miss Burgess, it doesn’t matter to me. But either way, I’m protecting you until we see this through.”

Her jaw tightened. Then released. He already knew what she was thinking. Damned strange. He’d never been particularly attuned to any woman’s mind before.

“Losing me won’t work,” he added, and by the way she clenched her teeth he knew that he had been correct. With a jolt, he felt himself slipping inside of her, her mind, her body, and it bound him to her, suddenly, powerfully, in a way he’d never experienced with another woman. A tight knitting of self to self. He’d killed for her, and he’d do it again, kill anyone who tried to harm her. Even Morris’s mission meant less than keeping her safe. The revelation stunned him.

“I’ve lived in Mongolia since I was a small child,” she said. “I know this country better than you, Captain. It wouldn’t be difficult to elude you.”

He tried to collect himself. “Doesn’t matter where we are,” he answered. “A trail is a trail. And you’ll leave one.”

“You sound awfully sure of yourself.”

Huntley almost laughed, but wisely checked the impulse since it would only rile her further. “I once tracked down the notorious brigand Ali Jai Khan to his gang’s secret hiding place in the Aravali Mountains of Rajasthan, and that bloke knew how to disguise his trail.” He realized too late that discussing brigands with ladies was probably unwise, but he kept forgetting that Thalia Burgess was a lady. On further reflection, after the hem of her robe flipped back in the breeze, revealing a long, shapely leg in trousers, he was very much aware that she was a woman. The term “lady,” however, which brought to mind images of painted china and cramped rooms full of overstuffed furniture, didn’t seem to apply.

And, far from being horrified at his anecdote, Thalia Burgess seemed reluctantly impressed. “I wouldn’t mind learning how to track,” she said so quietly he almost didn’t hear her above the sounds of the horses’ hooves and rushing wind.

“I may show you, someday,” he answered. He didn’t know if he ever would, but the prospect seemed almost pleasant. He tried to steer his thoughts back toward the matter at hand, and not to the idea of spending long hours crawling on forest floors with her, just them alone, in the cool damp seclusion of the woods. “So you may as well face facts: I’m sticking with you. Tell me everything. Better for all of us if you do.”

“I wish I could,” she said after a pause, and there was real regret in her voice. He found that he liked to hear her speak. She had an unusual accent, not fully English, tinged with a husky, almost Russian flavor. It sounded of long nights under fur blankets.

But despite her remarkable voice, Huntley felt his patience begin to fray. “Look, Miss Burgess,” he growled, “whoever or whatever you’re protecting—”

“Is far more important than your sense of obligation,” she finished. She turned and looked at him directly. “I take my own responsibilities very seriously, Captain. And one of them is maintaining my silence.”

Huntley didn’t respond, nor did she expect him to. They rode on without speaking, but he was a patient man. When he’d tracked Ali Jai Khan, he and his men had had to lie in wait for days, barely moving, making no noise, even when it rained for an entire day and they’d been lying in mud and mosquitoes, until the time for the bandit’s capture was exactly right. It had been hell, but worth it. The situation he was in now would be a paradise by comparison. Though that might not be true, either. He was a soldier, she was a gentleman’s daughter, they were on a dangerous journey together, and no matter what his body wanted, he was going to force himself to keep his hands, and other parts, off of her. There were things he needed to know, things that didn’t involve the taste of her mouth or the feel of her skin.

He’d have to content himself with finding out her secrets. Where they were headed. What they sought. And why. But those mysteries were much easier to solve than the ones presented by Thalia Burgess. And while he knew he shouldn’t learn her secrets, they were becoming much more intriguing to Huntley than anything else he’d ever come across in his jumbled life.

Sunrise was not for some time, but Thalia was already awake. Despite the long hours in the saddle and her physical exhaustion from the trying day, her sleep had been shallow, her dreams troubling. She kept seeing the face of the man she had killed, kept watching him ride up the hill over and over, and each time she raised her rifle and the
shot fired sounded louder than disaster. But in her dreams, the man would fall off his horse and roll down, down the hill, until he lay sprawled at her feet, and his face would no longer be his face, but her father’s. Blood, bright and accusing, covered her hands.

Many times, over the course of the night, she would wake, gasping and sick. Then she would turn her head toward where she knew Captain Huntley was sleeping, and, somehow, he was always awake when she was, because she would hear his voice say to her softly, “Easy, lass. The dreams will stop, in time.”

It didn’t seem that way. It didn’t seem that she could ever fall asleep again, but she would, after hearing the captain. She didn’t know why she found his presence nearby comforting, and it disturbed her that she did. Even so, she did drift off again, back to the nightmare. Would it always be this way? He didn’t think so. She wanted, at least, to believe that much.

Thalia now lay still as she fully wakened, looking up at the dark sky, marshalling her strength and her cunning. She and Batu would have to be extremely quiet, more quiet than silence itself, if they were to evade the captain. She supposed they could knock him unconscious with the butt of Batu’s heavy muzzleloader, but after everything that Captain Huntley had done for them, it would be unforgivable for her to physically hurt him. He’d helped save her from the Heirs’ violence, and she could not repay him with more of the same. But she did need to be free of him, for the sake of the Blades and everything they protected. She had no choice in the matter.

She would have to move soon. Thalia watched as one star, and then another, began to wink out with the approach of morning. They had camped for the night, wrapped in blankets that had been packed on the horses. Had she been traveling for any other reason, she would have had to stop at a nomad’s ail for the evening and saved herself and Batu the discomfort of sleeping on the hard, bare earth. She understood that she could receive hospitality at any ger, whether she knew the family or not. It was the Mongol way never to refuse food or lodging to anyone. But she hadn’t the time to stop, pay the usual respects, socialize over a meal, and perhaps perform a few chores to repay her hosts. So she had gone out of her way to avoid any gers, making sure that she and her party could not be seen by anyone at the encampments. To pass a ger without stopping was highly peculiar and almost rude. Better to stay out of the line of sight and avoid any speculation or unpleasantness.

It would be unpleasant to abandon Captain Huntley, but she saw no alternative. As befitting a soldier, he had traveled well and kept his council, only asking her now and again to identify certain animals or plants. She rather liked his curiosity, how he seemed interested in even the ridiculous marmots who would stare at them from their holes. He was focused on their journey, but had an expansiveness of mind that allowed for taking in new things. It was dreadfully appealing.

For their evening meal, she had handed out typical Mongol foods for travel: borts, dried mutton, and aaruul, dried cheese from goats’ milk, nothing that required a fire for cooking. Out on the steppe at night, a campfire shone like a beacon, and if the Heirs were out there, Thalia could take no chances in giving away her location.

“You’re not eating,” the captain had noted after she had distributed some food to him and Batu.

She had shaken her head. The idea of putting food into her mouth, chewing and swallowing it, after what she had done earlier in the day, seemed impossible. She didn’t think she could hold down anything.

Captain Huntley had gotten up and walked to the bag holding their provisions. He took a measure of borts and aaruul, and pressed them into her unwilling hand. “Eat,” he had commanded. “You can’t bring that man back by starving yourself, and you wouldn’t want to, anyway.”

“I can’t,” Thalia had answered, but he would not take the food back.

He had insisted. “You can and you will. If we have to sit here all night, I’ll make sure you finish those rations.”

“Don’t talk to me as though I’m a child,” she snapped.

“You’re not a child, and I don’t think of you as one,” he replied. “But after a soldier’s first kill, he can hurt himself. Not eating, not sleeping. I make sure that doesn’t happen. Not with them, and not with you.” He sat down opposite her and watched, waiting, until she began to nibble at the dried meat. At first, it had been difficult, and she nearly gagged, until he had said, “Breathe through your nose. Go slowly. And keep drinking.” She’d taken sips of airag, fermented horses’ milk, and gradually, bit by bit, finished her small meal. Despite her resentment toward Captain Huntley for his high-handed way of commanding her, she had ultimately been glad to have eaten something, recovered some of her strength because of it, which annoyed her. She didn’t want him to be right, not where knowing her own body’s needs was concerned, but he had been. She had a strange, unwanted thought—how well did the captain know women? Probably very well, indeed, with a face and form like his. Not that it mattered to her at all.

At the least, as they readied their beds for the night, he hadn’t pressed her for further answers. She appreciated his discretion, yet she also had an idea that he would take another tactic to learn the truth. He might not believe it, but for his sake, she could never tell him everything. And she had to lose him. Immediately.

With that in mind, Thalia now slowly, slowly pulled off her blankets and rolled into a crouch. It was too dark to
see much, but she knew that Batu slept not but a yard away to her right. She crept toward him and woke him with a hand on his shoulder, another hand over his mouth to keep him from speaking. Thalia pointed toward where Captain Huntley slept, and Batu nodded with understanding, then got to his feet. They both tiptoed toward where the horses were hobbled and began packing them as noiselessly as possible, using touch, rather than sight, as their guide. The animals snorted and stamped to warm themselves for impending travel. Thalia glanced over her shoulder, alarmed. Nothing from the captain.

The horizon turned pink and the rocky hills around them began to burn with dawn light. It wouldn’t be long before the sun’s rays reached their position, which would undoubtedly wake Captain Huntley. Even though he’d been awake whenever she had roused from a nightmare, he seemed to sleep soundly now. Maybe she had worn him out, with her frightening dreams. At least she could be grateful to the nightmares for that. She couldn’t rely on the captain’s exhaustion, though. They had to move quickly.

Thalia debated with herself whether or not she would take the captain’s horse. No Mongol liked to walk. Even small children learned to ride soon after taking their first steps. But the steppes were not uninhabited, nor uninhabitable. Taking Captain Huntley’s horse was not a death sentence. If he set out on foot, he could reach a ger within a day, if not less. She could surely lose him if she deprived him of a horse, and do him very little harm in the process.

As quietly as she could, she moved through the horses to find the tall mare he rode. Yet something was very strange. The mare was somehow eluding her, because she kept finding only her own horses. She fumbled toward Batu and whispered into his ear, “Where is the captain’s horse?”

Batu had been raised as a nomad and knew horses better than most people knew their parents. After a cursory examination, he whispered back, “The horse is gone.”

Thalia was alarmed. The captain had hobbled his horse when they had made camp, and she had discreetly watched him to ensure that he’d done it properly, which he had. So where in blazes was his animal? It couldn’t have wandered off on its own. Had it been stolen?

A strange intuition had Thalia cautiously approach where Captain Huntley slept. As she did, the first rays of light began to illuminate the basin. And that was when she saw it.

The captain was gone.

There was a slight depression in the ground where he had lain, but that was all that remained of him. His horse, his gear, everything had vanished. She found herself crouching down, touching the earth where he had slept, as if trying to catch the lingering warmth of his body, perhaps judge how long it had been since he left. Of course, the ground was cold.

She felt a stab of panic. What if something had happened to him? Had the Heirs kidnapped him from the camp, as she and Batu slept on, unaware? No. He was a soldier, and a good one. Nothing ill had befallen him. There was another explanation for his absence.

She straightened. “He left us,” she said to Batu as he came to stand beside her.

“Without saying anything?”

“It appears so.” Irritation flared as she contemplated this development. “All his protestations about accompanying us, that we needed his help—I suppose they had no weight.” Annoyed with the captain for leaving, more annoyed with herself that she should care, Thalia stalked back to her horse and adjusted the saddle.

“Or perhaps,” Batu suggested, following, “he finally took your words to heart and headed for home. A man will only wait around so long while a woman holds him at bay.”

Thalia scowled at her old friend, who merely looked back at her with a calm, unperturbed expression. She took out her frustrations on her poor horse by giving the saddle cinch a hard tug, and the animal snorted and pawed at the ground in protest. Thalia patted it, contrite.

“We should get going,” she finally said. “Morning is here and we have at least three more days of traveling.”

Batu agreed, and together, they finished packing, then mounted their horses and began to ride west. They had camped in a wide gulley, and had to crest a small line of hills to continue on their way. Thalia felt strange and out-of-sorts, and tried to dismiss it as the result of a poor night’s sleep, but, deep inside herself, she knew it was because she had not said a proper farewell to Captain Huntley. He was gruff and commanding, yes, but he had also shown her an unexpected compassion. Between that and the insistent pull she felt toward him whenever he was around, she could have compromised herself badly had he stayed. He could have been more dangerous than Sergei. A letter shouldn’t hurt, though. If she only knew more about him, where he was headed, she might be able to write him a letter, thanking him for his service. But she knew almost nothing of him besides his name and rank, and finding him could be nearly impossible.

Thalia shook her head, clearing her thoughts. She needed to focus her attention on the task at hand. The Heirs would be hard on her heels, and she had to protect the Blades, do their work. This was the opportunity she had
longed for, and she would be damned if she let anything, including herself, get in her way.

Yet all of her carefully constructed resolve fell away just as she and Batu came over the top of the hills.

Captain Huntley was waiting for them.

He was atop his horse, and, judging by the sheen on the animal’s hide, they had been riding for some time. As he wiped some dust from his face with a kerchief, he did not look at all surprised to see them, unlike Thalia, who felt a confusing mixture of happiness, relief, and anger.

“Good, you’re up,” he said as she and Batu trotted to meet him. “I’ve scouted the area and it looks clear, so we can move ahead.”

Thalia vowed to herself that she could be just as sanguine as the captain, while her heart, clearly not receiving the telegram from her head, capered inside her chest. “There’s a narrow gorge about three miles from here,” she said. “It could be a good place for an ambush.”

“Already secured it,” he answered.

“And a stand of larches a mile beyond could hide a group of riders.”

“That’s been taken care of, as well. Your friends don’t appear to be anywhere in the vicinity. I spotted a grouping of tracks, but they were headed north, not west.”

Thalia took a breath, scanning the horizon. She finally allowed herself to look at him directly, and found that the morning light turned his eyes to burnished coins. He must have slept less than she did, yet seemed to suffer no lingering trace of tiredness, no ill effects. In fact, with the golden sunlight playing across his cheekbones, the hard line of his jaw, and the slight fullness of his bottom lip, he looked quite enticing. It didn’t seem quite fair, not when Thalia was certain that she looked like the underside of a saddle.

“You’re quite thorough,” she said after a moment.

“Always am.” An almost teasing glint appeared in his eyes, warming them, warming her. “In everything.”

“Ah,” she cleverly answered. Thalia actually felt herself blush, something she hadn’t done since…since Sergei. And look how well that had turned out.

She resisted the urge to rub at her face, to try to hide the signs of her awareness of him, which would only draw further attention. His attention. Which she did not want. For so many reasons. Including the fact that she could easily respond to his attention, easily and eagerly. She would have to be careful, watchful, as much toward herself as toward him. Which meant that there would be no more blushing. There was a sizable difference between telling herself something and actually having it happen, however. She would have to take action, beginning immediately.

So: no flirtatious remarks from her. “We cannot stay here all day,” she said instead, and put her heels to her horse. The animal leapt into a gallop. Behind her, she heard Captain Huntley and Batu kick their horses into motion. As she listened to the horses’ hooves, felt the cool morning air against her face, something strange and surprising began blossoming within her, something she only later recognized as a secret happiness.
Chapter 5
The True Hammer of Thor

The servant, Batu, shouted something in Mongolian to Thalia. He sounded anxious. Her somewhat calmer answer was also in Mongolian, so he had no way to know what they were talking about. Huntley wasn’t sure if he should ask. Ever since that morning, when she had practically frosted over in response to his attempts at flirtation, Huntley had wisely decided to give her some room, and speak seldom.

Perhaps her father kept her isolated from the company of men. It might explain why she was skittish and abrupt with Huntley. Or, he thought wryly, perhaps his own ham-handed efforts at seduction could attract only the most jaded trollop that ever followed a regiment. Maybe he should have taken care of his sexual needs back in Peking. There had been a lot of opportunities, but Huntley had never been especially fond of paying for female company, which was the most available option, and he was also pressed for time. So he had ridden on, and now it seemed he was paying the real price. Clumsily flirting with a woman who would rather he had the good manners to be thrown from his horse and kicked in the head.

Their company of three had ridden in silence for the better part of the day. They hadn’t even stopped to eat, but instead, still in the saddle, they gnawed on more of the dried meat that Thalia had handed out. Thalia held the lead, while Huntley continued to ride at the back of the group, keeping his eyes and ears attuned to any sights and sounds. Occasionally, they passed a nomad herding sheep, and a few clusters of those large tents that Thalia called gers appeared in the distance, but she seemed intent on giving them a wide berth. Huntley admitted to himself his interest in the woman kept growing, and not only because she had a strong-featured beauty he’d seldom seen before. She campaigned well, almost as well as a seasoned veteran, and while no one would ever call her masculine, she wasn’t fragile. Perhaps the fact that he found this appealing was even more reason for him to get back to England as soon as this mission was over and find himself a tranquil wife whose favorite pursuits included embroidering slippers and pillow covers. His value system, as it stood now, was badly in need of repair.

The talking between her and the servant was growing more animated, and Huntley followed Batu’s finger as he pointed toward the east. The sky, which was clear overhead save for a few high, wispy clouds, appeared gloomy and threatening on the eastern horizon, behind them. Batu was clearly disturbed by this.

“A storm is coming,” Huntley said.

Thalia and Batu both looked at him as they reined in their horses. “Yes, a storm,” Batu agreed. “A bad one.” He spoke again to her in rapid Mongolian, and she shook her head.

“I thought there was hardly any rain in Mongolia,” Huntley said.

“There isn’t,” confirmed Thalia. She frowned at the northern sky, a worried line appearing between her straight black eyebrows.

“But the wind is blowing southward,” Huntley pointed out. “It should give us no trouble.”

The servant shook his head. “No. It heads toward us.”

“I don’t see how that could be possible.”

“But it is possible,” Thalia said, her voice tight. “It’s drawing closer. And I suggest we try to outride it.”

She was right. Even in the few minutes since their group had stopped, the small belt of darkness that had only occupied a narrow fraction of the sky had grown three times as big. On the open space of the Mongolian steppe, the torrents of rain that the storm was unleashing could be plainly seen, a gray column that stretched between the clouds and the soaked earth. The storm seemed to be traveling as quickly as a steam engine hurtling straight toward them. At that rate, they would be soaked in thirty minutes.

“The devil,” Huntley cursed.

“No, Captain,” Thalia corrected, grim, “something worse.” She kicked her horse into a gallop, with Huntley and Batu close at her heels.

The wind began to pick up almost at once, turning from a gentle breeze into a punishing gale that tore tears from the eyes. The bright day quickly faded into gloom as the storm raced nearer. Despite how hard they rode the horses, the giant wall of dark clouds advanced on them, taking over the sky and shadowing the ground. Across open pastures they rode, over rocky fields, trying to put as much distance as they could between themselves and the oncoming squall.
Huntley managed a brief look over his shoulder, and pulled automatically on the reins. He nearly caused his horse to rear up before he recollected himself and spurred the animal forward. In all the years he had served, with all the strange weather he had ever lived through, Huntley had never seen anything like the thunderhead that, he could almost swear, chased them now. The clouds were as tall as mountains, black as the grave, roiling and tumbling with unchecked rage.

Just as the edge of the clouds reached over their heads, rain slammed into them. Their clothing was soaked in an instant. Racing through the downpour, it was almost impossible to breathe—water kept pouring off the brim of Huntley’s hat and into his nose and mouth. Squinting, Huntley could barely make out the forms of Thalia and Batu ahead as they, too, struggled against the shredding wind and punishing rain. A thunderclap tore open the air with a report so loud, Huntley would have sworn a cannon had gone off right beside him. His horse did rear up then, and it took all of his strength to control the animal and continue their flight.

They climbed up a hill, trying to seek shelter in a small overhang of rocks. Thalia had already reached it, and Huntley and Batu soon followed. The rocks provided a tiny measure of relief, but not much, as the horses jostled each other in fear while their riders panted and watched the storm.

“We can’t stay here long,” Huntley shouted above the rain. As if to emphasize his words, a tumble of rocks, loosened by the downpour, clattered off the overhang and landed at the already nervous horses’ feet.

“There’s a cave not very far from here, on the other side of a river,” Thalia shouted back. Her dark hair was plastered against her face, which she shoved back with an impatient hand. She snatched off her soggy hat and shoved it into a saddlebag. “We can set out as soon as the horses have gotten their wind.”

Huntley started to answer, but was cut off by a bolt of lightning striking the ground a few hundred yards away. The flash was enormous, and Huntley had to shield his eyes from the glare. Another titanic thunderclap slammed through the air. Huntley felt it through the ground, in the marrow of his bones and recesses of his mind. It was as though he was under bombardment. The edge of the storm was passing overhead, but the dark center drew nearer. He couldn’t believe that any storm could have so much power. Then he saw something which made him doubt his sanity altogether.

There, in the clouds the size of a canyon wall, a man’s face formed. Huntley rubbed at his eyes, trying to clear the water from his vision, but no matter how much he pressed at his eyes, the image did not fade, but rather took greater shape and clarity. It was, in fact, the fierce and angry face of a man that appeared within the clouds, and not an ordinary man, but one with a long moustache and braided beard, a Norse helmet atop his head. A Viking. As Huntley watched, incredulous, the clouds also massed into the shape of a huge arm, and held in its fist was a hammer. The Viking opened his mouth with a bellow of thunder and brought the hammer down onto the ground, unleashing another bolt of lightning that struck a small stand of trees. The trees exploded, leaving only charred stumps in the rain. Huntley swore violently.

“What the hell was that?” Huntley demanded, turning to Thalia. Her face was white, her eyes wide, but she did not appear as though she was witnessing something extraordinary. Instead, she looked as though this was something she had anticipated. But that couldn’t be. No one could anticipate the impossible.

“We cannot wait,” she shouted over the roar. “We must ride for the cave now!”

There was no time to press for answers. The storm would be directly overhead in minutes, and surely the rocks would crumble around them when it hit. They broke from the minuscule shelter of the overhang, riding hard over the hills. Huntley spared only a moment to glance behind him, daring his eyes to show him what could not be there. But his sight was either lying, or the impossible was now very real, because the Storm Viking had not vanished. He was still in the clouds, his mouth twisted in rage, his eyes burning, and his arm upraised to strike again. Huntley urged his horse to gallop harder, though the mare needed no encouragement.

Huntley almost said a prayer of thanks when he spotted the river that Thalia had mentioned, with a hill just beyond it, and halfway up the hillside, the welcome dark of a cave. The river’s waters were swollen from the rain, its banks flooded, but it did not look too deep to ford—yet. A few more minutes was all they had.

Huntley led the group as the horses struggled down the bank and into the river. The water surged around them, trying to pull them from their saddles and tearing at the horses’ legs. As they managed to reach the middle of the river, the air was filled with an almighty roar that even obscured the wind and rain. Huntley had been pulling the reins of the pack horse to get the terrified animal to move forward, and he looked up with a vicious oath as the roaring grew even louder.

Hurtling down the river was a wall of water. It moved forward with an unquenchable hunger, tearing up the few trees that grew on the river’s banks and pulling huge rocks from the earth and adding them to its arsenal of water, mud, and debris. But there weren’t only rocks and trees swirling within the flood. Huntley saw beasts, demonic combinations of animals with gaping maws and pointed talons, made of water. As they hurtled down the river, the beasts tore at the land with their claws and teeth, destroying and consuming everything in their path. Already frozen
from the rain, Huntley was chilled further when he saw that these water creatures were headed straight toward them.

Thalia managed to get her horse across the river, maneuvering the animal skillfully through the surging water. Huntley’s mare was fighting to reach the riverbank, but the pack horse was too frightened to do anything besides pull on the reins and roll its eyes. The water was rising higher and higher, and now surged up to Huntley and Batu’s thighs as they both pushed and shoved at the fearful animal. The force was so great that some of their bags came loose from their moorings and were quickly pulled into the turbulent water and submerged. Huntley hoped they didn’t contain anything irreplaceable.

“Get to the cave,” Huntley shouted at Batu. “I’ll take care of the horse!”

The manservant shook his head. “I will help,” he yelled back.

Huntley cursed stubborn Mongols, but kept working. They both bullied the pack horse toward the shore, until it finally reached the riverbank, where Thalia grabbed its reins and pulled it behind her as she rode up the hill to the cave, moments ahead of the oncoming wall of water. Huntley was not satisfied until he saw Thalia ride into the mouth of the cave, then turn and wave back to signal her safe arrival.

He had no time to breathe easier as Batu’s horse struggled to reach the muddy bank, its head tossing wildly with fear and exertion. Huntley took hold of its reins and dragged on them hard, his arm burning. The horse was almost to the bank when the wall of water, and the beasts within it, struck.

He felt as though he was being slammed, over and over again, by columns of marble. Water surged all around, and he felt hundreds of claws tearing at him, trying to force him from the saddle. One hand on the saddle horn, and the other desperately gripping the reins of Batu’s horse, Huntley fought to stay mounted. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t see, he knew nothing beyond the rage of the river demons battling to drown him. His thighs ached in agony as he kept them clamped hard around the flanks of his horse. The only hope he had to survive was to move forward, out of the hellish river.

He dug his heels into his horse. It pushed against the current, sidestepping, and, after what seemed like ten lifetimes, the mare breached the water and made it onto the bank. Though Huntley felt as though his arm was going to fly out of its socket, he continued to pull on the reins of Batu’s horse. The animal burst through the water as the creatures within it continued to claw at its flanks, leaving marks on its hide. Batu bent low over the horse’s neck, urging it forward. They had nearly broken free of the galloping river when a talon reached out and plucked Batu right from his saddle. The man disappeared into the water.

Huntley immediately let go of the horse’s reins, barely noticing when it galloped away. He didn’t care what happened to the beast, but he had to find the man. Through the pounding of the rain and the rising water, he searched for any sign of Batu, barely daring to believe that the Mongol might still be alive. He shouted the servant’s name, trying in vain to be heard above the almighty din.

Thalia’s voice joined his. He turned in his saddle and was furious when he saw her beside him, on her own horse, calling for Batu.

“Get back to the cave, damn it!”

“I can’t lose him,” she shouted, and called Batu’s name again.

Under any other circumstances, Huntley would have forcibly returned Thalia to the cave, but a man’s life hung in the balance. He, too, shouted for the Mongol as they searched, their horses moving gingerly down the bank. Thank God that the wall of water had moved on a bit, the beasts inside as well, leaving churning floodwaters in its place. They called and called for Batu until their voices gave out, and Huntley was almost resigned to the fact that the loyal servant had drowned, when he felt Thalia reach over and grip his sleeve.

“There,” she shouted, pointing a little further downstream. “He’s there!” He followed her direction. It was true. Batu clung to the branches of a partly submerged tree that was moments away from being torn from the ground by the water. He looked exhausted, barely able to hold on for much longer. As one, Huntley and Thalia kicked at their horses and rode toward Batu’s precarious salvation.

They reached Batu, and Thalia managed to get him to release his grip on the tree, but not without prying his fingers loose from the branches. Huntley grabbed Batu’s waist and swung the battered man in front of him, knowing that the nearly drowned Mongol had hardly any strength left and would not be able to hold on without support. Huntley gripped Batu, holding tightly to keep the servant from sliding off the saddle and into the river. The horses were also worn out, and Huntley and Thalia weren’t faring much better. Huntley nodded at Thalia. It was time to seek their shelter.

With a final burst of effort, Thalia and Huntley pushed their horses enough to get them up the hill and into the cave. It was a blessed relief to be out of the punishing rain at last. Everyone slipped from the horses’ backs to the ground. Freed from the burden of their riders, the animals retreated to the rear of the cave, their hooves clattering on the rocky ground. Batu’s horse no longer made up the caravan, having disappeared in the storm.

From their vantage, they could see down into the gorge, where the river continued to rage. The banks had
completely overflowed, and the river itself looked to have been changed from a quiet stream of a foot’s depth to a
torrent over seven feet high. The storm kept at it, howling winds swirling around the mouth of the cave. What had
been a relatively peaceful day had been torn to pieces by a vengeful, sentient storm.

Huntley held on to Batu, who could not stand on his own. Both Huntley and Thalia helped lower Batu to the
floor, leaning him against the wall of the cave. The servant’s breathing was shallow and labored, his eyes closed.
Thalia cast Huntley a worried look, and Huntley held up his hand to ask for patience. As Thalia carefully held the
manservant’s lolling head, Huntley produced his flask of whiskey and dribbled a little of the alcohol into Batu’s
mouth. Batu coughed twice, but managed to revive a bit.

Thalia, kneeling on the ground, sagged with relief. She said something to Batu in Mongolian, and he answered,
smiling at her weakly. He then looked at Huntley, crouched to his left, and spoke again in Mongolian, before closing
his eyes, completely sapped.

“He says that his English washed away in the river,” Thalia translated. “But he wanted to thank you for saving
his life. And,” she added, “I want to thank you, too. You saved us both, again.” She fought to keep her eyes level
with his. “You humble us with your courage when we’ve asked nothing of you.”

Huntley, battered, soaked, tired beyond comprehension, sank beside Batu. His legs stretched out in front of him
while his arms hung limply to the ground. He wrung out his last remaining ounce of strength to tip the flask to his
own mouth, gratefully sipping at the warming whiskey. He offered the flask to Thalia. She took it and put it to her
lips. Huntley closed his eyes. He didn’t want to watch her drink from exactly where his mouth had been.

“Now’s the time you repay me,” he rasped. When he heard the cap replaced on the flask, he opened his eyes. A
slight flush stained Thalia’s white cheeks, but he didn’t know if it was a result of the whiskey or his demand.

“Very well,” she said. “Name your price.”

Huntley forced his arm up and took hold of her wrist as she was returning the flask. Her skin was cold and
smooth under his grasp. Her eyes flew to his.

“The truth,” Huntley growled. “We don’t take another step further until you’ve told me everything.”

Fortunately, some nomads had used the cave to camp recently, leaving behind a decent-sized pile of dry wood
that Huntley used to build a fire. The blankets were relatively dry, but their clothing was soaked, and they knew that
if they wanted to prevent sickness, they would have to let the clothing dry near the fire. Huntley first saw to the
horses, removing their saddles and packs. Afterward, Thalia shyly retreated to the back of the cave and removed her
wet clothes, while Huntley and Batu promised not to watch. Huntley made himself stare at the fire, trying not to
listen to the sounds of Thalia disrobing, but he could mark each garment as it was taken off: first the robe, which
would uncover her shoulders and arms; then the boots and socks, revealing her feet; trousers next, peeling off of her
legs, one, then the other. There was a moment’s hesitation, followed by the sound of smaller cotton items being
removed. Great God, she’d taken off her underwear, too.

Her bare feet slapped gently on the rocky floor of the cave as she approached the fire. Huntley saw that she had
wrapped a blanket just above her breasts, holding it up with her free hand while the other spread her clothing in front
of the fire. He knew she shouldn’t stare, and there were other, larger issues to deal with, but he was moonstruck by
the sight of Thalia Burgess’s bare shoulders, her slim arms and creamy neck. Her black hair hung down, as she tried
to shield her blushing face with its dark curtain. She didn’t have the arms of a lady of leisure, and he couldn’t help
but admire the small bunching of muscles that moved there as she arranged her clothes.

She eased down next to the fire, drawing the blanket tight around her. As she did so, he caught a flash of
slender, strong leg and hoped that he was too tired and cold to let that affect him. He felt his body stir, his cock
lifting. Apparently, he was going to have to be suspended in the middle of an ice floe to be unmoved by her. If only
one were handy.

Huntley helped Batu to his feet, and the servant had enough energy to take himself to the back of the cave and
disrobe. After Batu had returned, also swaddled in a blanket, it was Huntley’s turn to strip. It didn’t take long, and
soon there were three groups of clothes drying in front of the fire. Huntley noticed that Thalia’s eyes kept straying to
him and the parts of his body that his blanket showed. It was the same pattern, over and over again: her gaze would
wander to him, fasten on him—his shoulder, the length of his arm—then, as if chastised, skitter away. Yet never for
long. This repeated itself many times. He wondered how many partially clad men she had ever seen. Doubtful if any
of them were built like a common laborer…or soldier.

“It’s hard to know where to begin,” she said, after they were all settled.

“Let’s start with that Norseman in the storm and the beasts in the water.” Huntley could hardly believe he was
saying such words, but it had been a day that defied imagination, and seeing Thalia Burgess partially dressed was
only one part of it. “Tell me what the hell that was.”

She stared at the fire, as if readying herself for his response, his disbelief. “The storm and flood were
summoned by Mjolnir, the True Hammer of Thor,” she said after a moment. “Whomever wields it can call forth a
storm that would tear Asgard from its very foundations. The rains it causes create a flood more savage than a
hundred wolves. It was stolen from its sacred burial mound in Norway two years ago, but this is only the third time
it has been used.”

“Someone found an old hammer in a pile of dirt,” Huntley said, “and just used it to try to drown us.” Patent
disbelief dripped from his voice.

Thalia looked up sharply at him. “You asked for an explanation, and I’m giving it to you. Whether or not you
believe me isn’t my concern.”

“Fair enough,” Huntley conceded. “Let’s assume that what you’ve told me is true. For now. Who stole this
hammer?”

She tightened her jaw. “I’m not supposed to tell you this.”

“If you can’t trust me?” Huntley scraped out a laugh that had no humor in it. “Sweetheart, I’ve been shot
at, not only by bullets, but with metal wasps that punched through solid brick. I’ve been abandoned on the steppe,
neared struck by lightning, and come this close to drowning, and all in service to you and your mission, whatever the
hell it is. I’m more trustworthy than the damned Archbishop of Canterbury.”

“I could tell you some colorful stories about him,” Thalia said with a tiny smile.

He wouldn’t be distracted by that enigmatic smile of hers, though he wouldn’t mind seeing it more often.

“Some other time. Now, you were telling me about who took this hammer.”

Seeing that he would not give up, she nodded. “I think it would be best if I started at the beginning. Or as near
to the beginning as I can.”

“You’re stalling.”

“It may be hard for you to believe, Captain,” she said after casting him an annoyed look, “but the world is filled
with magic. Actual, genuine magic. What you saw today was just a hint of the power that is out there. That which
we call myths or legends is, in fact, the lore that has developed around this magic. Including the stories about the
Norse thunder god, Thor.”

“They write children’s books about him,” Huntley said, recalling some of the stories he’d learned in the dame
school he had attended long ago.

“And to most people, the realm of magic is just that, the stuff for nursery tales and academic research,” she
continued. “But it is quite real and quite dangerous. All over the world, there are repositories of this mystical power,
objects imbued with magic, like Mjolnir, the hammer that belonged to Thor. These repositories are known as
Sources. They can be found in every country, amongst every people. England, Scotland, Spain, India, the Americas.

If that were true,” Huntley cut in as his mind fought to understand, “then how is it that the world hasn’t been
destroyed by power-mad dolts? And why don’t more people know about them?”

“Not for lack of trying,” she said. “But the Sources are kept well hidden to ensure that doesn’t happen. They are
protected and sheltered from the world at large.”

Huntley thought for a moment. “By men like your father. And Morris.”

She nodded. “There is a group of men and women who seek out and protect the Sources, wherever they are.
This group has been around for over a thousand years, but when the nations of Europe began to turn their eyes to
distant shores, racing one another to create giant empires, the group became more organized. They had to ensure that
the Sources were not taken from their native homes and exploited, not only for the sake of the local people, but for
everyone’s sake.” She looked utterly serious, and grim, staring into the fire. “Mutual destruction would be assured if
the great nations of Europe were able to harness the Sources for their own blind advancement.”

“That never stopped fools from trying,” Huntley added.

And they do try,” she confirmed. “Napoleon’s escape from Elba would never have succeeded without the use
of Nephthys’s Cloak, which shielded him from the British patrols of the island.”

“But he failed at Waterloo.”

“The Cloak was recovered before the battle.”

Huntley leaned back and considered. He had never thought himself to be very clever, had been an average
student, and relied on his gut instinct when it came to soldiering. His instinct didn’t know what to make of the yarn
Thalia was spinning, though he was becoming more and more aware that it wasn’t a yarn, but the truth. He felt the
surface of reality growing soft and porous like an orange, peeling away to reveal a world underneath the one he
thought he knew.

“Those men who killed Morris and attacked you,” he said as things shifted and moved into their new positions.

“They’re in on it, too.”

“They are part of an organization called the Heirs of Albion.”
“Heirs, hm?” Huntley mused, thinking of the murderous, gently born piece of shit who murdered Morris and who led the attack against Thalia. “They are England’s chosen sons? Upper crust men who kill unarmed men in alleyways and assault women? I hate them already.”

She smiled ruefully. “Trust me, you will come to hate them more. The Heirs are one of the largest and most powerful groups who seek out the Sources for their countries’ benefit, and they don’t care who they step on, or kill, along the way. The Heirs will stop at nothing to ensure the supremacy of England, even if it means murdering their own countrymen.” Thalia looked at him guardedly. “But you’re a soldier. You have served Queen and country for many years. Perhaps you think the Heirs are in the right, that England should reign supreme over all other nations.”

“I served my country,” Huntley shot back, “but I never stood for bullying. I didn’t in the army, and I don’t now. That goes for men, women, and nations. It was them, the Heirs, who stole the hammer and used it against us today.”

She seemed relieved to hear his answer, though it galled him a little that she would’ve believed he sided with those blue-blooded bungholes. “Yes.”

“How close would someone have to be to use it?”

“No one knows for certain, since it hasn’t been studied thoroughly, but it’s been figured that the hammer can be employed from as far away as a hundred miles.”

“So, the Heirs are close to us now.”

“Within a hundred miles. But I fear that using the True Hammer is just the beginning. The Heirs know that there is a Source here in Mongolia, but they don’t know exactly where. That’s why they killed Tony, to keep him from finding out and getting to it first. And that’s why they attacked Batu and me yesterday.”

“What will they do when they have the Source?”

Bitterness hardened her voice. “With the Source’s unlimited power, Mongolia will belong to them. Its steppes will be plowed and plundered. The people yoked to pull the great machine of Britain forward, crushing everyone in its path, with the Heirs at the whip.”

“That’s what Morris’s message meant, ‘The sons are ascendant,’” Huntley figured.

Thalia smiled at him again, warming him faster than the whiskey ever could. “You’re a remarkably quick study, Captain,” she said with real admiration in her voice. “I should think you would have keeled over with shock after learning all this.”

“I’m hard to shock.” He was, in truth, reeling inside from all this information. Magic. Sources. Heirs. Things that would have given him a good laugh only a few days ago. But now seemed real and serious. He thought of the metallic wasps in the alley in Southampton, piercing a brick wall and then vanishing. Another Source, perhaps. One that had almost taken his life. Years of going into battle had trained him well enough to keep from showing fear or shock, or at least, not too much. Wouldn’t do for his men to see his jaw hit the floor when confronted with a surprise counterattack. This wasn’t much different, only instead of an assault by the warriors of Tewodros II, he had a young woman revealing to him the existence of actual magic.

“So Morris and your father are part of the group that keep the Sources out of the Heirs’ greedy paws,” he said. “You, as well?”

She looked somewhat abashed. “There are women members, but…me, no. Not yet. You have to...prove yourself before you are made a member. My father is, but he is injured. So it fell to me. I wanted to go,” she added with a sudden ferocity, no longer embarrassed.

Interesting. Thalia Burgess, a young woman who burned with need to prove herself to this group. If Franklin Burgess hadn’t been hurt, would Burgess have let his daughter accompany him on this dangerous journey? Perhaps the old man had been trying to protect his child more than she would have liked for longer than she wanted. But the needs of the many outweighed his own fatherly instinct, and he’d had to let her go. What was Burgess feeling right now? Probably an agony of worry. Huntley wished he could write Burgess and let him know. Huntley wasn’t going anywhere. He would stay and ensure the mission was completed, but, more importantly, protect Thalia. That had become Huntley’s purpose. She was a brave woman, he wouldn’t deny that, seeing courage and determination shining in her glittering emerald eyes. She’d fought that supernatural storm without once backing down or showing fear, and she’d pushed through her own guilt and doubt that had threatened to swamp her after she’d killed. Huntley could count on one hand the number of men he knew who could withstand as much.

But, with the exception of Batu, who was no fighter, she had started her journey alone against a very powerful, ruthless enemy. Her solitude made her vulnerable. She wasn’t alone in her fight anymore.

“So, Captain Huntley,” Thalia said, breaking the silence, “what I’ve told you has been kept a secret for generations, but you’ve proven yourself more than trustworthy. Now that you know everything, what do you intend to do?” She stared at him, intent and slightly afraid of what he might say.

He held her gaze. “I’ll say this one last time. I’m with you until the end. Whoever and whatever comes our way.”
As he said this, he felt the oddest surge of happiness—a feeling with which he hadn’t much experience, not since he’d resigned from the army. At that point, Huntley had settled on his makeshift plan to return to England, get an ordinary job, find a sweet wife, and install her in some snug home while they made armfuls of babies, but, strangely, the plan hadn’t raised his spirits as he thought it would. But throwing himself headlong into a cause he hadn’t known about a week earlier, a cause in which he’d face unknown, supernatural dangers…somehow that had done the trick. Huntley felt the blood moving in him, the old excitement of a campaign.

It was made all the better knowing that Thalia Burgess would be by his side.

Hearing his vow, she let out a breath she probably hadn’t known she was holding and smiled at him again. Seeing her smile, something hot and animal slid through him. But this wasn’t the time, and it wasn’t the place; he had his cause and his duty, so he tried to push that roused beast aside. It was a fight, though.

Instead of reaching for her, as he wanted to do, he asked, “And what are these paragons called, who safeguard the world, and save England from herself?”

Before she even spoke, he knew everything was about to change. And change forever.

“The Blades of the Rose.”
Chapter 6
Karakorum

Captain Huntley by firelight, partially covered by a woolen blanket, was one of the finest sights Thalia had ever seen, and that included sunrise over the red cliffs of Bayanzag, a Kazakh hunting eagle soaring in flight, and the gilt sculptures of the divinely inspired Bogdo Gegen Zanabazar.

She knew she wasn’t supposed to stare—there were some English concepts that had been impressed upon her from an early age, including modesty and a decent amount of decorum, as well as a love of a decently made cup of tea—but it was very, very difficult to keep her eyes where they were supposed to be. The captain had wrapped the heavy blanket around himself like a toga, so she had a perfectly lovely view of his broad, sculpted shoulders, and his lean, muscled arms. Oh, princesses had abdicated kingdoms for lesser arms. The light from the fire played across the burnished gold of his skin and caught in the dusting of fair hair on his forearms. Unfortunately, he’d wrapped the blanket so that his chest was hidden from her sight, but even the glimpses of his collarbones, the shadow in the hollow of his throat, and the strong column of his neck could keep her well satisfied. For now.

And there were his hands, his feet, capturing her attention. Large, capable, unmistakably masculine, and so powerfully suggestive that Thalia felt herself spellbound. She wanted those hands on her, touching her, wondered what they would feel like. Rough? Gentle? She wouldn’t mind, either way.

He knew what effect he was having on her. She saw the gleam of amusement and interest in his eyes whenever her gaze lingered on him too long. She saw, too, the way he looked at her from across the fire. They had survived a harrowing ordeal together; they were both young and healthy, and far from the structures of social custom. It was only natural that desire was there, in the cave with them, making the air thick like smoke.

Men were creatures she understood. Their motivations were more direct, purer than women’s. Sex was a matter of simple bodily needs for them. They wanted. They took. She might not be a classic beauty, but the captain would not refuse her if she asked to lie with him. It wouldn’t take much. Batu was asleep. All she had to do was beckon to Captain Huntley, or stand and let her blanket drop. The rest would take care of itself.

Thalia, however, wasn’t a man. She had desires, just as they did, but satisfying them was not so uncomplicated. She had almost taken a man to her bed, and had paid dearly for even that brush with sex. If she actually gave her body to a man, she could not protect her heart, could not treat the matter lightly, as if she was simply eating an apple when she craved something sweet. Men, especially beautiful, physical creatures like Captain Huntley, had the luxury of walking away and remaining intact. She did not.

So she might look, but she would not touch, would not taste, and would try as best she could to be content. Though it was deuced hard.

She attempted to distract herself by focusing on her mission, and telling the captain everything he might need to know as they pursued their goal of protecting the unknown Source. Night had fallen, the rain had slowed. The cave offered a momentary illusion of safety and peace.

“In my del,” she said, “you will find the Compass Tony asked you to give to my father.”

Captain Huntley leaned toward the pile of her drying clothes—ah, Earth Mother Etugen! the muscles in his back, shoulders, and arms seemed made of rough satin as they flexed with movement—and rifled through the pocket of her coat until he produced the object in question. It sat in the palm of his hand, appearing small and ancient in contrast to the living energy of his skin. Thalia moved closer and took the Compass from him, her fingers brushing against his palm. She fought the impulse to shiver.

Flipping open the lid, she showed him the inside of the Compass. She remembered her father giving it to her in Urga, the pride in his eyes. She was not a Blade yet, but the Compass would be both her protection and duty.

As the captain leaned in to look, she could smell him, his flesh warmed by the fire, the water that still dampened his hair, even his breath mingling with her own.

She made herself speak in a level voice. “The blades that mark each direction on the Compass symbolize the span of our mission: to traverse the world and protect the Sources. In the center of the Compass is a rose, which bids us to be merciful and compassionate in our mission.” Thalia closed the Compass and ran her thumb along the writings etched into the case. “These messages are from our ancestors, urging us to do right, even when faced with...temptation.” She struggled a little over that last word, knowing what temptations she wrestled with that very
moment. She and the captain were sitting very close to one another now. She could lean forward slightly and brush her lips against his throat where, she saw, his pulse moved steady and strong beneath his skin.

“Each member of the Blades of the Rose carries this Compass,” she continued. She made herself concentrate on the Compass. “They are the Blades’ most prized possession, and no one, including the Heirs of Albion, knows of their existence. Even the threat of death cannot induce a Blade to part with it.”

“Morris gave it to me.” She felt the dry brush of his breath on her cheek.

“So you would give the Compass to my father. There are many Blades all over the world, but they don’t always know each other. The Compass lets them see that they are amongst friends. But that isn’t enough. An object can be stolen, no matter how well it is guarded. So there is another way.”

Captain Huntley nodded with understanding. “That was why Morris had me say, ‘North is eternal.’”

“Yes. It is the first part of the Blades’ catchphrase. When a Blade meets another Blade, the first must say, ‘North is eternal.’ The response is: ‘South is forever. West is endless. East is infinite.’ It helps them to know one another, and reminds them of the scope of their responsibilities.”

“Someone might not answer correctly, though. Someone who’s trying to infiltrate the group. How can Blades protect themselves against enemies?”

“They are not called the Blades without having more than a little fighting skill.” She glanced at him, now leaning even closer, and felt herself drawn into a warm cocoon that surrounded them both.

“Even the women?” Humor danced in his amber eyes.

Thalia felt her mouth curve in a smile. “Even the women.”

As their gazes held, the moment stretched out between them, growing heavy and almost languid. Thalia could hear, faintly, the popping of the fire, Batu’s quiet snores, the horses as they slept standing up at the back of the cave, and the trailing off of the rain outside. But everything sounded so far away, so distant, and Captain Huntley was so near, he became all she saw, all she heard. His pupils widened, darkening his eyes. A muscle flexed along the square line of his jaw.

He reached out, and she started to close her eyes, thinking he would touch her, but instead he took hold of a lock of her hair. It was still damp, just beginning to dry at the ends, and he wound it slowly around one long, blunt-tipped finger. Thalia lost the ability to breathe. Her dark hair wrapped around his finger was the most intimate thing she had ever seen.

When he bent his head down and lowered his mouth to hers, she did not move back. Nothing felt more natural, and yet, the feel of his lips gently brushing against her mouth was something she could never have anticipated. Some semblance of self-preservation kept her from opening to him, but his gentleness was deceptive. Gradually, inexorably, he took small tastes, sampling her and in so doing, growing more hungry, more demanding. As was she. Thalia could not resist, and let her lips part. It was enough of an invitation for him to take the kiss further, deeper. And he did. They opened to each other. A tender, warm invasion, barely civilized but never brutal.

She didn’t know. Hadn’t known. That a simple kiss could wreak such delicious havoc. It never had, before. But this. This was opening the atlas to find a whole, unexplored world within its familiar pages. She was an explorer, and needed more.

She set the Compass down. Her hands came up and caressed his wide shoulders, danced up his neck. His skin was marvelous, almost fever warm, and his body was knit together with hardened muscle. She threaded her fingers into his damp hair and pulled him closer. In her mouth, he growled, and the vibrations jolted straight through her, right down to the place between her legs, which grew moist instantly. Desire had never hit her so hard or so quickly. She pressed her thighs tight against each other.

He must have released the ribbon of her hair, because his own hands came up, stroking along her shoulders. The rough fabric of the blanket frustrated him, and he pushed it down, partially uncovering her skin. When he touched her again, it was the meeting of flesh to flesh, his palms along her collarbones, across her sensitive upper back. The skin of his palms and fingers was work rough, rasping against her, and she felt in them such strength, such capability and ferocity, but also the hint of an unexpected gentleness. She wanted him everywhere, and let the blanket drop so it gathered in heavy folds at her waist, so she was bare to him.

He didn’t pull back to stare at her. Instead, he let his hands look for him. One pressed tightly against the small of her back, and the other, oh, the other, curved around her breast. Thalia heard a mewl as it arabesqued from her throat. She’d never made that sound before. A deep rumbling from low in his chest was his response, like a feral creature calling from another nighttime mountain. The large pad of his thumb brushed against her tight nipple, and though she tried to keep her knees locked together, hot, vivid sensation caused them to drift open. She began to lean back, pulling him with her.

Batu’s snore, heavy and unaware, was the dart that pierced the bubble of her fever spell. Her trusted friend slept only a few yards away.
Thalia pulled away. She did not want to, but she had to, and she tugged the blanket back up over her shoulders with clumsy fingers. She wanted what she knew she should not have. As she gulped for air, she looked at the captain with dazed eyes. His jaw was tight, his eyes had a hard gleam, and he, too, seemed to lack for air. He did not look dazed. He looked sharp, painfully focused, and not a little riled. It had been a long time since Thalia had been close to an aroused man, but she’d forgotten how potent they could be, just by revealing their desire. Especially this man.

“I shouldn’t…have let it go so far,” she said. Thalia had never heard her voice this way before, so breathless, so close to seduction. “I’m sorry.”

“We took the path together,” he growled.

“‘But what?’ But what? She had been foolish. Men could turn desire on and off like a lantern, blinking in the dark, but she should have known it would be different, more consuming, for her. She’d wanted him inside of her, wanted him there now. It was a shock to her. Even the pleasure she’d had from Sergei’s touch faded into a dying ember compared to the uncontrolled blaze that now moved beneath her skin. She hadn’t counted on that, not at all. “We should get some sleep, Captain,” Thalia finally said. “Much of today has been lost. We’ll need an early start tomorrow if we’re to make up time.”

He gave a single, clipped nod. He looked so fierce, she wondered if he would simply reach out, grab her, and finish what they had started. She almost, almost, wished he did. But he must have seen something in her, fear, perhaps, that kept him at bay. Yet, his exercise of honor was taxing him. She saw it in the straining muscles of his arms that seemed to hold him back, felt it in the waves of barely leashed hunger that rolled off of him. It would be so easy, so easy to lean toward him…

“I feel odd calling you ‘Captain,’” she said instead. “So formal.”

In a low rumble, he said, “I’ve been just ‘Huntley’ or ‘Captain,’ or ‘sir,’ for a long time.”

“Can I not call you by your Christian name? And you can call me by mine. You are not here as a soldier.” She was amazed she could string that number of words together.

“If that’s something you want.”

“I…do.”

She felt strange, awkward, vaguely embarrassed. He wasn’t making things any easier, simply staring at her with that undisguised need in his eyes. “Do you want something to eat?” she asked. “I think most of the provisions were washed away in the river, but we’ve a little left.”

“No.”

“Ah.” The silence stretched tightly. “I’m not hungry either.” Still nothing. She put the Compass back into the pocket of her del. Finally, she said, “Good night, Gabriel.” His name felt wonderful in her mouth.

“Good night, Thalia.”

She shut her eyes to the picture he made, speaking her name, but the sound of it lingered just behind her heart. She had done the right thing by ending their kisses and caresses. Captain Huntley—Gabriel—was far too dangerous.

Thalia did not open her eyes until she heard the rustle and shift of the blanket. When she did look again, he had moved so that the fire was between them. In his hand was a piece of sodden paper. He tossed it into the fire, and the flames hissed and sputtered briefly before consuming the paper entirely.

“What was that?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Something unimportant.”

Thalia saw he would speak no more on it, but watched as he lay on his back, and stared up at the roof of the cave that had been cold and damp but was now impossibly close, impossibly warm. Thalia also lay down and pulled her own blanket around herself as tightly as she could, as though swaddling herself. Restricting her movement. Keeping her from getting up and lying down beside him.

This had been one of the most draining days Thalia had ever experienced. Chased by a deadly storm, fighting a flood before helping to save Batu from drowning, revealing the secret world of the Blades. And Gabriel’s kisses, his touches, whose power eclipsed everything else that had come before.

As she fell into an exhausted sleep, Thalia wondered if, on this journey, the greatest threat would come from the Heirs, or from herself.

“Tell me where we are going.”

Thalia glanced over at Gabriel riding behind her. They had set out before dawn and ridden in silence. She took the lead, Batu held the middle, and Gabriel kept watch from the back. Her few attempts at conversation had died, so she had resigned herself to listening to the birds call to one another as they wheeled in the clear sky. She had been wondering if he was angry with her, but she would not apologize for protecting herself from certain injury. Now, at least, he was breaking the silence that had accompanied them for most of the day.

“The message from Tony said that we were supposed to ‘seek the woman who feeds the tortoise,’” Thalia said.
“I’ve a feeling there’s more than one tortoise in the whole of Outer Mongolia,” he answered dryly.
“Yes,” she agreed, “but I doubt any of them would harbor one of the Sources, whatever it is. But there is one
place where I think we can find a special tortoise.” She looked around, as if the Heirs might be hiding behind some
scrub, eavesdropping. But, of course, Gabriel had already done a thorough reconnaissance of the area, and she knew
with confidence that it was secure. Even so, she lowered her voice. “The city of Karakorum. It’s another day’s ride
from here.”
“And do the Heirs know of this place?”
“Doubtful, otherwise they wouldn’t have tried to beat it out of me. It seems that their Mongol is more
concerned about his own interests than the geography of his home country.”
“Not much of a home to him, if he’s willing to sell its treasure to the highest bidder.”
“He should be horsewhipped,” Batu said angrily. “That yamaa is no son of Mongolia.”
“If we ever find him, Batu,” Thalia answered, “we will give you that privilege.”
Batu held up his tashuur, the whip all Mongol horsemen carried. “With this, I will take the skin off his
miserable face.”
Gabriel looked at Thalia, one eyebrow quirked. “He’s just bloodthirsty enough to be a naval officer.”
“Not so surprising, since Batu claims to be a direct descendant from Genghis Khan, himself,” Thalia said with a
laugh. “But, given that the Great Khan sired probably whole cities of children, almost everyone in Mongolia is his
descendant.”
Refusing to be baited, Batu merely sniffed and held up his tashuur again with a threatening air while Gabriel
chuckled. Thalia wondered if this meant that the tension between them had gone. She surely hoped it had. It would
be a long journey to Karakorum otherwise.
Everyone fell quiet until a few minutes later, when Gabriel sped up so that his horse was beside Thalia’s, and
said, “I don’t usually kiss or fondle the men I campaign with.”
Thalia looked at him and was relieved to see him genuinely smiling. She had thought him attractive before, but
the smile transformed him into something mythically handsome, which was less of a relief. “And do they kiss or
fondle you?”
“They try,” he said with a negligent shrug. “I’m devilishly good-looking.”
Honest laughter bubbled up from inside her; she felt release from the tension she had been carrying.
“Thalia.” She still had not gotten accustomed to his speaking her name, and it curled warmly in her belly. “I’m
not sorry for what happened last night.”
“I’m not, either,” she said, though that wasn’t entirely true. She was only sorry because she had been given a
glimpse of a country she could not explore. “However, you have to understand, Captain—”
“Gabriel,” he reminded her.
“You have to understand, Gabriel,” she continued, “that it cannot happen again.”
He looked chagrined, but not, it turned out, with her. “Damn,” he muttered. “Been out of decent company too
long. I forget that a bloke isn’t supposed to paw a woman he fancies.”
She felt absurdly happy that he should admit to fancying her. Still, it could not lead anywhere outside of her
own secret, feminine gratification. Perhaps there was a way that ladies usually let men know that they did not
welcome their amorous attentions, but Thalia had never learned it. Her father, it turned out, had not covered that
when supervising her education.
“Let’s just stay focused on the task at hand,” she said. It was the best she could do without inventing a complete
fabrication or, worse, telling him that he could easily leave her heart battered and bleeding without much effort on
his part. She understood men enough to know that such a confession would strike a man dumb with terror. “We have
eight to concern ourselves with. Agreed?”
He cursed some more. If he ever did plan on mixing with “decent company,” as he called it, something would
have to be done about his language. That was a topic for another time, however.
“Agreed,” he finally grumbled.
That should have made her feel better. But knowing that she would never again experience the marvel that was
Captain Gabriel Huntley’s kisses, Thalia didn’t feel at all better. She felt…lonely.

At the very least, after she and Gabriel had settled matters between them, the travel became less fraught with
internal tension. Thalia did not lose her awareness of him, not at all, but it was an awareness with which she could
come to terms. The whole of the day was spent riding in watchful readiness should the Heirs attempt another strike
against them. They skirted around several ails to ensure speed and secrecy, even though Thalia wanted nothing more
than to rest and enjoy some hot food and tea. Once they had reached Karakorum, it would be easy enough to
replenish their supplies at the nearby monastery of Erdene Zuu. For now, they had to settle for rationing out their
remaining borts and aaruul and try to ignore both the monotony and scarcity of their diet.

The past months in Urga had robbed Thalia of some of her usual stamina. When she and her father had lived out on the steppes, days of riding hard would not bother her. But city life had softened her. So when it came time to bed down for night, Thalia tumbled into an immediate and dreamless sleep. Somewhere, out on the steppe, the Heirs were watching, waiting, and that alone should have kept her awake. Yet having Gabriel nearby, knowing that she and Batu were both safe while he was around, allowed her to give in to her fatigue completely. One moment, she had closed her eyes, the next, she was being gently awakened by Gabriel’s hand on her arm, dawn light gilding his shoulders. She couldn’t think of a better way to greet the morning.

“We should reach Karakorum today,” Thalia said after she had rinsed her mouth with water.

“Thank God,” Gabriel muttered. “I’ve nearly pulled out half my teeth chewing on that dried mutton.”

As Thalia swung up into the saddle, she grinned. “The Mongol horsemen used to soften borts by putting it underneath their saddles as they rode. We could try that to make it more palatable.”

Gabriel made a face. “Dried mutton and horse sweat? Even enlisted men were fed better. It’s grounds for mutiny.”

“I hope not,” Thalia answered. “Flogging is so time consuming.”

By late afternoon, they had entered a broad valley, through which flowed the Orkhon River. Thalia had been to the Orkhon Valley before, but its beauty always filled her heart with lightness. Small stands of trees clustered on riverbanks bright with sun. Scattered throughout the valley were groups of gers, smoke rising from their chimneys into the sky. A shepherd on horseback tended his cattle, and the echoes of their lowing could be heard across the basin. A few monks from the monastery had left its walls and were taking their leisure by sitting in the sun on the grassy knolls, their robes spots of flaming color against the green.

“A lovely spot,” Gabriel said. “But where’s the city?”

“This is it,” Thalia answered. She gestured to the wide plain. “Karakorum.”

“But it’s…”

“A ruin. Yes.”

She kicked her horse into a gallop, and, with Batu and a mystified Gabriel following her, they descended into the valley that had once held the great city of Karakorum. Now it was a barren field, empty of everything except a few weed-covered rocks. The only sounds of civilization came from the temples inside the monastery, where the many monks went about their lives and prayers.

They walked their horses around the desolate plain. “There’s nothing here,” Gabriel said.

“Karakorum was once the capital of the Mongol Empire, built by Genghis Khan’s successor, Ogodei Khan. It contained the royal warehouses, where all their plunder was housed.” Thalia looked around as if trying to conjure up the long-destroyed walls from her imagination. “Treasure came from everywhere: China, Persia. Anyone wanting an audience with the Great Khan had to come to Karakorum, even envoys from the kingdoms of Europe.”

“That must’ve been a long time ago,” Gabriel murmured. “Just rocks and weeds now. Not even a battlement left.”

“Six hundred years can rob anything of its greatness,” Thalia said.

“So what happened to this place? Doesn’t seem to be a spot you could easily defend, out in the middle of a valley.”

“Most of the soldiers who had defended it left when the capital was moved by Kubilai Khan to Peking. A little over a century later, Karakorum was razed by Manchu soldiers. The treasure disappeared. Nothing remains of the great capital.”

He gazed around at the empty space where once a marvelous city and palace stood, the center of one of the greatest empires the world had ever known, and shook his head. “A man spends his life chasing power and glory, something for the world to remember him by. He thinks it’ll last forever, but…” Gabriel shrugged. “It’s just dust and weeds. And sheep,” he added, hearing one nearby bleat.

“So what should a man, or woman, chase?” Thalia asked.

Gabriel stared at her with a strange intensity that was almost too much for her to withstand, before turning away. “Damned if I know.” He gave his horse free rein, letting the mare amble over the grassy field, while Thalia and Batu slowly trailed after him. Strange, but she could swear that the ruins had provoked a small fit of melancholy in the tough-skinned captain. “There’s nothing here,” he said at last, “that’s for certain. So why come?”

“Not everything was destroyed by the Manchus.” Thalia urged her horse into a brisk, brief canter, nearing a large stone shape that stood close by. As their group drew closer, it became more clear what the shape represented, and it made Gabriel chuckle.

“A damned tortoise,” he said, rueful.

Thalia dismounted and walked up to the stone animal. The wind and centuries had worn away much of its
elaborate carving, but the tortoise was still easily identifiable as it stared with unseeing eyes up at the sky. The sky looked down, ageless, far removed from the concerns of empires, khans, and stonemasons. Around the tortoise’s neck were bright scarves of blue silk, tributes left by travelers and nomads. As Thalia ran her hand over the sunwarmed stone, she heard Gabriel dismount and walk up beside her. She watched his hand also run along the back of the tortoise, touching the stone with surprising reverence.

“There were four of these tortoises once,” she said quietly. It was difficult to find her voice when she was somewhat hypnotized by the strength of his large hand, its movement across the stone. A vivid sense memory of his hand on her skin, on her breast, pulsed through Thalia. “They marked the boundaries of the city and guarded it.”

“Odd to pick tortoises for the job, and not something fierce, like lions or dragons.”

“Tortoises represent eternity, longevity.”

“Not so eternal now, eh, friend?” Gabriel asked the tortoise. When there was no response, he gave the stone animal a friendly, consoling pat. “Not much to say. That’s all right, lad. We’re here to talk to the lady that feeds you.”

Thalia frowned. She still could not puzzle out what that part of the message meant. “I knew that Morris’s clue directed us here, but I thought something about the old capital might be revealed to us once we arrived. There once was so much treasure here, I thought for certain that one of those objects must be a Source.”

“If it was here,” Gabriel said, turning around and leaning against the tortoise, “it’s long gone, now.” He patted the stone again. “This chap isn’t talking, though.”

“What should we do, Thalia guai?” Batu asked.

Thalia contemplated the tortoise. She honestly did not know if there was something, or someone, they should look for. “Let’s ask at the monastery,” she said after some time. “Perhaps they know of someone who ‘feeds’ the tortoise.” They all agreed that this was the best plan and set off to see it through.

Several hours later, however, Thalia was ready to tear out her eyelashes in frustration. Discreet inquiries at the monastery led nowhere. None of the monks they had quietly spoken with knew anything about a woman who had anything to do with the stone tortoise, let alone fed it. Most of them stared at Gabriel with undisguised fascination, having seen few white men in this isolated part of the country. Thalia, Gabriel, and Batu were given some buuz, steamed dumplings, which were wolfed down by their party in a matter of minutes, and washed down with cups and cups of milk tea.

When they finally emerged from the gates of Erdene Zuu, all they had to show for their efforts were full bellies and Batu’s pockets laden with juniper incense, purchased from the monastery, which he intended to give his parents the next time he visited them. The afternoon was gone, and night had turned the sky indigo. The only sources of light in the Orkhon Valley came from the gers dotting the fields and the torches burning inside the monastery.

“I suppose we could ask at some of the gers,” Thalia said tiredly, trying to keep irritation from hardening her words. “But I’m concerned that if we do, it means more trails for the Heirs to follow.”

“There was this bloke in Jhansi, ran a lamp shop,” Gabriel said. He reached into his inside pocket and produced a cheroot, which he proceeded to light. The brief flame from the match gilded the plane of his jaw before being shaken out. “Knew everybody and everything. Including, it was whispered, the location of a secret stash of weapons that were going to be used against the Maharajah in a bloody uprising. So I went to the bloke and asked him. But the cussed man gave us nothing. It was damned nasty. Still, I didn’t want to beat it out of him, the way my superiors wanted. I got what I was after, though.” He took a draw on the cheroot and exhaled a cloud of fragrant smoke.

Thalia was blindsided by a vivid memory of him tasting of tobacco and whiskey. “How did you manage that?”

“By waiting.” He grinned around the cheroot between his teeth. “Stood outside his shop for days. Didn’t say anything to him. Or anybody else. I leaned against the wall opposite the shop, arms crossed like this and face like this.” He demonstrated, folding his arms across his chest, and suddenly looked quite intimidating with only a tightening of his jaw and lowering of his brow. No one could disobey Gabriel if he summoned menace so easily. Even Thalia felt momentarily cowed by this brief demonstration. And just as quickly, the menace was gone, and it was Gabriel again, talking easily about the past. “Just stayed there, watching him. And after three days of this, the blighter drags me inside and tells me everything I needed to know. Pressure got to him. We found the guns, ended the rebellion before it began.”

“So,” Thalia said slowly, “you’re suggesting that we wait and see before charging off to do something foolhardy.”

Gabriel tapped the ash off the end of his cheroot before answering. “I’m not suggesting it.”

“I might point out,” Thalia said, bristling, “that you are not in the army here in Mongolia, nor are you in command of our party.”

He shrugged. “You might. But you strike me as a clever lass, one who wouldn’t let her stubbornness and pride muck up an important mission.”
Thalia muttered something in Mongolian that made Batu choke. It wasn’t particularly flattering toward tall, fair-haired, and high-handed former army captains, of which Thalia knew only one. “All right,” she said in English. “If nothing happens by morning, we head out and track down this woman.”

“Sensible decision,” Gabriel said with a nod. “And watch your language.” At Thalia’s questioning glance, he answered, “Don’t have to speak the language to know when somebody’s calling me a rotten bastard.”

Unfortunately, that made Thalia smile, so her annoyance with Gabriel was nearly gone by the time they hobbled their horses and hunkered down next to the stone tortoise. For a few hours, the three of them sat together, backs against the tortoise, and spoke quietly, trying to pass the time. Gabriel smoked half of his cheroot before putting it out and saving it for later. As each hour passed, and the lights in the surrounding gers winked out as their inhabitants went to sleep, Thalia became more and more convinced that coming to Karakorum had been a mistake. Perhaps the clue referred to something else besides the stone tortoise? If so, what? Maybe the Heirs had learned the clue and deciphered it, and were even now in possession of the Source. Had she failed the Blades so soon?

“Steady,” Gabriel murmured into her ear. He nudged her with his shoulder. “You’re keeping the horses awake with your fretting.”

Thalia did not reply. There was nothing to do but wait in the dark, watching the moon rise, and she did not realize that she had fallen asleep until she became aware of the fabric of Gabriel’s coat against her cheek. Not only that, but she was clasping his arm, holding it between her breasts as she leaned against him. His very hard, very strong arm. She came fully awake with a start, throwing herself backward in an attempt to put some distance between them.

In the silver gleam of the moonlight, she could make out Gabriel’s lopsided smile as he watched her flop around on the grass. She wondered if he was going to say something horribly cutting about her throwing herself at him, but was spared that ignominy when his expression sharpened, and he began to stare fixedly out into the darkness.

“What is it?” she asked, but he held a finger to his lips without so much as a glance her way.

Thalia pushed herself up and tried to focus on whatever it was he saw. At first, she thought he was funning her, or, at the least, had simply spotted a wolf out prowling for prey. But just as she was about to dismiss his intense concentration as the byproduct of too much military training, Thalia saw movement at the edge of the field. Movement that was definitely not an animal. Thalia heard the soft clink of metal against metal. She didn’t even know Gabriel had gone for his revolver until she saw it in his hand.

“It’s just one person,” Gabriel muttered. “Are those bastards really that cocky?”

“Can you tell who it is?”

He shook his head, still peering out into the dark. “Get your rifle,” he growled to Thalia as he rose into a crouch. He nudged Batu’s foot. “You, too. Take my Snider carbine, not that antique you’ve got. And both of you, don’t leave the tortoise,” Gabriel added, looking pointedly at Thalia. When she nodded, he started to move away soundlessly.

“Where are you going?” Thalia hissed.

“To surprise our friend.”
Chapter 7
The Tortoise Speaks

It was a damned hard choice to make. Either stay with Thalia and possibly suffer what the approaching Heir had planned for them, or trust that she could take care of herself and venture into the night to catch the Heir off guard. Gabriel had made tough decisions before, but he’d never had a woman to protect. Gabriel always hated waiting while the enemy advanced. It put a man in a tight spot. He’d much rather take the initiative. It was a better tactic, and gave him the advantage. If Thalia had been a man, he would have gone after the Heir with no hesitation. But not only was she a woman, she was her. He could still taste her, feel the satisfying, perfect weight of her breast.

Gabriel had a much better chance of safeguarding Thalia, though, if he went after the Heir, rather than letting the bloke come to them. So he’d swallowed his fear and stalked his prey. At least Thalia was a good shot, and he had given Batu his own rifle rather than leaving him with that obsolete, inaccurate muzzleloader the Mongol carried, since it was unlikely that their advancing enemy was a drunk whale.

The moon was a slice of silver in the dark night sky, giving him just enough light to see where he was going as he edged around the field. His plan was to circle back and steal up behind the approaching Heir as the enemy’s attention was focused on Thalia and Batu. Ares’s bollocks—he didn’t like using Thalia as a distraction, but if everything went the way it was supposed to, she wouldn’t be in danger.

Gabriel crept through the tall grasses, keeping one eye trained on the Heir. He didn’t recognize him from the attack outside Urga, but it was hard to know for certain in the darkness. Whoever the hell this gent was, he wasn’t too keen on keeping quiet. Some kind of metal pieces were hanging from the Heir’s clothes, jingling with each step. And the Heir was muttering, too. Words Gabriel couldn’t understand.

No time to think about anything but ambushing the prey. Gabriel doubled back behind the Heir and stole forward, behind the enemy. As he got closer, he ducked down to hide in the grass, peering up every now and then to make certain of the Heir’s position. The Heir never stopped, keeping up his steady progress toward Thalia, and unaware of Gabriel’s presence. They were a hundred paces from the tortoise. Nearing the Heir, Gabriel saw that the man was smaller than the two English toffs, and less than half the size of the giant Mongol they’d hired. Someone else, then, some other paid muscle. But no less a threat, regardless of size.

Gabriel pushed forward, feeling not a little like some giant cat stalking its dinner. Both he and the Heir were only fifty feet from Thalia. Gabriel would have to make his move now, before the Heir got too close. He’d take the Heir down then wring some answers from the bastard’s neck. He took a steadying breath, then launched himself at the Heir.

And hit the ground, having thrown himself at nothing but air.

Gabriel leapt to his feet at once. It was impossible. The sodding bloke had been right in front of him one moment. And the next…gone.

No, not gone. Gabriel broke into a run when he saw that the Heir had appeared right in front of Thalia. He’d never run so fast in his life, not even when he was being chased by khukri-wielding bandits in Central India. Gabriel wasn’t exceptionally skilled at running and shooting with a revolver—his rifle suited him better—but there wasn’t any choice. Thalia, damn it, hadn’t even drawn her weapon. Instead, it looked like she was actually talking to the Heir. Gabriel swore. He was going to have to teach her that as soon as she could take a shot, she bloody better well do it and not waste time or opportunities by talking.

It would be impossible to take his own shot now, not with any accuracy. There was too great a chance he might hit Thalia or Batu. He didn’t hear Thalia as she cried out, “Gabriel, wait!” Instead, Gabriel threw himself at the Heir and tackled him to the ground.

Only to have Thalia and Batu grab Gabriel’s shoulders and pull him away. The three of them went tumbling backward in a heap of struggling limbs. The Heir lay flat on his back, trying to right himself.

“What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?” Gabriel growled, struggling to peel Batu off of him.


“I’m not going to hurt her,” Gabriel snarled, shoving Batu away. “I’m trying to protect her.” He started to take aim with his revolver as the Heir got to his feet.

“Not me,” Thalia gasped as she grabbed Gabriel’s arm and shoved, pushing his gun away. “Her.” She pointed
to the Heir as she and Gabriel struggled. “Look.”

Gabriel did look, then went still. The Heir wasn’t an Heir at all, but a Mongol woman. Her gender was confirmed by her voice, as she chuckled and dusted herself off. Gabriel saw that her sex had been hidden by the large robe she wore, which appeared even bigger because of the heaps of ribbons covering the fabric. Silver charms and mirrors dangled from the sleeves and the hem of the robe, as well as from the leather apron wrapped around her waist. The woman’s face was mostly hidden by the ribbons trailing down the front of her headdress, and it was hard to tell how old she was, though her hair hung loosely around her shoulders. She carried a small drum, also draped in ribbons that glinted palely in the moonlight, and a drumstick with a horse’s head carved into the end. In the weeks Gabriel had been in Mongolia, he’d never seen anyone dressed so peculiarly.

“A shamaness,” Thalia whispered to Gabriel. They both rolled to their feet. “There aren’t many left in Mongolia, not since Buddhism came three hundred years ago.”

“Some kind of witch?” Gabriel asked.

The shamaness spoke, a long stream of Mongolian that Thalia quickly translated. “Not a witch,” the shamaness said, and Gabriel could only wonder how she had understood his English words. “One who speaks with the spirit world. Everything in nature has its own spirit, not only men and animals, but every plant, every stream, every mountain. And they are all part of a living whole. Even you,” continued the woman, pointing at Gabriel with the drumstick, “are connected by the World Tree. Shamans and shamanesses cross into the mirror world of the spirits, speak with them, listen to them.”

Thalia spoke to the shamaness, and the woman answered. “I asked her why she is here in Karakorum,” Thalia translated. “She told me that she brings offerings to the past.”

The shamaness reached into the folds of her robe and pulled out sticks of incense as well as a small metal bowl. The woman filled the bowl with *airag* and set it before the tortoise, then struck a flint to light the incense. Pungent smoke curled into the air.

Gabriel finally understood. “She’s feeding the tortoise.”

“You’re right,” Thalia nodded, amazed.

He’d seen people make offerings before, at shrines to deities in temples and by the sides of roads, always wondering what they saw in cold stone or statuary that inspired faith. A hard life in Yorkshire and what he’d seen as a soldier had convinced Gabriel that he’d little to believe in besides himself. Ever since brushing up against the world of the Blades, though, his understandings of truth and reality tottered. As they did now. Why make an offering to a statue of something that wasn’t even a god?

Whatever the shamaness’s purpose was or was not, it didn’t matter, not where the mission was concerned. “Then she’s the woman we want,” Gabriel said.

Thalia started to step forward. “I will ask her about the Source.”

“She looks a bit busy at the moment.”

The shamaness had begun pounding on her drum, first softly, then with growing strength and loudness. As she did this, she chanted to herself and began turning in circles. Gabriel watched, fascinated, as this went on for several minutes, the drumming, chanting, and turning never ceasing.

“She’s entering a trance,” Thalia explained quietly. “It is how she crosses over into the spirit world. I have never seen this before, only heard of it.”

“My grandfather spoke of shamans,” Batu added. The usually fearless servant was standing behind Gabriel as if looking for protection from the chanting woman. “They are powerful and strange.”

Gabriel had to agree. Just listening to the shamaness’s chanting made every nerve in his body shiver. Even though he had been stationed in remote parts of the world, as an Englishman and soldier, he’d never had much chance to witness native spiritual rituals, but had been inclined to dismiss them as just another variation of the religious nonsense he’d been force-fed as a child. Hindu ceremony or Anglican rite—it all seemed the same. Empty gestures.

There was nothing empty here in the dark plain of Karakorum. As the shamaness continued to chant and spin, beating on her drum, Gabriel could actually feel a change in the air. Something seemed to stir to life. An unseen energy pulsed beneath the surface of the world, working into his skin and mind. The night crystallized, sharpening and expanding at the same time. He almost jumped when he felt Thalia’s hand on his arm. His senses were alive to her touch, almost painfully so.

“Do you feel it?” she whispered. Her eyes were wide and glittering, beautiful. Somehow, he managed to nod.

The chanting grew faster, the shamaness’s voice swirling around them. She twirled so fast, she became a blur of glimmering mirrors and ribbons. Her drumming and chanting pierced Gabriel’s brain, making it impossible to think or move. He could only stand, amazed, as something began to glow and pulse *inside* the tortoise.
A warm red light gathered in strength within the stone. While the shamaness continued in her unearthly chant, the light began to move. It traveled from the center of the tortoise, moving up through its body, its neck, then into its head and finally its mouth. Gabriel felt Thalia’s hand clutch at his sleeve as the light danced out of the mouth of the tortoise and into the mouth of the shamaness. The woman suddenly stopped her chanting and drumming. The drum dropped from her fingers, as did the horse-headed drumstick. She stopped spinning, swaying on her feet as the red light glided to the center of her chest.

Afraid that the shamaness had been possessed by some dark spirit, Gabriel moved toward her. He wasn’t entirely sure what he could do to help her against a magical energy, but it seemed better than standing by and just watching. Thalia stopped him, however.

“I think this is what she wants,” Thalia breathed.

“How do we help her?”

“Please be quiet,” Batu whispered. “She speaks.”

Yet when the shamaness opened her mouth, she did not talk, didn’t even chant. Eyes closed, she sang. It was an uncanny song that dipped and swayed, curving itself down into valleys and up again into mountains. Gabriel couldn’t understand the words, but he felt the song stretch out all around him like a banner unfurling itself under his feet, showing him an entire landscape. He was taken across the whole of Mongolia, could see and touch its rolling steppes, the secluded vales, the unforgiving beauty of the rocky hills, the dark, pearl-blue lakes. It was all contained in the breadth and shape of the song. He had never experienced anything like it, not in all his travels. There weren’t many words, but each one extended on for miles.

Thalia, gazing at the shamaness with undisguised amazement, quietly translated the song, but it was almost unnecessary, since Gabriel felt its meaning.

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ have seen the world change} \\
\text{Many times over.} \\
A \text{ life, a breath, drawn in and exhaled.} \\
\text{They are the same.} \\
I \text{ am stone. I never yield.} \\
\text{And though I carry the universe upon me} \\
I \text{ do not move.} \\
\text{The sky sees everything, He tells me} \\
\text{Everything. What He sees amazes} \\
\text{Even Him!} \\
\text{A crimson field. No matter the season, the soft springtime,} \\
\text{The brief heat} \\
\text{Of summer, the brittle autumn, the long} \\
\text{Cold snows of winter—} \\
\text{The field burns crimson always.} \\
\text{Though it is constant, it does what I cannot.} \\
\text{It moves.}
\end{align*}
\]

When the last syllable of the last word died away, the shamaness gently began to fall to the ground like a blown leaf. Gabriel, his reactions slowed by the power of the song, leapt forward to catch her. But when he reached her side, his arms came up empty.

The shamaness had vanished completely.

Gabriel wished he had more whiskey. After the shamaness had disappeared, he’d completely drained his flask to steady himself, but it still wasn’t enough to get him used to the idea of magical songs moving from stone to person. And then the total disappearance of that person, vanishing into nothingness, right in front of him. But there was airag, and its slight fermentation would have to do in place of whiskey’s direct assault on his nerves.

They had returned to the monastery and found a room for the night. Thalia had gone out to tend to her private needs. Batu saw to the baggage by the light of a single lantern, while Gabriel paced next to his sleeping mat and made steady, but unsatisfactory progress through his flask. He could take his liquor, and the few sips of whiskey he’d had did nothing to help brace him after witnessing a woman blink into air. Batu, bless him, had found some airag, and Gabriel was making decent progress through it now. Still, it wasn’t quite enough. He wondered if he
could ever get used to this new world that had been uncovered, where words were magical and solid flesh could disappear.

The door to their room opened, and Thalia entered quietly. She didn’t have a lantern or candle. After checking the corridor, she closed the door behind her. Gabriel strode immediately to her and took her into his arms. It wasn’t only because he had been scared out of his wits earlier, thinking that she was about to be attacked by an Heir. He also needed to feel her real, living self, the truth of her body and scent.

Her hands came up to cup his shoulders, and she leaned into him. She breathed deeply, pressing her face against his neck, drawing him in just as he was doing with her. Ah, God, she felt so damned good. Too good. His body’s reaction to her was fast and earth-bound, and though he knew he couldn’t have Thalia, some comfort was taken in his need for her.

Not quite enough comfort, though. She wouldn’t appreciate being jabbed in the belly by his now stiff cock. Gabriel not-too-gently pushed himself away and turned to fake an interest in a carved chest, muttering something about being glad she was safe. He listened as Batu and Thalia spoke quietly in Mongolian, hearing in their tone that they were discussing him and how well he was faring after the night’s events. No shots had been fired, but she was worried about him. The idea was awful, silly…and touching. Damn it.

He grabbed up his cup of airag and took another drink. When he was satisfied that his tool was no longer at attention, he sat down, leaning against the wall with his legs stretched out in front of him.

The tone of Batu and Thalia’s conversation shifted, grew tense and curt. Almost as if they were quietly arguing. Gabriel wasn’t sure what they were arguing about, but, judging by the quick looks they were both casting toward him, he was the topic. Why?

Thalia said something to Batu that meant she wouldn’t hear another word. Batu tried to speak, but she refused to hear him. Instead, pointedly ignoring the servant, Thalia sat cross-legged beside Gabriel with a swift and smooth grace that made his breath catch in his throat. Without speaking, she reached out and took his cup of airag, then took a sip before returning it to him. Gabriel held the cup tightly in his hand. He was sodding done for if just watching her drink from his cup sent blood straight back into his groin. He hadn’t stumbled around with so many unwanted cockstands since he was a spotty-faced lad.

“How are you?” she asked softly.

“How are you?” she asked softly.

“How are you?” she asked softly.

“Not too poorly, what with a person literally disappearing from my very hands,” he answered. He didn’t want to be touched by her concern, but, bloody hell, he was. “You?”

She gave him a slightly wobbly smile that hit him in the dead center of his chest. She was a little frightened, but prepared to face her fear, and that struck him harder than sheer bravado. “Strange night.”

“You’re an old hand with this kind of thing,” he pointed out.

“Theory only,” she said wryly. “Seeing the magic, watching it, feeling it, is…very different from hearing tales. I’d wanted to see it for myself for a long time now.”

“Did it pass muster?”

Her smile was stronger now, and that much more potent. “Can something surpass muster?”

Thank the blighted star Gabriel was born under, Batu was still in the room and fully conscious, otherwise Gabriel would have taken hold of Thalia Burgess and given her a thorough kissing, and probably more. Gabriel was suddenly attacked by a powerful, fierce desire for her, wanting to pull her onto the nearby sleeping mat and peel the robe from her, to cover her body with his own. He wanted to finish what they’d begun the other night in the cave, sink into her welcoming warmth. Both his cock and his mind were in agreement. He couldn’t remember wanting a woman so badly.

Unaware that he was wrestling with the angels of his better nature, Thalia said, “Now you understand. The magic you felt tonight is nothing compared to what the Sources can do. And if the Heirs get hold of these Sources—”

Right. Gabriel brought his mind back to the reason he was even with Thalia in the first place. Finding and protecting a Source from those mealy bastards, the Heirs. “They won’t get the one in Mongolia,” he said at once. He’d protect Thalia, too, from the Heirs and anyone or anything else. He wondered if that would include himself.

“Whatever it is.”

“The song mentioned a moving field of crimson,” she mused.

“Seasons don’t affect it,” Gabriel added.

Thalia frowned in concentration as she thought. He wasn’t used to seeing a woman thinking deeply. Most of the officers’ wives usually looked bored and vacant. It surprised him how much he liked seeing a woman—Thalia—think. He knew many men were on edge around clever or thoughtful women. Probably because it made them feel small or stupid. Gabriel didn’t feel either of those things as he watched Thalia thinking. He felt…warm. Hungry.

“Because of the song, we know it’s extraordinary that this field can exist in all seasons,” she mused.
“Something natural, then. Something usually only seen during a certain time of year.”

“An animal,” Gabriel said, “or a plant.”

She considered this. “A herd of animals moves, not plants.”

“I’d wager moving plants are right extraordinary,” he said dryly.

“Wager?” She smiled. “I could never resist a gamble.”

He grinned right back at her. “Never could resist a betting woman.”

“The odds are too steep,” Batu interjected from the other side of the room. Gabriel caught the man’s barbed stare, which was aimed directly at him. What the devil?

Thalia said something hard in Mongolian to Batu, and whatever it was, it had enough bite to make the servant scowl and fuss with the baggage. She turned back to Gabriel and made herself appear calm and untroubled. Before Gabriel could puzzle out why he was suddenly a bone of contention between Thalia and Batu, she continued with her musing. “A herd of red animals, or a field of plants. We could be looking for either. Though I haven’t heard of a Source being any of those things.”

“You’re our sharpshooter,” said Gabriel. “It’s your know-how that’s going to find what we’re looking for.”

She grimaced. “I may fire wide. Outer Mongolia is a big country. With the clue about the tortoise, I knew where we needed to go. But this…” She held her hands open, as if they could encompass the whole of the country. Gabriel took a drink of *airag* and considered. He didn’t have much experience figuring out mystical clues that led to magical power sources—he had exactly none—but he did know a thing or two about strategies and buried information. Bandits plagued the hills of India, and more than once Gabriel had uncovered their secret networks of communication to prevent raids. One of the clever buggers had even used baskets of fruit to send messages—each fruit had been given a specific meaning, and together, they made up a whole message. Finally, Gabriel had been able to crack the code, and none too soon. The local villages were at the brink of destitution because of those thieving sods.

He picked over in his mind all the aspects of the song. Something was hidden within it. That was certain. He started to speak, then stopped.

“Come, now, Captain,” Thalia chided. “Don’t be shy with *me*. You can’t forget that we were all naked in blankets together. You were about to say something. Tell me.”

He didn’t want to be reminded of that. Just hearing her say the word “naked” was a test of his resolve. When he didn’t speak, Thalia sighed and looked up at the ceiling, addressing the heavens. “He issues orders left and right, but can’t seem to take them himself. If this was the army, he’d be drummed out for insubordination.” She turned back to Gabriel. “What if I was your commanding officer and ordered you to speak?”

“If I told my commanding officer what I was thinking now, I’d be sent to a lunatic asylum,” Gabriel said, sardonic.

“Especially if you mentioned mystical singing stone tortoises and vanishing shamanesses,” she countered.

She had a point there. Magical objects, demon Viking storms—nothing was too strange. Taking a breath, he finally admitted, “I was going to say that when the shamaness was singing, I…” Never a man comfortable with words, he struggled, trying to find the right ones. “It was like I could see the song.” Instead of laughing right in his face, Thalia nodded thoughtfully. He liked her acceptance. Liked it more than was good for him. “See?” she repeated. “In what way?”

“I saw….” He fought to give words to what had been a strange, almost indefinable experience. “The land unrolled all around me.”

Admiration and understanding lit Thalia’s lovely face. “Mongolian tradition has many songs sounding like the land itself. The notes and tones reflect the landscape. Rivers, steppes, mountains. One could actually *sing* a place.”

“This is true,” Batu said, coming to stand beside them. He still seemed angry, but not so put off that he couldn’t lend a hand. “I will demonstrate.” He sang out a few wordless notes, surprising Gabriel with his skill, and in those notes, Gabriel heard the flowing of water over rocks, tumbling down into a large pool.

Almost at once, a monk opened the door and glared at them. He spoke a few hard words at Batu and Thalia before shutting the door. Batu looked sheepish.

“Let me guess,” Gabriel said dryly, “we’re being too loud. A common barracks complaint.” Batu merely shrugged, continuing to be sore with Gabriel. If Thalia hadn’t been there, Gabriel would have hauled the other man by his collar and rattled him until he confessed whatever had gotten him so riled. And then they’d settle it with their fists. That’s how it was done in the army, and it worked fine. No grudges.


“Yes,” Batu said stiffly. “Near where I was born, there is a beautiful cataract, and I sang it to you.”

“Can you remember what the shamaness’s song sounded like?” Thalia asked Gabriel. When Gabriel nodded, she moved from sitting cross-legged onto her hands and knees and crawled to the baggage. Gabriel tried to make
himself stare at his hands instead of watching her well-formed, edible behind sway temptingly across the room, but he didn’t do a very good job of it. A man couldn’t resist looking, unless he was quite dead and buried beneath several feet of hard-packed dirt. However, Batu was glaring at Gabriel again, and understanding finally hit. It was a wonder it had taken him so long to puzzle it out.

Gabriel had almost half a foot on the other man, and outweighed him by three stone, an uneven match if it ever came down to it. But Gabriel, despite his growing lust for Thalia, didn’t want to hurt her, and in that, he and Batu shared the same goal.

Thalia came back with some paper and a piece of drawing charcoal that she gave to Gabriel. She seemed unaware of Gabriel’s ogling as well as her servant’s silent efforts to shelter her. “Try to draw what you felt when you heard the song,” she urged.

“An armless baboon can draw better than me,” Gabriel objected.

She tried to look stern but couldn’t hide the smile that curved the corners of her mouth. “Just try. It might help if you close your eyes.”

Grumbling, Gabriel did as she suggested. He closed his eyes. “I don’t see anything,” he said at once.

“Were you the man who counseled patience to me at Karakorum? Give yourself a little while.” He heard the laughter in her voice and couldn’t keep from laughing a little himself. Her voice turned soft and coaxing. “The world you’re in now, it isn’t the same as where you were before. Let the soldier part of yourself go. There’s no training here, no right and wrong way to do something. All right?” When he nodded, she continued. “Now, bring the song back into your mind. Don’t rush. It will come when it’s ready. And when it does, fall into it.”

None of his commanding officers had ever made such a bizarre request of him before. But he kept his eyes shut and let his mind wander back to the song. He didn’t think he could recall it very well, and at first struggled with frustration and a need to know right now. But once he let go of that impatience, the song seemed to release itself into him, as though it had been buried somewhere and needed a moment’s stillness to come forward. He heard the notes filling him up, let them take him wherever they needed to go. There was a wild, harsh beauty in the melody, as there was in the land. He’d never been particularly moved by scenery—always too busy with a job to do or trying to uncover the geography’s secrets when planning a mission—but something stirred inside him when he handed himself over to the steppes and rocky hills of Mongolia, and how right, how fitting it was that Thalia Burgess was part of that land. The more he saw of it, the more he understood that she would live in such a place, and how forbidding both the land and the woman could be, if one didn’t know how to survive in their harsh climates.

“You’ve done it!” Thalia said, wonder and pleasure in her voice.

Gabriel opened his eyes. Here was another impossibility. He had drawn something. Not just a paper full of meaningless scrawl, but an actual tree that stood where two streams forked. He hadn’t even been aware that his hand holding the charcoal had moved, let alone created an actual picture.

With this small success, they decided to call it a night, and soon everyone was settled on their sleeping mats, the lantern doused, the room dark and quiet.

It was a hard night. He’d grown somewhat used to sleeping near Thalia, but never in a room. Having four walls and a roof enclosing them, instead of the limitless steppes and sky, changed things. He tried to remember when the last time was that he’d slept beside a woman, and couldn’t. With Felicia, he’d slipped from her bed, dressing quickly in the dark, and the dawn had found him sprawled in his own bunk.

In the monastery room, Gabriel could hear Thalia breathing as she slept. Those soft sounds from her were more intimate than the cries of pleasure Felicia had made as she and Gabriel had impersonally fucked. The result of having Thalia near him, even with Batu close by, was a damned long, uncomfortable night and too little sleep.

He was grateful for the morning, grateful to get back into the open spaces. They rode in a southerly direction, which Gabriel had said felt right. He hated trusting the lives of Thalia and Batu to something beyond his understanding, but they had little to go on besides impressions of the shamaness’s song. For hours, they rode, no one speaking much as Gabriel tried to concentrate on how the song had felt. It was bloody frustrating.

Just before noon, with no sign of the tree or the rivers, he became positive that he’d led them all down the wrong path. He was a man of tangibles, not a believer in impressions and feelings. Here was proof of that. They were wandering around Mongolia with no set destination. And somewhere out there were the Heirs, ready and eager to spill blood. Gabriel fumed.

Pulling up the reins on his horse, he grumbled, “Hell’s arse, this has been a waste of time.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Thalia counseled. “Let’s ride a little further, just over the next hill. After that, we can think about what we should do.” She nudged her horse on with Batu close behind.

Grudgingly, feeling like a fool, Gabriel put his heels to his horse. He let Thalia keep the lead as he scanned the land, looking for enemies or something that resembled his drawing. When Thalia and Batu reached the crest of the
hill and then stopped abruptly, alarm prickled the back of his neck. Had his ridiculous ideas about how a song felt taken them straight into an ambush? He kicked his mare into a gallop and reached for his rifle.

Thalia looked over her shoulder at his approach, a smile touching the corners of her mouth. “You aren’t going to need that,” she said, eyeing the weapon. “Unless you plan on hunting cottonwoods.”

Puzzled, Gabriel brought his horse alongside hers, then followed her gaze into the valley ahead.

Nestled peacefully between the hills, a cottonwood tree stood on a grassy bank that lay where two small streams forked into their separate directions. Everything was quiet and undisturbed. Gabriel fumbled in his pocket, then produced the scrap of paper on which he’d drawn the night before. He held the picture up, stared at it, then looked back into the valley. The scenes were the same.

“The song has not misled us,” Batu said.

“Gabriel has not misled us,” Thalia corrected. “You shouldn’t doubt yourself,” she added, looking at him meaningfully.

Gabriel couldn’t speak. For the first time since beginning this strange mission, since being all the way back in Southampton, Gabriel felt part of something much larger than himself or another person. This other world that Thalia had shown him, he had seen it, but never felt it, never been inside of it, nor it inside of him. But through that song, the magical force that pulsed beneath the skin of the everyday joined with him, used him as a channel. The results were right there, drawn onto a scrap of paper. And in the valley with the forked rivers. Not until that very moment did Gabriel understand how very large and very powerful magic could be. He felt humbled, awed. Yet also, being a part of it, he felt expansive, strong.

“Bugger me,” he said quietly.

What followed was the strangest tracking mission Gabriel had ever undertaken. Since both Thalia and Batu insisted that the song spoke most clearly through Gabriel, at their behest he would continue to lead them toward their destination. And by “lead,” they meant: have him sit quietly and think about the shamaness’s song, each note following the next. Whatever bit of geography sprang into his mind he would describe or draw, and they would set off in search of it.

“This is a damned silly way to run a campaign,” he grumbled after they had left the cottonwood tree behind in search of a hill with three tall, rocky spires.

“That’s not what Lord Raglan said at the battle of the Alma,” Thalia answered, riding beside him.

Gabriel stared at her. “I knew men who saw action at the battle of the Alma, and not a one said any magic had been involved.”

“None that they were aware of,” she replied. She must have seen his look turn black, because she answered quickly, “Yes, the troops fought bravely, and the Alma wouldn’t have been won without them, but Lord Raglan had a little bit of assistance from Fatimah’s Guiding Hand, recovered in Constantinople the year before.”

“This Guiding Hand—the Heirs gave it to Raglan?”

“They did.”

“And the defeats that followed—what happened to the Light Brigade, the losses in the winter of ’55, the Malakoff, and the Redan—because the Blades took the Guiding Hand back?” He heard the cutting steel of his voice, but didn’t try to temper it.

She looked horrified. “God, no! The Blades would never take back a Source, knowing it could cost soldiers’ lives. They tried to get the Guiding Hand back long before it had been brought to the battlefield. It was, unfortunately, pure military mismanagement of the Source and of men that caused those defeats. Fatimah’s Guiding Hand was lost somewhere in the Crimea, and hasn’t been recovered.”

Gabriel shook his head and muttered, somewhat calmed. It was bloody well difficult to get his bearings, now that he knew about the Blades and the Heirs and the rest of their lot. He didn’t know whether to be pleased or troubled when, after riding the rest of the afternoon, the three rocky spires were sighted, glowing with the setting sun’s last rays.

Thalia, however, wasn’t troubled at all. When they came upon the pinnacles of rock, a smile lit her face and lit something inside of Gabriel, too. In his experience, women grew less beautiful the more time he spent with them. But somehow, being with Thalia disproved that. It wasn’t a theory he was happy to refute, not in this case.

They all dismounted and walked toward the spires. The rocks looked like three old men, watching the world pass by and finding it all rather lacking. It was eerie, having seen them so clearly in his mind, and then, there they were, no longer thought or sound but real stone.

“Well done, Gabriel,” Thalia cried, exultant, and took hold of his hand. Without any thought, his fingers wove with hers. They were palm to palm. He could feel her everywhere. Touching her like this felt impossibly right. It was wonderful—and unsettling.
And over quickly. She suddenly pulled away, frowning, her color high, or maybe the light from the setting sun was burnishing her skin. No. She was upset. Wonderful. Not only was the servant angry with him, so was the woman Batu served.

Damn it, he cursed to himself, what the hell did she want? Everything had been going right lovely between them, and now she was angry because they held hands. He couldn’t figure out the maze of the female mind. Just because he got along better with Thalia than he had with any other woman didn’t change the fact that she was a woman, with all the mental tangles and inconsistencies of her gender. It could drive a man out of his gourd.

“Night’s falling,” Gabriel said roughly. “We’ll make camp soon.”

She nodded and peered along the rolling hills. “I think there’s a sheltered spot about a mile south.”

“Can you and Batu find it on your own?”

Alarm flared in her eyes. “Yes, but where—?”

Gabriel quickly headed toward his horse and mounted up. “Good. I’ll find you. Need to do some reconnaissance, make sure those sodding Heirs aren’t on our trail.”

He didn’t wait for any response from her, just pulled hard on the reins to bring his horse about before kicking the mare into a canter. Gabriel focused hard on the landscape, looking for telltale signs that their enemies were close or following. He saw without seeing the oceanic beauty of the dry grassy plains, the isolated stands of scrub and trees, the smoke of a distant ger’s chimney rising in a white plume into the indigo sky. They had no meaning to him, beyond indicating whether or not the Heirs were nearby. All he cared about was ensuring the safety of their small riding party, the success of their mission. He couldn’t understand the changeability of women, and, at that moment, he told himself he didn’t bloody well care.
Chapter 8

A Curious Means of Seeing

“I can’t see anything,” Gabriel muttered, stalking back to the campsite.

Thalia watched him as he threw himself down to the ground, moodily stretching out and staring up at the sky, his arms folded behind his head. She honestly didn’t want to stare at him—how he moved with an athletic energy, or the long, sinewy form of his body that she knew felt hard and solid with muscle. But what she wanted and what she actually did were sadly two different things, and she drank in the sight of him with a greediness that made her light-headed.

He had arrived at the campsite she and Batu had made in the sheltered glade, having found no sign of the Heirs. This didn’t console her much. She never doubted Gabriel’s abilities as a tracker, but the Heirs had no qualms about using Sources or other forms of magic to hide themselves. It was entirely possible that Lamb or Edgeworth would still be able to stalk them without a seasoned soldier such as Gabriel being aware of it. Even so, the Heirs presumably could only observe them remotely, and weren’t bodily nearby. That gave Thalia some reassurance.

Not a minute after Gabriel had arrived at the campsite, the news good but his mood black, he had grabbed something to eat then headed off into the darkness to commune with the shamaness’s song. Apparently, he hadn’t been successful. Thalia and Batu exchanged speaking glances, and Batu bent his head to his task of repairing a hole in a saddle blanket and said nothing. For that, she was grateful. Thalia had had enough of her old friend’s opinion on Gabriel. She didn’t need Batu’s thoughts crowding her own, which were already packed to capacity.

“Give yourself a chance,” she urged Gabriel.

He snorted. “This whole damned thing is a big, bloody waste of time.”

“That isn’t true,” she countered. “You’ve led us this far.”

“And where the hell are we?” he grumbled. “Haven’t seen a single blasted Source. Maybe that old witch from Karakorum wants the Source for herself, sent us on a fool’s errand.”

“She wouldn’t do that.”

Gabriel sat upright and, even in the deepening twilight, she could feel the heat of his golden eyes. “And you know this because you and she are bosom chums,” he snapped.

Thalia wouldn’t be baited. “You sound as though you’ve swallowed a bowl full of nettles.”

In response, he ran his hands through his hair, causing it to stand in rather charming tufts that lent him an uncharacteristically boyish appearance, contrasting with the golden beard that had come in during the last few days. Hard travel left little time for such personal niceties as shaving, though she found herself wistfully wishing she could watch him attend to this mundane task. Applying lather to the planes of his cheeks, the deliberate, methodical progress of the razor moving across his face, slowly revealing his skin with each stroke. Thalia grabbed another saddle blanket and pretended to inspect it for more tears to keep from reaching out and putting her palm to his face, feeling the hard bristle of his whiskers and the juxtaposition with his soft mouth.

“I’m not used to going on like this,” he said after a pause. She understood that the admission cost him, his acknowledgment that he was outside the realm of his expertise. “Knowing that the enemy is out there, but being unable to do anything about it. Picking out clues from the air to lead me toward something I don’t even understand. It’s not how things are done.”

“This isn’t the army,” she reminded him. “Once we find the Source, then you’ll be able to go back to that life.”

A bright knife of pain gleamed through her, as she thought of the time when she and Captain Gabriel Huntley would part company to resume their usual lives. In just a few days, he had come to occupy a large part of her thoughts, of herself; her body even now demanded his touch, and it distressed her to think how quickly she’d carved out a space for him. Batu had noticed it, too. He’d said as much at the monastery of Erdene Zuu. Reminded her what she had suffered because of Sergei, the danger she was facing now of having it happen again. Thalia had insisted that she wouldn’t repeat her mistakes, confident that she could be much smarter where her heart was concerned. Yet each minute she spent with Gabriel threatened that confidence. She had taken his hand when they had discovered the three rocky spires, touched him because she needed to. Without thinking. And she had been furious with herself when she had discovered what she had done, pulling away from Gabriel, trying to imprison the wild creature of her heart in its cage.
Perhaps Batu was right, after all, damn him. When Gabriel returned to the army, they would likely never see each other again, and she would be left with a self-inflicted emptiness. Time had helped her recover from Sergei, yet somehow Thalia sensed that it would take much longer, hurt that much more, when Gabriel took his leave. Her anger with Batu was anger with herself.

“Not going back,” Gabriel said.

Her heart leapt up, and she tried to wrestle it back down again. He would desert? “Not going back to what?” she asked, trying to sound unmoved.

Gabriel picked up some twigs at his feet and began snapping them into small pieces, his broad hands fast and efficient even at this task meant to waste time. “To the army. I’m done. Resigned my captaincy.” He snapped twigs as punctuation.


“Four months ago.” Snap. “Passed over too many times for promotion.” Snap. “Too much of a collier’s son,” he said, deepening the rough music of his accent. Snap, snap.

“So, your ambitions were thwarted.” Each broken twig danced along her nerves.

“Yes.” Snap. “No.”

She reached over and stilled his hands, causing him to look up sharply. She made herself ignore the answering warmth in her belly, and pulled her hands back. She should know by now that skin to skin contact with him felt much too good. “Which is it?”

“I did want to be a major,” he admitted. “But even if I’d become a general, I couldn’t see myself sitting in the officers’ club twenty, thirty years down the road, blowing steam and boasting about how many men’s lives I’d lost in a battle. So, I chucked it in.” He forced out a laugh. “Became another civilian.”

“When I met you in Urga, you said you were in…”—she cast her mind back, trying to recall—“the Thirty-third. But you weren’t.”

“Been serving Queen and country for fifteen years,” he answered. “Takes more than a few months to unlearn half a lifetime’s lessons. It wasn’t my aim to mislead anyone.”

“I don’t feel misled,” Thalia said quickly. “Just…surprised.” She tried to readjust her perception of Gabriel, knowing now that he was no longer a soldier. It didn’t seem right, somehow. Even in the short amount of time she had known him, she could see how much he thrived on challenge, how his every movement and word was as sharp as a bayonet. He wasn’t bloodthirsty, but he had the air of a warrior about him, something as inseparable from his identity as his hair or eye color.

Those golden eyes were watching her carefully now, waiting to see how she’d react. “In the army or no, I’m sticking with this mission.”

“I never thought otherwise,” she answered truthfully. It didn’t matter in what capacity he served, civilian or soldier, Gabriel Huntley was a man of honor. She’d met very few, outside of the Blades. “But, once the mission is over, what will you do?”

He began methodically arranging the pieces of twigs he’d broken, as if lining up troops. “The objective is to go back to England. Supposed to find work in Leeds. Settle down.”

Thalia’s mouth dried, even as she wondered at his strange use of the term objective, which sounded awfully military. “You mean, get married.”

He nodded without looking at her, not hearing the change in her tone. Batu did, though, and her loyal servant glanced at her with raised eyebrows. It was the look he always gave her when he was right and she contradicted him. Faintly smug and self-congratulatory, and also pitying. Thalia wanted to scream. Instead, she said to Gabriel as levelly as possible, “Your future bride must have been somewhat angry when you postponed domestic bliss and headed off to Outer Mongolia.” Then, she could not keep her words from turning hard and brittle. “Did you write to her during your voyage here? Does she know about the fight in Southampton?”

“I haven’t written to anybody,” Gabriel said.

That was something of a relief. “She might be worried about you.”

“She who?”

Thalia wondered how someone as perceptive as Gabriel could be so obtuse. “Your fiancée,” she said with enforced patience, when all she wanted to do was howl.

The thunderstruck look on Gabriel’s face nearly made Thalia laugh, but she was in no mood for laughter. She’d never seen him so thrown. “I’ve never proposed marriage to any woman.”

Relief hit Thalia so hard, she thought she might lose consciousness. But this was followed by dismay at the strength of her reaction. There were many ways that Gabriel was different from Sergei, though she hadn’t been able to stop the anger and fear that had risen inside of her at even the slightest hint of duplicity. She refused to look at Batu.
“Not yet,” she echoed. “But you will.” She had to make herself face the unpleasant truth as soon as possible, and, in so doing, protect herself from certain pain.

“At some point, when the mission dictates.” He threw a handful of twigs into the fire. Again, he used oddly detached, military terminology for what should have been deeply personal. “You have someone in mind.”

Gabriel gave another hollow-sounding laugh. “Not at all. Been soldiering almost half my life. No time to meet ladies. At least,” he added, rueful, “not the kind one marries.”

“I don’t think I want to explore that last comment,” she said dryly. A frustrated growl rumbled out of his throat. “I’m always saying things I oughtn’t in front of women. It’s going to be bloody disastrous if I go back to England and start scouting for a bride.”

That was exactly what Thalia needed to hear. Once their work together was finished, he would return home and find himself someone suitable. Not a tall, Mongolian-raised woman with ties to dangerous secret societies, but a sweet, biddable girl who would keep a neat home, presiding over the teapot and serenely watching their children play on the rug. Dear Lord, the prospect of Gabriel’s making children with some faceless simp of a female churned in Thalia’s stomach like rancid mutton. Yet it was a truth she had to face.

“I can’t instruct you on proper behavior when courting,” she said, “since I’m not precisely the model of genteel manners.”

“I’m glad you aren’t,” he answered with a candor that surprised her. “This mission wouldn’t go too smoothly if I had to watch what I was saying, or if you needed to be coddled.” It was a compliment, of sorts. He didn’t strike her as the kind of man who doled them out with a liberal hand.

Thalia started to rise, needing to stretch her legs and gain some distance from him. “For the sake of the mission, then, it’s a good thing I’m not a real lady.”

This time, he was the one who reached out, putting a hand on her thigh, which caused her to stop in the action of getting to her feet. “I didn’t say you weren’t a lady, just that you didn’t require cosseting or a bunch of other silly tripe. One doesn’t have to entail the other.”

Thalia could only stare at his hand on her leg, aware of the heat of his touch even through her and trousers, a heat which rose up her thigh and settled immediately between her legs, and in her breasts, which suddenly felt heavy and sensitive. She hated her body’s traitorous response, which seemed to have no consideration for her head or heart.

He followed her eyes to his hand, then pulled back, but not without a slight lingering touch, an almost imperceptible increase of pressure from his fingertips, as if he was trying to imprint the feel of her into his skin before forcing himself away. Thalia sunk back to the ground, avoiding Batu’s too-knowing gaze. She didn’t think she could walk just then.

“I’ve no wish to talk about brides or manners or any other rot,” Gabriel said gruffly, curling his hands into fists and then pressing his knuckles into the dirt. “Not when I can’t figure out where to take us next.”

She wondered if her skin glowed where he had touched it. It certainly felt as if it should. Had any man ever affected her so strongly? No, none had, not even Sergei.

“We’ve had a long day and should get some rest,” she suggested. “Perhaps things will be clearer in the morning.”

“Perhaps,” he agreed, but she doubted if either of them believed her.

It was no better at dawn. Gabriel tried repeatedly to conjure up images of the landscape, but either too much time had passed since he had heard the song, or there were no more embedded clues within its fabric of sound. Both Thalia and Batu also tried to envision the geography of the song, but with no success.

“We must be close, though,” Thalia insisted with more conviction than she felt. “But ‘close’ in Mongolia could mean a hundred miles or more,” said Gabriel, more than a little frustration in his voice. He was cleaning his short-barreled rifle unnecessarily, since Thalia had watched him painstakingly clean it the night before. He needed something to do, some way to be useful. She tried to imagine him behind a desk at a bank, or carrying sheaves of important documents in a leather case down a city street, but none of those images seemed at all appropriate. Not to her, anyway. Maybe he thought differently of himself.

He finished wiping down the barrel of the rifle and got to his feet. “You and Batu stay here,” Gabriel announced. He sheathed the rifle in its scabbard, then shouldered his pack and started toward where his horse was hobbled. “I’ll scout the area further, see if I can’t locate the crimson field, whatever that is.”

“Two things, Captain,” Thalia said, planting her hands on her hips and herself in front of Gabriel. He stopped and gazed at her with an impatient frown. “Firstly, you aren’t in command here, so you cannot order me and Batu around.”
His jaw tightened. He might have resigned from the army, Thalia understood, but he hadn’t lost any of his commanding ways. Irritation with the current lack of progress only shortened his temper.

“And the second?” he growled.

“None of us need to ride halfway across creation looking for something when we have a means of bridging distance at our disposal.” She stepped around him and headed toward one of the saddlebags. “Fortunately, the item I need wasn’t washed away by the True Hammer of Thor.” Thalia rumbled through the bag, searching.

“I have a spyglass,” Gabriel said behind her.

“That cannot see nearly as far as this,” she proclaimed, and, locating what she was searching for, removed it from the saddlebag with a triumphant smile. She quickly unfolded it with Batu’s assistance.

It was a contraption of painted canvas stretched over a shaped wooden frame. But the paint on the canvas revealed an extraordinary artistry and attention to detail. Gabriel stared at the object in her hands. “A cloth eagle,” he said at last. “Life-sized, too.” He gently touched the fabric as if to convince himself it was real. Thalia had to admit that the canvas bird was indeed beautiful in an almost dreamlike way, each feather ready to feel the wind, the glint in the eagle’s eye as bright as anything living.

“This will help us see much farther away than we ever could, even with the best spyglass,” she declared.

“If it can help us see, we could’ve used it earlier.”

“The conditions weren’t right. Perhaps you can’t think of the next part of the song because it had reached the end. Now we have to do the work.”

He studied the beast made of canvas and wood. “Do you have some magic that will make the eagle real?”

She shook her head. “I do not, and Blades avoid using magic that is not their own. But we do have something almost as powerful.” At her nod, Batu retrieved a leather case from the saddlebag and brought it to her. She opened it to reveal a large prism, which was connected via brass chains to a series of round lenses several inches in diameter. Thalia suspended the prism from a hook on the eagle’s body while Batu supported the weight of the lenses.

“Graves guai would be very unhappy if we had lost this,” Batu said.

She glanced up from her work to find Gabriel watching her intently, his eyes as keen as cut topaz. Instead of battering her with a litany of questions, he let her continue to assemble the device, observing with a focus that was almost unnerving.

“It’s ready,” she finally announced. Thalia took several steps away from Gabriel and felt the breeze on her face. It should be strong enough. She held the fabric bird up and started to run. The prism and lenses were somewhat ungainly to carry, but she continued to sprint across the autumn grasses. When she felt confident, she let go. The canvas eagle soared up into the air, while Thalia held on to a long, stout, waxed twine line wrapped around a wooden reel. The prism hung beneath the fabric body, while the lenses dangled beneath the prism. She stopped running and let the line play out. It tugged in her hands, but she kept her grip strong, knowing that there would be no replacements if she should let go.

Behind her, Gabriel laughed. “Good God, a kite!” He came to stand beside her, watching the eagle kite reach up into the morning sky. The line was exceptionally long, and the kite hovered several hundred feet in the air. “It’s beautiful. Only…”

She couldn’t help smiling along with him, caught up in the joy of the kite in flight. There was something giddy and jubilant about watching it dance upon the sky, removed from terrestrial concerns. She finished his question. “How will it help us see? Look there.” She pointed to the ground thirty yards ahead of them and enjoyed Gabriel’s exclamation.

“Let me hold it,” Batu said, taking the wooden reel from Thalia. “You go look.”

Thalia sprinted ahead, with Gabriel close at her heels, then stopped at the edge of a bright circle, twenty feet across. The edges of the circle were blurred, but it was the center that captured both Thalia and Gabriel’s attention. It was a projected image of the countryside, taken from the kite’s vantage point high in the sky. They could see the steppes and hills they had ridden through the previous day—all visible at their feet, like an enormous picture window.

“Behold the work of one of the Blades’ most valuable members, Catullus Graves,” Thalia said, unable to disguise the pride in her voice. “Catullus and his family have been creating devices and contraptions for the Blades for generations. This viewing kite was invented by Catullus himself.”

“Unbelievable,” Gabriel breathed, staring at the image of the countryside displayed on the ground. He gingerly stepped inside the projected circle, as if worried he might disrupt the image, but it did not move, and he strode into the center. He was bathed in the strange light of the image, fields and mountains covering him like a tattoo, and looked up at the kite. “The prism,” he said, understanding causing the corners of his eyes to crease.

Thalia joined him inside the circle, and they were both illuminated, two living maps. She felt as though they
were somehow suspended between the earth and the sky together. “Exactly. The prism suspended just below the body of the kite captures the image of the landscape, which passes through those lenses hanging beneath. The image is projected onto the ground, allowing us to see for miles in any direction. I can demonstrate.” She signaled to Batu, who shifted the line, bringing the kite around, and casting an image of another part of the landscape onto the earth.

“This Graves bloke must be brilliant,” said Gabriel.

Thalia nodded. “His whole family, too. His great-great-grandmother Portia designed the Compass which all Blades carry, and you should see some of the inventions his great uncle Lucian created. Rather terrifying, actually, to be around someone so hopelessly clever.”

“I know the feeling,” Gabriel said, flicking a glance toward her.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re just as intelligent as I am. Even so, I’m a whimpering pudding compared to Catullus.”

“Always had a taste for pudding,” he murmured to himself.

Thalia decided it would be best not to address that last statement. She directed her attention back to the projected image of the distant landscape. It was incredible to see a picture of the hills and plains many miles distant, as though a dream had been made real. “I don’t see anything even remotely red toward the east.”

“Try another direction.”

At her signal, Batu shifted the line, and they followed the image as it changed with the kite’s placement. Slowly, laboriously, they combed the surrounding geography until—

“There!” Gabriel said, pointing.

A large all of gers was situated at the base of some rocky hills. The rhythms of everyday life pulsed around the tents. Children performed chores or played on the ground. Women were drying curds of cheese on top of the gers. Herdsmen chatted over their pipes as they tended their flocks of sheep and herds of horses. And surrounding this whole encampment, spreading out in a corona of vibrant color, were acres of crimson flowers. Against the faded greens of autumn grasses they glowed like constant fire.

“Those hills,” Gabriel said. “You can just see them on the horizon, there.”

Thalia looked up from the projection toward where Gabriel pointed. Sure enough, what appeared to be large rocky crests in the projection were barely perceivable bumps against the sky.

The red flowers lay nearly a day’s ride from Thalia, Gabriel, and Batu, but there was at last proof of their existence, just as the song had described. It was truly wonderful to see. She felt a heady pleasure, sharing the enchanted moment with Gabriel.

“If I should ever meet this Catullus Graves,” Gabriel said in wonderment, “I’d like to buy him a pint.”

Thalia’s mood abruptly pitched down. The likelihood that Gabriel would meet Catullus was practically nil. Thalia knew that Gabriel’s first mission for the Blades would be his last. Once they had located and secured the Source, Gabriel would have no more contact with her or the Blades. He would return to England to begin a life free of Heirs, Sources, Blades—and her.

She had refused to cry. That’s what Batu remembered from his first meeting with Thalia. He had not known her as a baby, but his acquaintance with Thalia had begun early in her childhood. When he first met the Englishman, Franklin Burgess, and his then-little daughter, the girl had been nearly eight summers old, shy as a deer as she clung to her father’s side. Her mother had died the year before, and her father had tried to outrun his grief by taking the child to a distant place, far away from familiar sights that only served to remind him of what he had lost. The girl, according to her father, had not yet shed a tear for her dead mother, convinced that holding back her sorrow would somehow bring Diana Burgess back from the place of shadows.

Back then, Thalia spoke no Mongolian. Batu’s English was even worse. The only thing they could understand was their mutual love of horses, and, after he observed the girl watching him cut horses from the wild herd every day, they gradually bridged the gap between them. He taught her to ride the Mongol way, helped bandage her bruises when she was thrown, and wiped her tears when she finally cried for her mother.

Batu had served her and her father ever since.

He and Thalia had taken many voyages together across the whole of the country, but neither of them had ever undertaken a mission for the Blades of the Rose. When Franklin Burgess had eventually revealed the existence of this society, and the role he played in protecting the magic of the world, Batu accepted his own responsibility immediately. Having been a youth on the steppes that fairly hummed with mystical power, knowing that shamans crossed from this world into the world of the spirit, Batu never doubted the existence of Sources. He knew that Burgess would shield them from men who would use the Sources for their own gain, and Batu gladly took up the task to do the same. If necessary, he would die to protect them, and he almost had. If Thalia and Captain Huntley had not saved him.
The work of the Blades was his work. Batu had no daughters, but he had sisters and nieces. Thalia was both to him. He bore a double burden: to protect the Sources, and to protect Thalia. It was a sacred charge, one he would never abandon.

He signaled to her now. It was midday and time to rest the horses as well as themselves. Thalia nodded and searched for a river where they could find good water and grass. She understood. The horses were already showing signs of strain, even though they had not ridden particularly far this day. Mongol horses spent part of the year roaming wild on the steppes. If taken too far from familiar land, they grew restive and melancholy. It was the price one paid for such a sturdy, spirited animal. Already the three horses had traveled hundreds of miles from their home. As soon as he was able, Batu would find replacement horses, and let theirs go free. They would return home on their own. Having faced the powerful magic used by the Heirs of Albion, Batu wasn’t sure that he would also be making the return journey to Urga. Thalia, however, would. Batu had promised her father to get her back to him safely. And he always kept his promises.

With that in mind, Batu waited until they had stopped to rest, and Thalia had gone off to seek some female privacy, before approaching Captain Huntley. The tall, fair Englishman was crouched down near where the horses were hobbled, carefully reviewing his weapons and equipment with a practiced eye. Batu had known many soldiers in his life, mostly Russians and Chinese, and many were braggarts and bullies; some of them had been capable men, but only a handful had ever truly impressed him with their skill and intelligence—as the captain had. Having spent nearly a week with Captain Huntley, Batu knew that not only were soldiers such as Huntley rare, civilian men were, as well. That did not make him any less of a threat, however.

“In the army, you were a cavalry officer?” Batu asked.

The Englishman cast him a quick, wary glance before returning to his task. “No, foot soldier,” he answered.

“Then you must be unused to riding for so long.”

“I’m fine,” the captain said, terse.

“You must be careful, Huntley guai,” Batu said.

“I’m always careful, Batu,” the captain said without looking up.

“With the business of being a soldier, yes,” Batu agreed. “But Thalia guai is not a war campaign.”

That got the Englishman’s attention. He looked up with those curious gold eyes, frowning. It was an intimidating sight, even though he remained crouched and Batu stood. “Never said that she was.”

Batu would not let himself be cowed, as he fought the urge to put some distance between himself and the captain. He had already seen that the Englishman was as ferocious as a lion. “Perhaps, though, you think to conquer her, or that she is a warrior’s prize to serve as your reward for service. She is a lovely girl.”

Captain Huntley surged to his feet, angry, and Batu could not help taking a step back. “You’re a decent enough bloke,” the captain growled, “so I won’t smash your head in. Nobody’s going to touch Thalia without her consent. Not you. Not me.”

“I do not think of her that way,” Batu shot back. “She is ger bül to me.”

“And what the hell is that?”

Batu struggled to recall the English word. “Family. She is family. And I must protect my family.”

“I’ll keep her safe,” the captain said at once.

“From the enemy, from the Heirs, yes, but what about you?”

The captain scowled. “All those looks you’ve been shooting my way since that night at the monastery. And this.” He snorted, a sound both angry and bitterly amused. “You’re warning me off her.”

“What does that mean, ‘warning off’?”

“Chasing the mongrel away from the prized bitch.”

“Ah, I understand. Yes, that is what I am doing.”

“I haven’t laid a finger on her since—”

“Since when?” Was Batu too late? But that was impossible. They had not been apart since they left Urga. Perhaps sleeping had been a mistake.

The captain shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. I’ve been a bloody gentleman, and I’ll stay that way until this mission is finished.”

“I do not know that word ‘gentleman.’ If it means ‘a man who looks with longing at a woman,’ then you are a gentleman.”

Batu could have sworn that the captain’s face turned a little pink. “You’re out of your sodding mind,” Captain Huntley grumbled, but he did not look away.

Feeling slightly more emboldened, Batu persisted. “When she returns to her father, she will be untouched by any man, just as when she left.”

The words that came out of the captain’s mouth were words Batu had never heard before in all the years he had
served Franklin Burgess and his daughter. They involved something that had to do with the offspring of unchaste female dogs, and some actions that Batu was quite sure were physically impossible, even for a circus contortionist.

“I will do none of those things,” Batu answered. “Yet I was there when you made mention of marrying when you return to Anglic...England.”

“Not yet, and I don’t have a damned fiancée. Good Christ, Batu,” snarled the captain, “I’m not going to bed Thalia.”

“You would not be the first man to try.”

The Englishman suddenly towered over Batu, more terrifying in his fury than Batu recalled. “Some man assaulted her? Give me his name. I’ll find him and kill him.”

“Not assaulted, Huntley guai,” Batu gulped. He did not doubt that the captain would make good on his threat, and prayed that he would not be around to see it. “What is the word? Seduced?”

Captain Huntley still looked ready to commit the foulest of murders. “Tell me what happened,” he commanded.

Batu glanced around to be sure that the woman in question had not returned. When he felt certain that he and the Englishman were alone, he cleared his throat and explained, “Three years past, her father met a young Russian who was studying Mongol plants. The young Russian was handsome and well-spoken, and soon became a good friend to Franklin guai and Thalia guai. When it became clear that this Russian wanted to pay court to Thalia guai, both she and her father were quite pleased. The Russian looked at her the way you do, and she looked back. They seemed very much in love.” Batu stopped when the look on the captain’s face turned even more fierce. He thought Captain Huntley might break his neck.

Instead, the Englishman rumbled, “Go on.”

“The Russian never mentioned taking Thalia guai as his wife, and Franklin guai became suspicious. We finally learned the truth.”

“How?”

“One of the Russian’s friends from home spotted him in the market,” Batu explained. “I was with him and Thalia guai at the time. The Russian tried to avoid his friend, but he could not.”

“Bringing news from home,” the captain guessed.

“Yes, including news of the Russian’s wife.”

More of the strange, angry words came from the captain as the muscles in his neck faintly pulsed with rage. “Already married.”

“A wife and two small children in Moscow, a boy and a girl.” Batu nearly trembled with remembered fury, thinking of how miserable Thalia had been in those bleak weeks after the truth had been uncovered. But she had not cried, the same as when she was a little girl mourning her mother. Instead, she wore a strange, empty look, as though she was nothing but dust blown across the expanse of the southern deserts. It had chilled both father and servant.

“Franklin guai beat the Russian until the man was almost dead, and the miserable coward slunk away back to his family. We never heard of him again. Hopefully, he died from his injuries.” Batu shivered slightly. Mongols were highly superstitious about speaking of blood and death, but he could not contain his desire for revenge against the weak Russian.

The captain was silent for some time, his jaw clenched tight and his hands curled into fists. He tilted his head, as if listening to something, but Batu could see nothing nearby, only the trees and water.

“I won’t do that to her, Batu,” the captain said lowly.

“You are a good man, Captain Huntley,” Batu answered, “and I owe you my life. But you will be returning to England when we have finished our task. And if you tempt Thalia guai into lust and then leave, then there is no place you can hide. Not England. Not anywhere. Franklin guai and I will find you and make you wish your mother had remained chaste.”

“And what Thalia wants, that means nothing?”

“She wants you.” The simplicity and directness of the statement had the captain blinking in surprise. “Yet she has been wounded before. I do not let my cattle graze too long simply because they want to. If they eat too much, they get sick.”

“Now she’s a damned cow,” grumbled the captain.

“You understand my meaning,” Batu said. The Englishman gave a short nod, but did not argue. He was a powerful warrior, yet that would not save him from the wrath of Franklin Burgess or Batu. Even the other Blades of the Rose would seek vengeance if it came to that. And the captain understood.

They both turned when they heard Thalia approaching. She smiled brightly at them, and Batu was relieved. She had not heard what they had been discussing. Everyone then shared a quiet midday meal. When they were confident that the horses had rested enough, they mounted up and began to ride in the direction of the distant field of flowers. With the horses refreshed, they should reach the encampment by nightfall.
Batu glanced over at Thalia as she rode alongside him. “Why did you tell him that?” she asked in Mongolian. Her voice had gone hard as frost, the way it did when she was especially angry.

He scowled. So much for being discreet. “You heard us.”

“You didn’t need to tell the captain, Batu,” she answered. She cut her eyes toward Captain Huntley, but he was riding behind them and seemingly unaware of the nature of their conversation. “You already warned me back at Erdene Zuu.”

“But you did not heed my warning,” Batu countered. “I have seen how you continue to look at him, how you enjoy his touch.”

“I don’t want to talk about that with you,” she muttered, reddening.

“We must,” he insisted. “These are steps that lead to disaster, Thalia guai. If you will not protect yourself, then I must take up the task.”

“By disrespecting the captain? He’s been nothing but honorable.”

“He is honorable, but he is also a man.”

“Men aren’t beasts, Batu.”

“They can be ruled by the animal part of themselves.”

“And women?”

“Women, too.”

“That’s right. We’re cows,” she said bitingly.

Ah, that was not good. She had heard too much. “The words were clumsy, but the meaning held true.”

For some time, she was silent, but her mind was not still. At last, she said, “He didn’t need to know.” She shook her head. “Trusting Sergei was my mistake, Batu. My mistake and my private shame.”

She was as headstrong as she had ever been. It was one of many reasons why Batu loved her like blood. “Do you remember when you first learned to ride the Mongol way?”

She gave a cautious nod.

“Do you remember when you were thrown, and you lay in the dirt, looking up at the sky, and you refused to cry, even though the fall was bad and you cut yourself?” She did not answer, but Batu could tell by the tightening of her mouth that she did remember. “I picked you up and used the sash from my del to wrap your cut.”

“I still have that sash,” she said after a pause, and now her voice wasn’t hard with frost, but rather rough with river gravel. She would never be a woman who gave in to tears easily. “And the scar on my leg.”

“That was the first time I cared for your injuries, but it wasn’t the last,” Batu said solemnly. “Yet I will do everything in my power to make sure I never have to tend your wounds again.”

Without looking at him, she said, “Cows or no, you’re a good friend, Batu.” She reached across the space between their horses and gave his arm a squeeze, then let go and put her heels to her horse as if trying to outride her own heart.
Chapter 9
The Lion and Lamb

The small whirlwind of dust finally began to gather in strength. It grew from as tall as a man’s knee to almost reaching mid-thigh. A faint, damp smell curled from within it, the slightest breath of life. But the triumph was short-lived. Within less than a minute, the whirlwind collapsed back down to the ground, nothing more than a pile of dirt. The medallion also fell to the earth, sending up a puff of dust.

“Hell and harlots,” Jonas Edgeworth barked, surveying the failed test, “I almost had it that time.” He picked up the medallion and glared over at Henry Lamb, who was sitting on a folding camp stool, next to the fire but far enough away so the wood smoke wouldn’t scent Lamb’s clothing. Edgeworth continued, spitting in the dust. “I don’t know what the bloody hell I’m doing wrong.”

Lamb scarcely spared Edgeworth a glance as he packed the bowl of his pipe with his favorite, custom-blended tobacco that came straight from a tiny shop on Jermyn Street. Inhaling the scent of the tobacco, Lamb wished that he was back at his club, relaxing over a pipe and paper, and far away from the primitive backwaters of Outer Mongolia. Partnered with the loutish Jonas Edgeworth, Lamb would have to endure for the sake of the Heirs and England. Lamb, Edgeworth, and the Mongol Tsend had voyaged from England to China on a steamship hired by the Heirs, a long trip made longer by the boorish company.

“Try again,” Lamb suggested, barely containing his annoyance. “And this time, don’t rush the chant. You spit it out as if you were speeding through school lessons. But, before you do,” he added, waving a piece of paper, “I’ve received a letter through the Transportive Fire. Very good news from headquarters.”

“What is it?”

“Our team in Africa was successful. The Heirs are now in possession of the Primal Source.” Lamb waited for Edgeworth’s jubilation at the news.

Edgeworth stared blankly.

Holy God, how could this dolt be part of the Edgeworth family?

“The Primal Source is the first Source,” Lamb explained. “When mankind was born and formed civilization, it created magic, it created Sources. From the Primal Source, all magic arises. The power it contains cannot be grasped by the mortal mind. And now the Heirs have it. Trouble is,” he added with a grumble, “we don’t know how to use it.”

“So get some of our frightful sorcerers to have a go at it.”

“They are working on unlocking the Primal Source as we speak.” Lamb cast a critical eye at Edgeworth. “Which means that you need to return to your own work.”

Edgeworth scowled, and went back to his task, cursing under his breath, and not a few of those curses were meant for Lamb himself. Ah, well. It didn’t matter if he and Edgeworth wouldn’t be punting down the Thames together when they returned to England. Lamb actually would not be overly distressed if, for some reason, Edgeworth met with a tragic but heroic death while pursuing the Mongolian Source. Edgeworth’s father would be furious, however, and Lamb was determined to avoid the wrath of Joseph Edgeworth. So, he would have to keep young Jonas safe as they worked to obtain the Mongolian Source.

Lamb had used the True Hammer of Thor to stop Thalia Burgess and her escorts. When that had failed, Lamb realized there was a better use of the girl and her friends. She and that annoyingly steadfast Yorkshire soldier were actually doing the most difficult part: locating the Source. And, judging by the speed and directness of their southerly route, they were very close. Which meant that the Heirs were also close. The Sumatran Obfuscation Charm was short-lived, but it allowed Lamb, Edgeworth, and Tsend to ride just three miles behind the Burgess girl and her group without detection. Any closer, and the magic wouldn’t function. Lamb wasn’t worried. On horseback, he could breach those three miles within minutes. Knowing that Thalia Burgess had no idea how close he was, how easily he could reach out and take her, hurt her, and her soldier powerless to stop it, gave Lamb a delicious, dark shiver of pleasure.

“How does this work?” asked the giant Mongol. He pointed at the small round mirror, resting on its stand. Within the mirror, tiny images of the Burgess girl and her retinue of two flickered in and out. Lamb was annoyed. He had made a mistake in not killing the soldier back in Southampton, little knowing that the base-born ruffian
would take it upon himself to complete Morris’s work. Now, Lamb had to pay for his own lack of judgment, which was nearly intolerable and shortened his temper considerably.

The Mongol, Tsend, reached out with a huge, meaty paw and snatched the mirror up to look more closely.

“Careful with that, idiot,” Lamb snapped as he jumped to his feet. He strode over and plucked the mirror from Tsend’s hand, then carefully returned it to its brass stand while the Mongol growled. “I cannot very well rush down to Algiers and get another thousand-year-old enchanted mirror.” He wiped the reflective surface with an embroidered handkerchief, removing traces of the Mongol’s grimy fingerprints.

Tsend looked unimpressed. He did not value age or rarity, only costliness and size. Which was good, since it was the lure of heaps of money that secured not only the Mongol’s information, but his loyalty. Though, Lamb corrected himself as he eyed Tsend’s brutish hands and the knife at his belt, his “loyalty” only went as far as the strings of his coin purse.

“How does it work?” Tsend repeated.

“Birds are very susceptible as well as sensitive to magic,” Lamb explained. “So I can easily control one using a binding and viewing spell. I just find a bird and tell it to follow the Burgess girl, then I see what it sees through the mirror. A simple enough process.”

A curse from where Edgeworth stood let Lamb know that his partner still had not succeeded. Edgeworth was still young and, despite his impressive lineage within the Heirs, largely untested. If the situation with Edgeworth’s inexperience grew dire, Lamb would step in. Until then, he would let Jonas Edgeworth fume and cuss like some Billingsgate fishmonger, though Lamb’s refined sensibilities shuddered with distaste to hear such language. How had Joseph Edgeworth, one of the most influential and revered members of the Heirs, sired this boor?

Speaking of boors, Lamb cast a suspicious eye toward Tsend. The Mongol had worked on a steamship that took him to Southampton. From other sailors he learned that the Heirs paid good money for reliable information about magic. Tsend approached the Heirs, claiming that he could lead them to a powerful Source in his home country. For a price. Lamb wondered how long he would have the Mongol’s loyalty, or if the faintest whiff of money could draw Tsend away to another camp. Not the Blades. Those imbeciles considered themselves too superior to use financial inducements. But there were other organizations, other countries and nations who sought the Sources, and it would not be difficult for Tsend to locate them and sell the Source, and possibly members of the Heirs, to the highest bidder.

Those other organizations—France’s *Les privilégiés*, or that German cabal, to name just two—would all kill to have the Mongolian Source. But Lamb would kill to make sure they didn’t, and that it belonged to Britain alone.

“The thing we are looking for,” Tsend said, lumbering over to where Lamb sat, “it will also help us control birds?”

Lamb mentally rolled his eyes. The Mongol had come to the Heirs with the knowledge of a riddle, but no idea its exact meaning or value. Tsend had assumed it possessed some worth, because he’d had to beat it out of a shaman. The shaman had finally yielded the riddle, and only then because Tsend promised to kill him quickly. Unfortunately for the shaman, Tsend hadn’t kept that promise. Or so the Mongol had boasted at the Heirs’ London headquarters.

It didn’t take long for the Heirs to figure out what the Mongolian Source could achieve, however. Once they did, Lamb and Edgeworth were dispatched immediately. Failure wasn’t permitted, not with such a powerful Source at stake.

“What we are after has a far greater power.” Lamb drew on the stem of his pipe, taking the fragrant, wonderfully English smoke into his mouth. God, he loved his country! It had the best of everything—land, food, language, monarchy—and the finest, most intelligent minds all working toward a single goal: ensuring that Britain’s empire would expand until there wasn’t a single nation that wasn’t under her flag. He honestly could not fathom why anyone, particularly anyone who happened to be English, would ever knowingly and deliberately hinder the work of the Heirs of Albion. Every Briton stood to benefit from their nation’s global advancement, though the ruling class—Lamb’s class—benefited more than most. But, infuriatingly, not everyone seemed to share the goals of the Heirs.

The Blades of the Rose were dangerous subversives, anarchists, probably reformers. They sought to destroy the foundation of British culture and its civilizing influence all over the world. A strange and motley collection of men from all walks of life. Worse, they even allowed women in their ranks, taking them from the sacred protection of home and husband, and imperiling their lives on fools’ pursuits. And Lamb would not allow himself to think of Catullus Graves and his whole blighted family. A shame, really, since they had the finest minds in the world, and, but for the singular problem of their skin’s pigment, the Heirs would have tried to lure them away from the Blades long ago. It was grotesque, maddening.

Lamb made himself take a calming puff from his pipe. As it always did, the smoke helped soothe the temper within him that, he knew, at most foul could grow blacker and more vicious than anything Edgeworth could
produce.

“This thing we chase,” Tsend persisted, “what sort of power will it have? Can it bring us wealth?”

“Better.”

“What is better than money?”

“Power. The same power that let Genghis Khan rule almost the entire known world. From China to Arabia, all the way to Hungary, the Mongol army destroyed any who opposed them and brought every nation to heel, and he used a Source to do it.”

Tsend frowned, trying to understand things beyond his limited comprehension. “What does the Source of the Great Khan do?”

“It might make a small army great in size and devastation,” Lamb speculated. “A hundred men may have the strength of a thousand. A single regiment could conquer and destroy nations.” Lamb could not contain his excitement just theorizing about the prospect. “The British Army is the best in the world, but we only have so many soldiers. Once I seize the Source, Britain will be able to conquer and control the globe, starting here, in Outer Mongolia, where Genghis Khan’s rise to power began. We continue to Russia, finally crushing that gadfly, and move out from there.”

“Will this Source be so powerful?”

“It must,” Lamb said fiercely. “Back in England, the Heirs have the Primal Source. It takes the power of all Sources and heightens it, so that every Source is imbued with a thousand times more strength. Including the one we search for here, in Mongolia.” He did not add that unlocking the Primal Source was still a mystery, but it did not matter. The power would be Britain’s, would belong to the Heirs and to Lamb himself.

Almost giddy, Lamb began to pace. “Every country, every nation will become a British colony. And not merely in Asia and Africa, but in Europe and the Americas, too. No more France. No more United States.” The British lion would reign supreme, as it was always meant to do. With Lamb and the Heirs of Albion commanding it all. In such a world, the Blades of the Rose would be annihilated, completely and utterly.

“Will I get to kill that Englishman with the girl?” Tsend asked, unconcerned with global domination. “He shot at me, and I want him dead.”

“My good man,” Lamb said, happily puffing on his pipe, “when we find that soldier, you may grind him into an unrecognizable paste with my blessing.” He wouldn’t make the same mistake again where the soldier was concerned. Lamb had a few plans for Thalia Burgess before she was also disposed of, though he kept those ideas to himself.

A shout of glee broke into Lamb’s thoughts. He and Tsend both looked over to a triumphant Edgeworth, who yelled over his shoulder, “I’ve done it! Come and see, Lamb!”

Both Lamb and the Mongol walked toward Edgeworth, who waved his hands at his creation. “Very good, Edgeworth,” Lamb said. The lad wasn’t entirely a simpleton.

A shout of glee broke into Lamb’s thoughts. He and Tsend both looked over to a triumphant Edgeworth, who yelled over his shoulder, “I’ve done it! Come and see, Lamb!”

Both Lamb and the Mongol walked toward Edgeworth, who waved his hands at his creation. “Very good, Edgeworth,” Lamb said. The lad wasn’t entirely a simpleton.

For once, even Tsend looked awed as they all stared at what Edgeworth had summoned. The smell of earth was strong. And beneath that, the living fire of magic.

Gabriel couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being watched. Even though he had scouted and thoroughly investigated a wide swath of land all around them, something prickled along the back of his neck and down his arms, as if unseen eyes followed their progress across the rolling steppes. He trusted his instincts too well to simply ignore the feeling, but hadn’t evidence to back it up. There was no way to prove it, no way to dismiss it. Something was wrong, though, and it angered him, not knowing what or why, or how he could protect Thalia from this invisible threat.

Perhaps a gun couldn’t do the job against magic, but it never hurt to have a little insurance. Gabriel now rode with his rifle across his lap, ready to be used. The closer he, Thalia, and Batu got to the Source, the greater the chance that the Heirs would try something. And when they did, Gabriel would be ready for them. He almost wished that the Heirs would launch an attack, just so it would end the waiting and uncertainty. He could finally act, instead of biding his time. But ever since the storm caused by the True Hammer of Thor, the Heirs of Albion had remained quiet. Gabriel didn’t trust that silence.

But there was one silence he could end. Glancing over at Thalia, her dark hair like a silk standard fluttering behind her, he urged his horse beside hers, until they were riding side-by-side.

“If I could,” he said to her, “I’d go back in time and butcher that Russian. Or hunt him down now.”

She looked over with a flash of surprise. Thalia shook her head at herself. “I should have known you knew I was within earshot.” Her shoulders drew down as she sighed, no longer holding up a burden of tension. “That’s good. I was tired of pretending. And,” she added, with a small smile, “thank you, for your bloodthirstiness on my behalf.”
“I’m not speaking tripe, Thalia,” he said. “I’d slowly kill that vodka-steeped bastard if it was possible. Stomach wounds are good. Takes a long time to die from them.”

She stared at him for a moment. “I believe you,” she said at last. “And, maybe it’s wrong to revel in your thirst for vengeance, but it’s a better gift than a bouquet of posies.”

“You want his guts tied up with pretty ribbons, I’ll do it for you.”

“Such a lovely gift.” But she didn’t look too bothered by his imagined grisly offering. “Although, you might want to save such ribboned presents for your future bride.”

“Something’s wrong with your eyesight. You keep seeing a bride where there isn’t one.”

“I’m no shamaness, but I can see into your future based on the plan you made. And it included returning to England and finding a wife.”

He swore roundly—his natural compulsion whenever he was frustrated. “I hadn’t a bloody idea what I wanted to do with myself after I left the army.”

“So you went to England without any plan?”

“Not exactly. Do you remember the night we spent in the cave? After the storm from Thor’s Hammer?” When she nodded, he continued. “I burned something that night, and you asked what it was.”

“You said it wasn’t important.”

“It was a letter.”

“A love letter?”

Gabriel snorted. “Hardly. From an old friend, promising me a job and the possibility of a bride. If I wanted it.”

“And did you? Do you?”

“Now…” Gabriel felt the sun on his face, the wind tugging at his clothing and breathing life into his whole self. He was alive. Here and now. “I burned it that night because the rain had turned it to useless pulp. Now I think it was for another reason. I don’t know what tomorrow brings. Soldiering taught me that. But I know that a job behind a desk, an ivory doll for a wife who knows only embroidery and babies—such things aren’t for me.”

“Ah,” she said, and couldn’t quite hide the hope and happiness in her voice. “That makes things…very different.” Thalia quieted, turning her thoughts inward, as if trying to reach an important conclusion. If only he could climb inside that clever brain of hers and know what she was thinking. Then she seemed to come back to herself, away from larger schemes. “But we cannot make any kind of plan with certainty, not while we search for the Source, and the Heirs are out there, somewhere, trying to claim it for themselves.”

“Certainty is for milksops.”

She smiled, and he felt it plain throughout his whole body. “We are definitely not milksops, are we, Captain?”

“No, ma’am, we aren’t.” She didn’t object or pull away when he brought his horse up beside hers, then took her hand. A slim woman’s hand, but definitely strong and able. With just the touch of her skin to his, heat roared through his body. He had the urge to take her sweet fingers in his mouth, lick them, or guide them to where he needed touching most. Instead, he made himself what he never thought he could be: a gallant. He kissed her hand.

But he wasn’t completely transformed into some cavalier. Her eyes widened as he pressed his mouth to her palm, then she flushed as his tongue came out quickly to lap at the sensitive skin.

Gabriel made himself release her hand and put a little distance between their horses, otherwise, he’d drag her right off her saddle and give in to what his body and heart demanded—claiming her for his own.

Fate was a contrary bitch, bringing him to Thalia when every day meant facing mortal peril. Gabriel had never known another woman like her. It wasn’t his own possible death that bothered him—though he wasn’t particularly keen on the idea of his final muster, not when being alive was pretty damned pleasant—so much as knowing that she was in danger. Well, he’d just have to stay twice as vigilant.

Yet she had sharp eyes, too. “There it is,” Thalia said, pointing ahead into the broad plain. Her voice came out a bit breathless, which gratified him even if he wasn’t satisfied. “It’s beautiful.”

As Catullus Graves’s distance-viewing device had shown, there were almost a hundred acres covered with small red flowers, with a large encampment of gers in the midst of them. The flowers weren’t of themselves extraordinary, but in the entire time Gabriel had been in Mongolia, he had seen only small sprinklings of these flowers, and never in this abundance. A soldier wouldn’t note them outside of what they might indicate about the season, the quality of the land, or whether there was water for horses nearby, and that’s what his mind went to first. But then, at Thalia’s comment, he did see the flowers for their bright beauty, a carpet of flame that dazzled between the lush green grasses and the blue sky.

There wasn’t much time for poetic fancy, though. “Do these nomads follow the flowers, or the other way around?” he asked.

“We’re going to find out,” Thalia said. “However, we cannot simply stop and examine the flowers without first paying our respects to the tribe. That would be suspicious and rude.”
“I don’t know the first thing about Mongol customs,” Gabriel admitted.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “Just follow my lead.”

Since his promotion to captain, he hadn’t much experience being directed by anybody else, and certainly never by a woman. Even so, he was out of his element here in Mongolia, and had enough brains rattling around inside his skull to understand it was best to let Thalia take charge. For now.

As they rode into the encampment, they were met with naked stares of curiosity from the people who lived there. Men tending herds of livestock and horses watched them from the backs of their saddles, while women stopped in the middle of their chores to gape. And a flock of children chased after them like ducklings, jostling and peeping amongst themselves. Almost everyone was looking at Gabriel, not at Thalia or Batu. Their interest didn’t unsettle Gabriel too much. He was familiar with being the first white man locals had ever seen. Some soldiers never got used to it, or felt that the color of their skin somehow made them better than a country’s natives, but Gabriel wasn’t one of them. So he returned everyone’s stares with a polite nod.

“This is the chieftain’s ger,” Thalia said as they neared the largest tent. “We shall speak with him first.”

Riding up, they were met by a barking dog, who danced his guard in front of the ger, and Thalia called out, “Nokhoi khor!” A little girl darted out and grabbed the dog by its neck, but that didn’t stop the animal from continuing to bark. As Thalia, Gabriel, and Batu dismounted, a boy came from behind the tent and took hold of the horses’ reins. He and Thalia spoke for a moment before she gestured for their party to go inside.

It took some moments for Gabriel’s eyes to adjust to the darkness. The only light came from an opening at the top of the tent. At first he was reduced to using his ears, listening to Thalia exchange pleasantries with a man, the sounds of someone preparing a meal, two children playing on the floor. But then the haze that filmed Gabriel’s sight disappeared, and he looked around. He hadn’t been inside a ger since he’d left Urga, and was curious what he’d find. And he was surprised, but for a different reason than he’d originally believed.

“Yes,” Thalia said softly at his side, sensing his question. “It looks the same. All gers are arranged exactly the same way as one another. The stove is at the center, while the door must always face south.” She made a small movement toward the left side of the tent, where a woman was stirring a fragrant kettle of milk. “That is the women’s side, where food is prepared and the children sleep. The right is where men sit.” Sure enough, a man stood on the right-hand side near some saddles, ready to greet the visitors. Everything else, from beds to red-painted cupboards, to the shrine that decorated the north part of the ger, was just as Gabriel had seen in Urga. “It is an ancient custom that is never broken,” Thalia explained. “And this way,” she added, “you always feel as if you are home.”

Having spent the last fifteen years in tents and barracks, none of them remarkable, comfortable, or at all homey, the idea that a man could find his home anywhere and with anyone strangely pleased Gabriel.

The man Thalia had been speaking with started to talk to Gabriel, but he could only shake his head in response. Thalia immediately stepped in and began to talk, while Batu quietly provided an ongoing translation.

“He is my cousin from England, and speaks no Mongol.”

“You are welcome to my home, cousins,” the man said, with Batu translating. Gabriel noticed that his del was slightly finer than everyone else’s, with silk trim along the cuffs and hem. The chieftain.

Not content with playing mute, Gabriel repeated what he had heard Thalia call out earlier. “Nokhoi khor,” he said, with a small bow.

The chieftain looked puzzled, while Thalia suppressed a smile, and the children giggled. “You just told him to hold his dog,” she whispered.

“I’ll shut my gob, then,” Gabriel muttered as he felt his face grow hot. So much for international diplomacy. He’d stick to shooting and scouting from here on.

More pleasantry was exchanged, including questions about livestock fattening, horses, and family members, in that order. After this, Gabriel was waved toward the northern part of the tent, which, Thalia murmured, was the seat of honor. He sat on the ground, with Thalia to his right and Batu on his left. While small talk was made, the chieftain approached Gabriel and pulled a silken pouch from his del while also going down on one knee. The chieftain touched his right elbow with his left hand as he pulled a small bottle from the pouch and held it out to Gabriel expectantly.

“A customary snuff exchange,” Thalia said when Gabriel looked at her. “All men do this when they greet one another.”

“I don’t have any snuff. Just cheroots.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s custom, a sign of friendship.” She offered quiet guidance as Gabriel did what she instructed. “Take a pinch of the snuff using your thumb and forefinger, that’s right, now sniff it. Bless you,” she added when he sneezed. The chieftain laughed good naturedly. “Return the bottle to him, and mime handing him your own bottle. Yes, just like that.” Gabriel tried not to feel like a dolt as he pretended to give the Mongol chieftain
a snuff bottle, but no one seemed to think it odd, and the entire ritual was enacted one more time in pantomime.

“What about you?” Gabriel asked Thalia.

“Only men.”

The ritual was repeated with Batu and the chieftain.

After this, the chieftain turned to Thalia, and, as he spoke, Batu continued to provide an ongoing translation.

“We have heard of you. My brother has gone to Urga and made mention of the English Mongol and his daughter.” It did seem an apt way to describe Franklin and Thalia Burgess, since they weren’t one nationality or the other, but some kind of mix. It wasn’t rare for people living away from home to go native in one way or the other—sometimes the efforts were absurd, and sometimes the expatriates turned more native than the actual natives, as if trying to lose themselves in someone else’s culture. Somehow, Franklin Burgess had struck just the right balance, and his daughter was proof. Gabriel was beginning to wonder if he could ever get used to seeing an Englishwoman cinched into a corset or dragging a bustle behind her after seeing Thalia’s freedom of movement. And freedom of self. She was so different from the girls his comrades in arms used to moon over, those gentle creatures who were trained to serve, docile and obliging. What the hell had he been thinking, even to consider having a girl like that as his bride?

Batu interpreted Thalia’s answer into English, so Gabriel might follow the conversation. “You honor us,” she replied, but the chieftain waved away the compliment. A woman, whom Gabriel assumed was the chieftain’s wife, stepped forward with her eyes downcast. She held out a bowl of steaming tea to Gabriel, which he took and sipped from, before returning the bowl to her. She offered the same hospitality to Thalia and then Batu, before returning quietly to the women’s side of the ger.

Gabriel burned with questions about the flowers, but he knew that the polite rituals would have to be observed. Even so, he longed to leap up and run outside. It felt strange to be in a shelter again after living and sleeping in the outdoors. The monastery of Erdene Zuu had been but a small break in the routine. Inside again, Gabriel was becoming much too aware of Thalia’s nearness, the sweet soft femaleness of her; the sound of her voice, contained as it was by the felt walls of the ger, played low and hot in his belly.

“We are honored by your presence at our humble ail,” the chieftain said through Batu. “Whatever I have is yours, my sister.” A small child toddled up to him and began playing with the frogs that fastened the side of his del, and the chieftain accepted his baby’s mischief with good grace. “Have you joined us for our nadaam?”

“Forgive me, but are not the nadaam festivals held in July?” Thalia asked. She repeated the question in English for Gabriel’s benefit.

“Yes, but our tribe has a special custom. Each year, the strongest and bravest men from nearby ails come in the autumn to compete for a special honor.”

“What is this special honor?” she asked in Mongol and then English.

The chieftain, whom Batu told him was named Bold, called to his wife. The woman, named Oyuun, immediately left the tent. “I shall show you. It will take just a moment.”

“While we wait,” Thalia said, again in two languages, “I must remark on the flowers that surround your ail. I’ve never seen anything like them.”

Bold grinned. “I am so used to them that I never see them. I did not realize until I was nearly a man that not every ail had its own field of scarlet flowers throughout the year. They go where we go, even if we change settlements.”

“Does anyone know what makes them grow?”

The chieftain shrugged. “No one knows. They feed our livestock, no matter if the frost is very deep, so we do not delve too deeply into their mystery. The Buddhist priests cannot say, and the shamans will not. It may have something to do with the ruby.”

As Batu translated the word “ruby,” Gabriel’s senses sparked into awareness. Both he and Thalia exchanged glances.

“Here,” Bold said as Oyuun returned to the ger, a strapping young man following her. In an instant, Gabriel had sized the man up and knew he could be an impressive fighter. And better guard. In his hands, the man held a small red wooden chest covered with elaborate carvings, which someone had clearly labored over for a long time. Bold signaled to the man, and the chest was opened. It took all of Gabriel’s will to keep from cursing with astonishment when he saw what it held.

“This is our tribe’s glory and our prize,” Bold explained, pride weighting his voice, and Batu echoed the sentiment in his translation. The chieftain looked up at the man holding the chest as if asking permission, which was odd, since Bold was clearly the man in charge of the tribe. When he received a nod, Bold reached into the chest and pulled out its contents and held it up to the light.

Gabriel felt Thalia’s hand on his arm, as if she, too, were trying to restrain herself. Taking a quick glance at her, he saw a flush stain her cheeks, her eyes widened with amazement. Even though he was trying to remain calm, he
probably looked the same way. Sometimes, a soldier’s training only went so far.

It was a ruby. Not an ordinary ruby, but one as large as a child’s hand, and a deep blood red that caught the light, shimmering and hypnotic. The stone was uncut, but even without polished surfaces, it was one of the most incredible objects Gabriel had ever seen. Surely it had to be worth hundreds of thousands of pounds, if such a thing could have a price.

“This is what the champion of the nadaam wins,” Bold continued through Batu. “For a year, he lives with our tribe and has the honor of guarding our ruby. Each year, he must defend his honor or yield it to a stronger, better champion. Unlike other nadaam festivals, ours is held as a tournament, so we may find the best man for the task.”

The man holding the chest said something to Bold, which Batu did not translate. And again, the chieftain seemed to obey the man, returning the ruby to the chest, where it lay on a blue silk pillow. At once, the man closed the chest and left the ger, looking about him with alert eyes. He would have made an excellent soldier.

Thalia spoke in Mongol, then said in English to Gabriel, “I told him I am awed by his ruby,” Thalia said. “It is not mine,” answered Bold, Batu interpreting, “but belongs to our tribe. We have had it in our possession for many generations, and each is taught to revere and protect it.”

“How could it not be?” Thalia said in English, quiet and urgent.

It surely is the ruby of Genghis Khan,” Batu added. “There is a legend,” Thalia said quickly, “that when Genghis Khan was born, he clutched in his hand a blood clot, and this was the secret to his power. Some have speculated that it wasn’t a blood clot at all, but a ruby.” She looked over to the door of the ger, where the ruby’s guardian had been minutes earlier. “This ruby. It must be what causes the flowers to follow the tribe and bloom all year.”

Before Gabriel could answer, the squalling child had been attended to, given a dumpling to keep him quiet, and Bold returned his attention to his guests.

Thalia spoke to the chieftain, but didn’t translate her words for Gabriel. “She wants to compete in the nadaam, Gabriel guai,” Batu said, eyes wide.

“What?” asked Gabriel.

Bold said something in Mongol at the same time that sounded very much like, “You?”

Thalia turned to Gabriel. “How are you with a bow and arrow?” she asked in English.

“Never shot one,” he answered, thrown. “Guns only. A cannon, once.”

She pointed to herself as she spoke to Bold.

“Sister,” the chieftain said, Batu translating, “you cannot enter. You would have to live with our tribe for a year if you won. But, more importantly, our nadaam is for men only.”

Gabriel had gathered his scattered wits enough to growl, “The hell you’re competing. I don’t know what the damned tournament is, but you aren’t entering. I’ll do it.”

Thalia shot him an angry look, but he wouldn’t back down. He had already committed himself to protecting her, no matter what it cost him. And if there was physical danger, he damned well wouldn’t let her get involved. He might not have Catullus Graves’s brains, but Gabriel did have brawn in his favor.

Thalia began to speak to Bold, without repeating herself in English, so Gabriel had to rely on Batu to provide him with her words. “In England, it is quite common for women to be warriors.” She ignored Gabriel’s curse of dissent. “There is even the famous warrior queen, Boudica, who waged glorious war against the Romans.” To Gabriel, she hissed in English, “No orders from you, Captain. If we want to win the ruby, then I must compete.”

Knowing that it would be impossible to get answers from her, Gabriel looked at Batu. The servant looked just as appalled as Gabriel. After their talk, they had reached an armistice, and were united in their need to keep Thalia safe. “Tell me what else happens at these nadaams.”

“It is a celebration of the three manly arts,” Batu explained. “Horse racing, archery, and wrestling. Usually, children compete in the horse race, and women may enter the archery competition, but it must be different here. I should mention that there are no weight classes in the wrestling competition, as there are elsewhere.”

Wrestling? “You are not entering the tournament,” Gabriel repeated to Thalia. He looked to Batu for reinforcement.

“Your father would not allow it,” Batu added. “And he would be furious should I let anything happen to his
only child."

“I’m a grown woman, not a child,” Thalia said through gritted teeth. “He would also know that the Source must be protected at all costs.”

“Not if the price is your life,” Gabriel growled. “I’ll enter.”

“You can’t shoot a bow and arrow, and I can,” she fired back.

“You can’t wrestle a fully grown man and win,” he countered. “And sure as the devil, I won’t let you get hurt, which you would.”

They both glared at each other, with Bold looking on quizzically, until Batu cleared his throat. “If I may suggest, should Bold allow it, perhaps you could enter as a team,” he offered in English. When Gabriel and Thalia began to sputter their protests, Batu continued, “Alas, I am only a fair archer and even my younger brothers can beat me at wrestling, thus I should not enter. Either one of you might win the horse race, but only Thalia guai can win the archery, and only the captain can win the wrestling. So you must enter together. The captain will ride in the race and wrestle, while Thalia guai will shoot in the archery competition.”

Everyone was quiet as they mulled over this proposition. “Will that satisfy you?” Thalia finally asked Gabriel hotly.

“I’d rather you were ten bloody miles away from the damn tournament,” Gabriel grumbled. Anything to avoid the possibility that she might get hurt. Someone could fire wildly, or, hell, a nearby horse could get spooked by the hubbub and trample her. Who knew what might happen in the midst of a Mongol athletic contest?

“That isn’t an option.”

“Then yes, it’ll do.”

In rapid Mongolian, which Batu did not translate, Thalia made her case to the chieftain. Bold continued to look skeptical about the whole idea, perhaps even more so than when he thought Thalia would enter the competition alone. Gabriel could try to take the ruby from the man guarding the jewel, but it would be far better to get it without resorting to violence. He knew that the best way to get the ruby was to win it, and it steamed his pudding knowing that not only couldn’t he do it on his own, but that Thalia would have to be put in danger. He wished Batu could guarantee a win in archery, but the absolute certainty in Thalia’s eyes that she not only could win but would win convinced Gabriel that she was their best hope.

“Wait,” Gabriel said, breaking into Thalia’s appeal, “tell him this: it might seem strange to you. Go on, translate,” he urged, and Thalia reluctantly translated as he spoke. “A man and a woman competing together? Why shouldn’t I enter on my own? It’s because…,” he struggled to find the words, not used to or comfortable with talking eloquently. Finally, he said, looking at the chieftain, “She and I are like flint and gunpowder. Each are strong, but together, they’re explosive.”

Bold only frowned. So Gabriel kept talking. “We’re the bow and the string. Useless alone, but strong together. Or…uh…we’re the knife and the blade.” He stopped as the chieftain began to laugh as he nodded his head. Bold spoke first to Gabriel, then to Thalia, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes.

“It appears that you and I are competing in the nadaam as a team,” Thalia said, turning to Gabriel.

“What did I say that convinced him?”

At this, Thalia’s own mouth quirked in a little, rueful smile. “None of it. But he found the idea of a man and woman working together so amusing, that he’s letting us enter. He thinks that the tribe could use a good laugh.”

Gabriel couldn’t help but chuckle, too. “My brief career as a diplomat—over before it started.”

“That’s all right, Captain,” she said warmly while giving his hand a squeeze. “I prefer you as a man of deeds.”

He grinned, thinking of the tournament. His blood hummed with excitement, relishing the prospect of real stand-up fighting. No hidden ambushes from underhanded enemies. No magic. Just straight man-against-man competition.

But not only man-against-man. There was a woman involved, too. Thalia. She’d never been in battle, but she was a warrior, just the same. The perfect woman to have at his side in the competition. Soon, they would fight together. And nothing felt more right.
Chapter 10
Another Form of Magic

The timing could not have been more auspicious. Bold informed them that the *nadaam* tournament would be held the following day, and in the meantime, there would be a celebration that night, with Thalia, Gabriel, and Batu as guests of the tribe.

Batu was given a bed in a kinsman’s *ger*, since it was discovered that, in one of those coincidences that happened with a strange frequency in such a vast country as Mongolia, he was related by marriage to the chieftain’s second cousin. Even beyond a Mongol’s usual endless hospitality, this further endeared Batu to the hearts of the tribe. He was plied with food and drink immediately, pounded with a hundred questions about his family as well as about the English man and woman who accompanied him. Thalia and Gabriel received the honor of sleeping in the chieftain’s *ger*. But sleep was a long time away. In the meanwhile, there was the feast.

Thalia and Gabriel walked out of Bold’s *ger*, and the *ail* was bustling with activity as tents went up all around them.

“Seems like every man within miles wants to try for the ruby,” Gabriel remarked.

Thalia watched as several people walked by, leading camels laden with all the necessary equipment to erect *gers*. “It’s an honor that many seek. Bold said that people from *ails* nearby would be arriving all evening.”

Gabriel rubbed his hands together. “Should be a good show.”

She couldn’t help smiling at him. “It appears you’re looking forward to it, Captain.”

He grinned back. “Ma’am, I am, indeed. Nothing like a little old-fashioned competition to get the blood hopping. But,” he added, turning serious, “I don’t like that you have to get involved. Not looking forward to that.”

His protectiveness both annoyed and secretly delighted her. Before she had time to fashion a reply, Oyuun appeared. “We could use another woman’s hands in the preparation of the feast,” the chieftain’s wife said.

Thalia glanced at Gabriel and translated. Batu was off somewhere, sharing gossip, and, with her off to attend to the feast arrangements, Gabriel would be alone amongst people with whom he shared no common language.

“Go on,” he urged her, gently nudging her with his shoulder. “They need you, and it looks like these fellows”—he nodded toward a group of men assembling a very large *ger*—“could use some help, too.”

“Will you be all right?”

A delicious, rather cocky smile tilted the corner of his mouth. “Warms my heart when you worry about me.”

She longed to throw something heavy at his head, but he was gone before she could grab the nearest cauldron.

“Come, sister,” Oyuun said. “I know that the others want to meet you. Every woman is delighted to meet the English Mongol lady who will compete against men.”

Thalia glanced at Gabriel and translated. Batu was off somewhere, sharing gossip, and, with her off to attend to the feast arrangements, Gabriel would be alone amongst people with whom he shared no common language.

He was already in their midst, as comfortable as if he’d been born on the steppes. The men had already laid down the floor and furniture, and, communicating through gestures, were showing Gabriel how to put up the trellis walls. The whole process could usually be done in less than an hour, but this *ger* was exceptionally big.

“The feast later,” Oyuun explained.

Nodding with understanding, Thalia followed the chieftain’s wife to the gathering of women, all eager to press her with questions, but not before casting a look over her shoulder to see how Gabriel fared with the men.

“Do you really believe you can beat a man in the *nadaam*, sister?” asked one of the women.

“Any one of us could shoot a bow as well as, if not better than, our husbands,” Thalia answered.

“Is he your husband?” a younger girl asked, looking over Thalia’s shoulder.

Even though Thalia knew who the girl was talking about, she felt compelled to look behind her. Gabriel and several other men hefted the roof posts for the festival *ger*. A grin spread across her face as she watched him. Though he spoke no Mongol, he responded readily to the others’ signals, and was absorbed in both the work and the
camaraderie. It did not hurt that he was able-bodied, strong, and clever, quickly understanding what needed to be done and accomplishing his tasks with almost no trouble. Once or twice, the nuance of fitting one of the roof poles provided a momentary obstacle, but those difficulties were overcome nearly before they had begun. Despite the language barrier, he laughed with the Mongols and made them laugh in turn. A few of the men slapped his shoulders, the universal sign of male approval.

“He is a kinsman,” Thalia said, turning back to the group. As tolerant as Mongols were, even they would look askance at an unmarried man and woman traveling together.

“So, he is available?” an older woman asked. “I have daughters.”

“And my husband is old,” another tribeswoman added with a wicked grin. Her comment set off a chorus of feminine giggles, like doves rising into the air.

She didn’t know how to answer that. Thalia scanned the faces of the women, and only few of them were paying attention to their cooking tasks. Instead, most of them were staring past her. Unable to help herself, Thalia looked back again, and lost her ability to think rationally.

Along with some other hale young men, Gabriel unrolled the large swaths of wool felt that made up the ger’s walls. Somewhere along the way, he had shed his coat and vest, unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt, and rolled up his sleeves. The sight of his tanned forearms and neck, combined with the athletic grace of his body underneath the cotton shirt, transfixed Thalia. He moved with pure masculine beauty, an economy and purpose of action. It was impossible to keep her eyes from him as he threw the felt covering over the top of the ger’s wooden skeleton, his muscles hard and sure beneath the woven lawn of his shirt. Her gaze trailed lower. Without his coat to cover him, she could see the tight firmness of his buttocks, the toned thickness of his thighs, everything moving, working perfectly together. She recalled vividly the feel of his skin, how hard and alive he’d been beneath her hands.

But more than the aesthetic glory of Gabriel, his energy and enthusiasm entranced Thalia. He threw himself into the task, observing with a keen and intelligent eye, carefully following the instructions he was given while also taking chances. If he made a mistake, he corrected it and moved on. There was a real pleasure living in him. Pleasure in trying something new. Pleasure in letting his body and mind align. Here was someone who would never hold himself back, and his joy in life became the joy of those around him, including Thalia.

Catching her watching him, Gabriel gave her a cheerful wave before getting back to work.

“‘Kinsman,’ hm?” Oyuun asked pointedly.

Thalia made herself return to her own tasks, but her hands felt clumsy. “A distant kinsman,” she said. The chieftain’s wife smiled, knowing, but did not go further. Instead, as everyone cooked, she readily absorbed Thalia into the world of her tribe, filling her in on the latest scandals, who pined for love for whom, which man wasn’t speaking to his brother-in-law because of the loss of several goats. By the time most of the food had been prepared, Thalia felt as though she had known this tribe all her life. Thalia became so engrossed in conversation with the women, she hardly noticed when Oyuun disappeared.

It was only when Oyuun returned and stood next to Thalia that she’d become aware of her absence. “Come with me,” the Mongol woman said.

Thalia followed Oyuun back to the chieftain’s tent, where she found a steaming tub of water waiting. Knowing that water was scarce, Thalia looked at Oyuun with wide eyes. “I couldn’t…” she started to protest, but the woman would not have any part of it.

“You may be an English Mongol,” she said, “but you are still English. And from what my husband tells me, the English love their baths. Come,” she insisted, putting her hands on Thalia’s shoulders and gently pushing her toward the tub, “you have been traveling hard for many days, and we shall have you clean for the feast and your ‘kinsman.’”

A few half-hearted protests later, and Thalia had stripped out of her dusty clothes and sunk into the bath with a pagan moan. Oyuun left the ger, giving Thalia some much-needed privacy. It felt sinfully wonderful to wash the grime from her skin, using a bar of sandalwood soap that probably came from Russian traders. Thalia dunked her head under the water and washed her hair as well, which had made considerable progress toward resembling a diseased marmot. She dunked her head again, rinsing the soap from her hair. When she came up, water streamed into her eyes, and she felt around for the towel that Oyuun had left nearby.

The towel was placed in Thalia’s searching hand. “Thank you, Oyuun,” Thalia said as she wiped at her face.

“You’re…welcome.”

The sound of English in a familiar deep voice had Thalia’s eyes flying open. Gabriel stood beside the tub, staring at her with amber fire. For a moment, all Thalia could do was stare back at him, seeing a slight glaze of perspiration gleaming on his skin, his discarded jacket and vest hanging from his hand. Even though he was at rest, his breathing was shallow, strained, as his gaze moved down to the bath water.

Belatedly, Thalia realized that the cloudy water did almost nothing to hide her naked body from him. She could
even ask him to take off his clothes and join her in the small tub. His skin...wet...But this was Oyuun and Bold’s
ger, and she couldn’t, not when anyone could wander in at any moment. Understanding it would be best not to start
something she would not be able to finish, she crossed her legs and held one arm tight over her breasts, shielding
herself.

This seemed to break him out of a spell, and he turned his back to her. He seemed to understand as much as she
that this was not the time or place to play with their attraction. “Bold said I might...ah...clean up before the
celebration,” he said, hoarse. “I didn’t know...he didn’t tell me you...” He headed toward the door.

“No, please,” Thalia said quickly. He stopped in his tracks but did not turn around. Tension emanated from the
broad breadth of his shoulders, his hands curled into fists at his sides. “The water is still warm. We can share. I
mean,” she added hastily as he gave a start, “I’m just finished. If you don’t mind somewhat used bath water.”

“No, I don’t mind.” His voice was strained, a rough rasp. “I’m very...dirty.”

“I won’t be a moment.” Thalia stood, sloshing water, and hastily wrapped herself in the towel with shaking
hands. It wasn’t the first time she’d been almost completely naked near Gabriel, but she was by no means
accustomed to the experience. If anything, her attraction to him had grown even more potent in the ensuing days,
and she was bodily fighting with herself to keep from walking over to him and pressing her nude body against the
broad muscles of his back. Frantically, she looked for her discarded clothing, but could not find it. Oyuun must have
taken the clothes to be cleaned. For the first time, Thalia cursed Mongol hospitality.

Knowing that she could not very well walk outside in nothing but a towel, Thalia pulled a
del and trousers from
the clothes chest, then threw them on. It wasn’t a particularly good fit, since Thalia was considerably taller than
Oyuun, but for now it would do.

“All done,” Thalia said, trying to make herself sound bright and unaffected. “You can turn around now.”

Gabriel did so, slowly. He looked everywhere but at her. With his shirt unbuttoned at the collar, she could see
the tight column of his neck, the movement there as he swallowed. Then he did glance over at her, and inhaled
sharply as his eyes narrowed. He looked positively dangerous. His jaw hardened, and he thrust the bundle of his
jacket and vest in front of him. Thalia wondered what the matter could be, since she was dressed, but looked down
and saw that, in her haste, she had not dried herself completely, and the clothing clung to her body in a way that
revealed every curve, more suggestive than complete nakedness. Oh, hell.

“Thalia,” Gabriel growled.

“Yes?” she squeaked.

“Get out.”

Grabbing her boots, Thalia ran from the ger, even though every part of her demanded she stay.

Life on the steppes was never easy—dry, short summers; long, harrowing winters with their threat of zud, the
killing frost—so every celebration was enjoyed to its fullest. For this tribe, the feast before the ruby’s nadaam was
also the farewell to warmth. Autumn would turn quickly to winter, the green pastures disappear under cold white
blankets for months while the blue sky froze overhead and the sun shone with icy crystalline light.

There was enough heat inside the celebratory ger to fuel the nomads for another winter. The special large tent
Gabriel had helped set up just for the feast, despite its size, was crammed full of celebrating herdsmen and women.
The air was thick with laughter and music, the smoke of pipes, scents of roasted mutton, and the wafting aromas of
the continual supply of potent archi to drink, which turned cheeks red and shy men into heroes. Several hundred
people had stuffed themselves inside the huge tent. It was raucous, noisy, and crowded, the furthest thing from a
genteel cotillion or sedate afternoon tea.

Home, Thalia thought to herself as she stepped inside the tent. This was her home. She could not imagine
herself anywhere else. As she moved through the throng, weaving deftly between warm bodies, exchanging cheerful
greetings, she felt an overwhelming sense of love and tenderness toward the nomads, people who accepted her far
more readily than her own supposed countrymen. She had to help protect the Mongols, protect this world, this place,
especially from the Heirs. They would turn Mongolia into another corner of England—pie shops on every corner,
English-language newspapers reporting on the latest British triumph, frock coats and bustles instead of dels—and
destroy everything unique and wonderful about it in the process.

“Are you nervous about tomorrow?” Oyuun asked as she came to stand beside Thalia.

“Not at all,” Thalia answered. With a rueful laugh, Thalia realized that she had been so absorbed in thoughts of
defeating the Heirs, she had not even considered the possibility of losing in the nadaam.

“I will tell you a secret,” Oyuun said, cupping her hand over her mouth. When Thalia leaned closer to hear
better, Oyuun whispered, “I hope you win.”

“Why?”

“Because no one thinks that a woman can best a man. I know that Gabriel guai will compete with you,” she
said to Thalia’s objections, “but the fact that you dare to enter when no other woman has ever done so before—that, to me, is wonderful.”

“Perhaps next year, you should try,” Thalia suggested, but Oyuun laughed.

“You think I haven’t enough to worry about, between my children, my husband, and the well-being of this tribe? I should add the ruby to my burden, too? No”—she chuckled—“I leave such tasks to the young and free. Although,” she added with glittering eyes, “perhaps you are not free.”

Thalia knew immediately that Oyuun was speaking of Gabriel, and her face flushed. There was no point denying it. The wild creature of her soul had finally yielded to the calloused hand of one man.

The chieftain’s wife smiled wickedly, looking toward the entrance to the tent. “And here is your handsome Englishman, and I am glad to know that you are not related, especially given the way he looks at you.” Before Thalia could offer up a rejoinder, Oyuun had disappeared into the crowd, acting as hostess for the enormous party.

Thalia watched from the other side of the tent as Gabriel entered. Her heart leapt like an unbroken horse to see him, even after merely an hour apart. He’d shaved, and his face was starkly handsome in the glow of the lanterns, sculptural and piercing. His hair, now a dark gold with damp from his bath, was brushed back from his forehead, so that nothing hid him from view. And he’d managed to find some clean clothing, only slightly rumpled from being stowed in his pack. She didn’t doubt that, in his uniform, he would have been a sight to tempt any woman to profligacy. As it was, even with him in his travel-creased jacket, vest, and shirt, Thalia was willing to give him whatever he wanted. He looked around, as if trying to find someone. She almost waved to him, but then held back. She wanted to see him on his own in the realm of the herdsmen.

As soon as Gabriel came into the tent, he was greeted boisterously by several men. Some of them, already deep into their third or fourth bowl of arkhí and in good spirits with the universe, threw their arms around Gabriel in a hearty, manly embrace. Gabriel didn’t stiffen or pull away. He seemed startled at first, but then returned the gesture at once, smiling and laughing. Thalia let go the breath she hadn’t known she held.

Gabriel was quickly commandeered by some of the tribe’s younger men, and escorted through the tent. The men with him beamed with borrowed glory. Whatever trepidation both Englishman and Mongols had toward one another was long gone, lost beneath the joined experience of setting up a ger. A liberal quantity of arkhí didn’t hurt the cause of fellowship, nor the fact that, on the morrow, Gabriel would be competing in the nadaam not only as a foreigner, but as the partner of a woman. Thalia saw that, with great good humor, the tribe had decided to informally adopt him. A bowl of arkhí was put into his hand. Someone put a velvet-trimmed, pointed Mongol hat on him, and he didn’t take it off.

But he continued to look around. For her. Had any woman wanted to be found more than Thalia did at that moment? Yet she wanted to prolong the game a little longer, and ducked behind some women when his gaze moved in her direction. When she felt that he’d moved on, she peered around the women to watch him some more.

Gabriel was talking animatedly to some herdsmen, and they laughed rowdily together, the kind of uninhibited laughter men reserved for each other. Batu stood next to Gabriel, translating, though by the looks of things—everyone’s arms slung around each other’s shoulders—a translator wasn’t really necessary.

She felt the strange twin sensations of joy and jealousy. Joy to see Gabriel so light of heart, after days of focus and skirting danger. Jealousy to share him even with these good people, after all this time when he had been hers alone. Seeing him across the smoky interior of the ger, his tall, lean body loose with relaxation, his face truly glorious as he smiled and laughed, she was dizzy with longing. There wasn’t a man she wanted more. Not even what she had felt for Sergei could match this hard hunger, this need. She barely recognized herself beneath its bright radiance. Always before her mind had held dominance, but now her body and heart had taken control.

As if sensing the hot pulse of her desire, Gabriel suddenly looked right at her. Sharp, golden, unavoidable. His smile faded and was replaced by something much more intent. A soldier again. No, not a soldier—a man. He murmured something to Batu without breaking eye contact with Thalia, then moved swift and straight toward her on the other side of the tent. He was an amber arrow headed for her, and she the target that could not, did not want to, move. The crowds swirled in a tide around him. She waited.

He stopped a foot away from Thalia, then raked her up and down with his gaze, saying nothing. It became difficult to catch her breath as she stared back.

“You’ve changed,” he finally rumbled.

“Not particularly,” she answered, “I’m the same Thalia you’ve always known.”

A small smile appeared in the corner of his mouth. “Same biting tongue. But the feathers are different.” He gently touched the strands of pearls and coral that draped from her silver headdress and curved in a low, graceful swath from temple to temple. The headdress itself was a band that encircled her head like a diadem, studded with more pearls and coral. She had taken the unruly mass of her dark hair and braided it into a single, heavy plait that reached the middle of her back, bound at the end with a silver clasp. Gabriel’s eyes moved lower, taking in the fine
emerald silk del she now wore, covered with intricate embroidery, and the golden sash around her waist. Unlike the del she wore every day, this one was longer, lightweight, cut to show a woman’s figure. The flare in Gabriel’s eyes showed her that he liked what he saw of hers.

“Oyuun,” Thalia explained. Realizing that something had changed between them, she suddenly felt awkward and shy, a young girl only recently admitted to the company of men. “Actually, her sister-in-law, who’s closer to my size.”

“I’ll have to thank them both later.” He lightly traced the embroidery running along her collar, his fingers brushing against her neck. Liquid heat gathered between Thalia’s legs.

To keep herself from dragging him against her and demanding his kisses right in the middle of the crowded feast, she tried some distracting pleasantries. She looked up at the Mongol hat he wore. “Seems the tribe has taken you as one of their own.”

He pulled his hand away to touch the hat, as if he’d forgotten it was there. “More like a mascot,” he said wryly. “No, it’s respect. It’s a rare foreigner who falls in so easily. You work hard. And tomorrow, you compete in the nadaam.”

“With a woman as my partner.”
She grew tense, guarded. “We agreed—”

“If there was another way, I’d do it,” he said at once and without apology. “But there isn’t, and if anybody can trounce these blokes, it’s me. And you. Besides,” he added with a disarming grin, “I’d wager they’d all want to be on a team, if their partners could be as pretty as you.”

His compliment turned her cheeks crimson. “Flatterer,” she chided playfully.
Gabriel scowled. “I don’t know flattery from a tiger’s arse.”

“Waltz.”

“Faint praise.” But at least it wasn’t outright condemnation.

After two brothers finished singing about the heavenly blessing of horses, Oyuun, who had been standing close to the musicians, called out to Thalia. “Sister, please honor us with a song,” she cried, a mischievous glimmer in her eyes. Everyone in the tent turned to look at Thalia, who felt fairly certain she would immolate herself from embarrassment.

Thalia felt Gabriel tense, and he moved quickly to stand in front of her, shielding her. “It’s fine,” she said, placing a hand on his arm. “She just wants me to sing.”

“Do you want to?” He seemed ready to defend her against anyone and anything, which broke her heart just a little.

“I’d rather listen to bagpipes. But it would be unspeakably rude if I said no.” She stepped around him, but not...
gone off to take care of his bodily functions. Even now, a few men ambled past her and into the tent. Had something happened to him? The Heirs? Or maybe she was just being unreasonably afraid. He could have adjusted his eyes to adjust to the black night.

searching for him in the tent and finding no sign of Gabriel, Thalia quietly slipped outside. The crisp, cool air balancing full bowls of Arkhi on their hands, heads, and feet, while the other guests rowdily urged them on. After searching for him in the tent and finding no sign of Gabriel, Thalia quietly slipped outside. The crisp, cool air pleasantly stung after the oppressive heat inside. Because of the brightness of the ger, it took some moments for her eyes to adjust to the black night.

Peering into the darkness, she searched for Gabriel nearby. No sign of him. A thread of panic unwound inside her. Had something happened to him? The Heirs? Or maybe she was just being unreasonably afraid. He could have gone off to take care of his bodily functions. Even now, a few men ambled past her and into the ger, adjusting their hands, heads, and feet, while the other guests rowdily urged them on.
trousers, ready to launch into another round of drinking.

Yet after she waited a few minutes, allowing plenty of time for tending to any and all bodily needs, there was still no Gabriel. Her internal debate lasted only a moment before she went to find him. She quickly checked to make sure her hunting knife was still tucked inside her sash.

At the chieftain’s ger, Thalia found only Bold’s elderly grandmother watching the small children as they played. The woman hadn’t seen Gabriel but urged Thalia to rejoin the feast.

“You won’t find a husband out here with the old people and babies,” she chuckled.

Thalia thanked her for the advice and left. Instead of heeding the grandmother’s recommendation, Thalia ducked her head into other gers, but they were either empty or contained only the elderly or very young. No one had seen Gabriel. From one of the gers, she borrowed an oil lantern.

She walked through the ail, searching, the lantern held aloft. She told herself not to be alarmed—he was a soldier and more than capable of taking care of himself—but a man didn’t simply vanish from a crowded tent without explanation. The Heirs could have used any number of Sources or spells to spirit him away. For the first time, Thalia wished that the Blades had more flexibility in their moral code. She would like nothing better than to summon some vicious demon to track the Heirs down and rip their miserable carcasses apart. On second thought, if anything were to happen to Gabriel, Thalia would greedily break the Heirs’ bones with her own hands.

Her breath came in frantic puffs that misted the cold air as she started to sprint. The pearls and coral beads hanging from her headdress swayed and clicked with a frenzied rhythm that matched her heartbeat. Yellow light swung back and forth as the lantern danced in her hand, turning the still night into a dreamlike tableau. She didn’t know where she was running, only that she had to find Gabriel.

In the corner of her eye, she caught the faint gleam of blond hair. Thalia skidded to a halt as she saw Gabriel sitting on a large rock, watching a herd of horses nosing at the ground and huddling together in the evening chill. Relief hit her so hard she nearly cast up the roast mutton eaten earlier. She waited for her breathing to calm, feeling the sweat cold upon her back, even though she wanted to run to Gabriel and throw her arms around him, confirming that he was real and safe.

The light from the lantern suddenly felt too bright, too intrusive, so she adjusted the wick to dim it to a faint glow before walking toward him. She knew he heard her coming by the slight stiffening of his shoulders as she approached. Perhaps he’d come out to find some solitude. She didn’t want to disturb him, but, after the absolute terror she’d felt just moments earlier, it would be impossible for her simply to turn around and leave him alone. Not without saying something, or at least being near him. Selfish of her, maybe, but she needed reassurance just then, even if it cost Gabriel a few seconds of privacy.

Coming to stand next to him, Thalia glanced over at Gabriel. A trace of panic unwound inside her. Had she gone too far with her song? Was it possible she had misconstrued his feelings for her, and he’d needed to put welcome distance between them? He did not look at her, but continued to watch the horses leading their peaceful lives under the starry blanket of night. Something, some wave of energy, barely contained, radiated out from him. The dim illumination from the lantern turned him into a creature of dusky gold and shadow, slightly menacing. Now her heart beat strongly again, but not quite from fear. She set the lantern on the ground.

"Is my singing so dreadful?" she asked with a lightness she didn’t feel.

She didn’t even see him move. One moment, he was sitting silently, and the next, he stood before her and—oh, God.

He was kissing her. But not so much a gentle caress of mouth to mouth as it was a devouring. He pulled her tightly against him, his hands large and firm, one on the back of her neck, the other on her hip as she was pinned against the taut span of his body. There would be no retreat for her. She felt captured, pinned, but in the most exquisite way. The intensity of his kiss would have frightened her, if she had not matched it with her own unfettered desire. She needed him with a desperation that could destroy fields, level cities.

He tasted warm, wonderful, his mouth both velvety and relentless. She wanted to crawl inside him. Against the curve of her belly she could feel the hard length of him pressing into her. Instinct had her rocking her hips against his, and their combined groans were swallowed each by the other. The sensation seemed to shred whatever scrap of restraint he’d held. His hands were now everywhere: palming the swell of her behind, stroking the sides of her ribs, cupping her breasts through the silk of her del. His fingers played across her already tight and sensitive nipples. She leaned into the lightning-hot pleasure, lost to everything but him. Before tonight, before the stolen time in the shelter of the cave, it had been so long. So long since any man had touched her like this. But not like this. Something that approximated it, but all other touch was a candle and this was the sun. She would burn to oblivion.

Touching him was as necessary as life. Thalia quickly re-learned, as her hands roamed over his body, that there wasn’t a part of Gabriel that was not solid with muscle. His shoulders, back, thighs, buttocks. Stomach. Ridge, sculpted, but sensitive to her fingers as they splayed across his abdomen. He twitched beneath her hand. And when
her hand moved lower, caressing his rigid thickness through the fabric of his trousers, the breath was drawn from her mouth as he sucked his own breath in. Thalia reveled in this evidence of his desire, growing powerful, more feminine than she had ever felt before.

They were on the ground before she was aware of moving. He pulled her on top of him as he stretched out in the dust. She pulled off the headdress in one impatient move, heedless of pins ripping from her hair, and let the ornament fall to the ground. Thalia’s legs opened. She straddled him. Moved against him, their hips meeting and pulling back, and, even with fabric separating them, he fit perfectly, rubbed her exactly as she craved. Something bright and strong began to build inside her. She reached toward it the only way she knew how. He growled as she pressed even closer. At her waist, his fingers shook as they tried to untie the fastening of her trousers.

Then his hand stopped. He panted with the effort.

“Why…?” she murmured, deeply swathed in the spell of desire.

“Not in the dust,” he growled. “Not you.”

She would have been touched by his concern if she hadn’t been so damned close to tearing his clothes off.

“Maybe we could find an empty ger.”

“And have someone come in to get an eyeful.” He shook his head.

He was still hard and alive beneath her. She blazed with desire, needing him with a desperation that was painful. Words of love formed on her lips, but she couldn’t let herself speak them. Not yet. For now, there were needs that had to be satisfied. “Gabriel, please. I don’t want to wait for you anymore.”

With sinuous speed, he rolled to his feet, pulling her up with him. He reached down and turned the lantern off completely, and for a moment, Thalia was in utter darkness. But her eyes adjusted quickly, enough to see him backing toward the large rock on which he’d been sitting earlier. It was tall enough so that he could sit with his legs comfortably stretched out in front of him, and he sat down now. He tugged on her hands, drawing her forward, so that her legs straddled his as she stood in front of him. She understood.

Thalia wrapped her arms around his shoulders, bringing her and Gabriel together for another deep, greedy kiss. Her hips cradled his so that when the length of his erection slid up and down, he pressed perfectly against her sex. His fingers resumed untying the drawstring of her trousers. Thalia managed to collect herself enough to move away. Frantically, she pulled off her boots, then her trousers, and in seconds, she was naked beneath her del. Cool night air was a sweet sting as it touched her most hidden places; the earth was rough under her bare feet.

She stepped close again, and both she and Gabriel fumbled to unbutton his pants. A hiss escaped his lips as he sprang free from his constricting clothing, and then he groaned as she took him, bare, in her hand. He was thick and large. Could she take him? She had to.

“I wish,” she whispered as her hand glided up and down his shaft, “that it wasn’t so dark. I want to see you.” A tiny bead of moisture escaped from the very tip of his penis, and she used it to ease her progress.

“Sweetheart,” he gritted, “I wouldn’t last…ah, that’s it…two seconds if I could see your pretty hand on my cock.”

“No more waiting,” she gasped. “I want you inside me.”

Smiling against her mouth, he said, “Thank God I know when to obey orders.” He placed his broad hands on her hips. Then, with a strength that left her breathless, he lifted her up easily and held her above him. She braced her feet on the cool surface of the rock, one on each side of his hips, as she held tight to his shoulders.

“Tell me your full name,” he rumbled.

“What?”

“Do it.”

“Fine. Thalia Katherine—ah!”

He brought her down so that he plunged up into her with one deep thrust. After almost a lifetime spent on horseback, there was no tearing, yet she felt an intense internal stretching that made her eyes sting. “You said to tell you my full name,” she gasped as she learned the new experience of having a man, Gabriel, deep within her. It hurt more than she expected.

“I’m…impatient,” he growled against her neck. Then he kissed her. “Sorry, sweetheart, but I had to distract you. Does it hurt too much?” He started to pull away, but she held him fast.

“Stay, stay inside me,” she said in labored puffs. For a few moments, neither of them moved, Gabriel gripping her securely as he kept his legs anchored to the ground. They were both breathing heavily, even though they remained still. She could feel him shaking with effort, holding himself back. Thalia experimented by moving her hips up and down. He slid almost completely out, then all the way back in again. Discomfort faded and pleasure began to take its place, faster than she would have anticipated. “Oh!”

Something like a laugh thundered deep in his chest. His hips rose up as he surged into her, and he guided her, with his hands, as she found a rhythm. “Better?”
“Yes…much…oh, God…” Thalia tried to keep her voice down, knowing that, even though the nadaam feast was a noisy affair, someone in a nearby ger might hear her moans and investigate the sound. But it was almost impossible to stay silent as she rode him. Again and again. She wrapped her legs around his waist, needing to be as close to him as possible. Clenching him, feeling his girth, an extraordinary, blinding pleasure began to build.

“That’s it, Thalia,” he gritted, bucking. “Come for me.”

He thrust again, and it began to roll over her, starting deep inside her and spreading out in growing surges, bigger and bigger, until it hit her fully, a crashing torrent of rapture that she threw herself into with a recklessness she never knew she possessed. Her jaw ached from holding in her scream. Just moments after she was lost to the flood, he stiffened beneath her with an agony of bliss.

He held her close as she collapsed against him. And though a heavy quilt of drowsiness threatened to drag her into sleep, Thalia kept her eyes open. She wanted to see the stars.
Chapter 11
Nadaam

Nearly four dozen men on horseback were lined up at the edge of the encampment. A large crowd stood close by, already cheering. The horses sensed the excitement, and were eager to run, Gabriel’s mount included. His stallion tugged at the reins, wanting to let loose the power of his legs. Familiar faces from the night before greeted Gabriel as he took his place between some riders. He called out his own greetings in painfully awkward Mongolian, but no one seemed to mind his butchering of the language. Everyone was too caught up in the thrill of the moment. Gabriel even felt himself smile. He loved action, loved doing, and after waiting and agonizing over the Heirs’ next move, finally taking charge of the situation was bloody marvelous.

Bloody marvelous didn’t come close to describing the night before. Thalia. Finally. After an eternity of days, a misery of wanting but not having. Good Christ, even waiting for the race to begin, when he should be thinking about how best to take the course, his body demanded more, his pulse sped with desire. He wanted nothing more than to gallop up to Thalia, throw her over the saddle, and ride away with her to some secluded spot where he could take her sweet body again and again, making her come relentlessly, until she was hoarse from screaming, until they were both tapped dry. Last night hadn’t even approached dulling his hunger for her.

When he’d cleaned himself later, he’d been surprised not to find any blood. But there had been no tearing, either. She had been a virgin. He knew that completely. But she was also a horsewoman and no English sidesaddle for Thalia, and he was grateful that had tempered her pain. He couldn’t stand causing her any pain.

Gabriel’s attention snapped back to the moment when Bold came forward. He addressed the riders, saying something in Mongolian that Gabriel could only assume meant, “Ride well, and watch your arse.”

He saw Thalia and Batu join the crowd, and his heart knocked into his ribs to see her and the encouraging smile she gave him, but he made himself focus on scanning the territory ahead, learning the landscape so he could be prepared. But nothing prepared him for what he saw next.

Muscling between two riders, mounted on his own wild-spirited horse, was Tsend, the Heirs’ henchman. Jesus, how close were the Heirs, to send their thug? They’d kept themselves hidden, somehow, and belated recognition of danger turned to fire up Gabriel’s back. So near. The Heirs had been so near, and Gabriel unknowing the whole time. Christ and devils.

The large Mongol mockingly saluted Gabriel with his riding crop, then flicked his greedy eyes to where Thalia stood. Gabriel followed his gaze, and saw that a surprised and angry Thalia recognized him, too. She took a step toward them, as if she could somehow fight the vicious Mongol herself. But Tsend just smiled coldly. Black rage poured through Gabriel. Not only was Tsend leering at Thalia, but the bastard was going to vie for the ruby. Probably easier than trying to steal it outright from several hundred tribesmen. He’d win the Source and give it to the Heirs.

“Like hell,” Gabriel muttered. He started to wheel his horse toward Tsend, maybe try to knock him down, but there was a shout from Bold, and suddenly the race had begun.

Every day in the army hadn’t been a battle. In fact, there could be months on end when almost nothing happened, and the soldiers had had to find a way to amuse themselves or else go barmy from boredom. Horse races had been just one of the entertainments they’d devised. Gabriel had competed in, and won, his fair share.

But none of those races had the urgency, the necessity, of this one. Only the first eight men to finish this race would advance to the next stage in the tournament, and Gabriel had to be one of them.

Sounds of hooves beating hard into the earth rumbled on every side as riders galloped hard across the fields. Gabriel bent low over his horse’s neck, while dust rose up in huge, choking clouds. The first part of the course was nearly flat, half a mile of steppe without interruption. Gabriel pressed his heels into the stallion’s sides, kept the quirt resting lightly on its flank as a reminder for speed. He didn’t want to tire his horse too soon, but had to establish an early enough lead to separate out from the throng of riders.

He chanced a quick glance around and saw that already half of the competitors had fallen behind. That still left nearly two dozen men, all of them whipping hard at their horses. Tsend was among them.

They forded a stream. For half a moment, Gabriel wondered if the Heirs might summon more water demons to sweep the riders from their saddles, but, in an instant, everyone had crossed the stream. Flat steppe swelled up to
rolling hills dotted with birch trees. Gabriel wove his horse through the trees, nimbly dodging them. By the sounds of horses neighing and men shouting, followed by a few crashes, other riders hadn’t been so careful.

He ducked under a low-lying branch and felt a few twigs brush his hat, which almost came loose. From the corner of his eye, he saw a few other riders keeping pace deftly, including Tsend. Somehow, the Heirs’ Mongol had found a horse large enough to support his bulk. Folded awkwardly over his own knees, Gabriel wished he’d been able to do the same.

Abruptly, the hills and trees gave way to a steep and rocky slope. Some of the horses were unprepared, and they and their riders stumbled as rocks blocked their descent. One pair even toppled over completely, rider and horse somersaulting together. Gabriel almost swung his own mount around to help, but saw the fallen horse immediately get up and trot away while the dazed rider tottered to his feet.

Gabriel leaned back in the saddle as his horse careened down the hill. Without a firm hand on the reins, the horse would have galloped madly, directionless, heedless, but Gabriel held tight, guiding the beast around rocky outcroppings when possible, or urging it to leap over smaller obstacles in his path. The bright blue sky seemed to reach down to meet him as wind pushed against his body. A strange, wild joy thundered in his chest in those brief, airborne moments. His mind and body both pulsed with life. He laughed aloud.

He took that thrill and directed it toward staying on his horse and toward the head of the pack of riders. The stone-covered slope ended, stretching back into grassy steppe, which meant it was time to bring the horse about and complete the course. Quickly, Gabriel counted eleven other riders, with Tsend part of that number. At least three riders couldn’t cross the finish line ahead of Gabriel, or the battle would be lost. This wasn’t just for the ruby, not merely for the Blades of the Rose, but for Thalia. The thought spurred him on.

Like a booming flock of birds, the competitors wheeled around en masse. The rest of the course was flat steppe, so it was an all-out sprint to the clusters of gers off in the distance. Gabriel lifted up, crouching in the stirrups, and his horse caught his urgency. The sight of the other horses around it spurred it onward, ears folded back, neck stretched out, sandy hide flecked with foam. Tsend managed to pull up alongside Gabriel. The Mongol’s horse’s flanks were striped with red welts from his indiscriminate use of the whip.

Then Tsend moved closer, snarling. Gabriel anticipated the blow, and caught the strike of the whip on his forearm as he shielded his face. Tsend struck again and again, the force of the blows almost knocking Gabriel from the saddle. He grimaced in pain as the leather bit through the fabric of his jacket, catching flesh. He cursed, as the attacks were causing his horse to fall back, losing ground. More riders passed, either unable or unwilling to help, and Gabriel had to act.

The next time Tsend slashed with the whip, Gabriel managed to wrap his hand around it. A struggle ensued as the Mongol mercenary and British soldier fought for dominance, their bodies suspended over the racing grasses beneath them, each tugging furiously on the whip. Gabriel felt as though his arm, burning with exertion, was about to be torn off. With a growl, he pulled hard. Tsend shouted. The whip went flying, cutting the air, and was lost somewhere on the steppe behind them.

Gabriel spared neither the lost whip nor the swearing Mongol any further thought. He was a few hundred yards from the finish line, could already hear the crowds shouting encouragement, but there were ten riders ahead of him. The race could be lost or won in the next moments. He nudged his heels into his horse, and the animal, wanting to taste victory, hurtled forward.

Shapes of the other riders slid past Gabriel as he bridged the gap between himself and his competition. He didn’t look to his left or right, didn’t look behind. His sole focus was the blue silk banner that marked the finish. As he pushed onward, sweat formed and cooled on his back. Closer. Closer. He felt himself, his horse, begin to flag. Now he could give the horse’s flank a swat with the quirt, and did so. The animal broke out of its complacency, drawing upon reserves of energy Gabriel had carefully tended throughout the race. The crowd’s indistinct roaring became individual voices as he neared. And in the midst of that sound was Thalia, yelling in English, “That’s it, Gabriel!”

Her voice was all he needed. With a final push, he dug in. A flash of blue silk moved and was behind him. The crowd shouted. It was over. He’d crossed the finish line, but not knowing in what position he’d placed. Had other riders passed him at the last minute, edging him out?

Pulling up on the reins, Gabriel eased his horse into a canter, then a trot, and finally a walk. He brought the horse around, and in the haze of dust kicked up from so many other riders, it was impossible to know. He squinted through the swirling yellow dust.

Then, appearing like a summoned spirit, Thalia ran toward him. She dodged the horses milling in excited confusion, never breaking stride, until she was beside him, beaming up at him with a beauty and radiance that stung his eyes. He’d made her happy.

He bent down, wrapped an arm around her waist, and hauled her up so that her hip touched his. And then he kissed her. Hard.

She seemed startled at first, hands suspended in the air like birds, but then she gripped him, kissing him back with the same ferocity. The race had his heart already thundering in his chest like heavy artillery. And now, he was sure every cannon in the British army fired simultaneously underneath his ribs. The excitement of the race was nothing to holding Thalia, kissing her.

When her hands gripped his upper arms, pressing into the fresh cuts from Tsend’s riding crop, he couldn’t help the hiss of pain that escaped between his teeth. Hearing this sound, Thalia broke the kiss and leaned back. When she saw the injuries he’d sustained, she scowled and wriggled free until her feet touched the ground. He hated letting go of her, but she was determined, and he was more than a little sapped from the race and from defending himself against the Heirs’ Mongol. He swung his leg over the saddle and dismounted.

“I’ll rip his guts out, starting at his toes,” she growled, gently examining Gabriel’s wounds. 

He couldn’t help but smile at the fierce panther that was Thalia. “Against the Blades’ rules, isn’t it?”

“Not if it’s justified.” She shook her head at his bleeding skin. “I can bind these, put some herbs on them to help the healing. Do you think you’ll be up for wrestling later?”

Gabriel decided he wouldn’t tell her about the time he’d almost had his arm shot off, though he had the scars on his shoulder to prove it. Bragging never did anybody any good, except make him or her look like a bleating fool.

“That shouldn’t be a problem.”

Just then, Tsend rode slowly past them, chuckling. Gabriel started after the Mongol, but a restraining hand from Thalia stopped him. “He finished just after you. So save that fight for later. If he places in the top four of the archery competition, you’ll get your chance. Besides,” she added when Gabriel let out a stream of rather unpleasant oaths, “we don’t know what the Heirs are planning. If we simply take out their heavy muscle, they’ll surely have someone or something else ready. At least Tsend is a known commodity, and one that can be bested.”

It wasn’t as satisfying as beating the Mongol’s skeleton into a paste, but it would have to do for now. Other things also left Gabriel unsatisfied, such as the kiss he and Thalia had just shared, the kiss that flooded him with thick heat.

She seemed to recall it at the same moment he did, because her already pink cheeks turned nearly ruddy as she blushed. Kissing in public wasn’t something she was familiar with. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s get you bandaged. The archery is about to start, and I don’t want to be distracted by thinking about you.” Thalia turned and began to walk toward the chieftain’s ger.

After handing the reins of his horse to a waiting boy, Gabriel followed, watching the sway of Thalia’s hips. He knew it would take more than a few bandages to keep him from thinking about her.

Thalia rubbed her palms against her thighs, trying to dry them. She’d shot a bow many times in her life—it had been one of the first things Batu had taught her, soon after she’d arrived in Mongolia, and not long after that, she’d surpassed him in ability—so she didn’t doubt that she could shoot well. But Thalia had only hunted, as well as shot at targets for amusement. Now, if she failed in this task, she and Gabriel would have to be out on the exposed steppes against the relentless Heirs; the mission might be a failure with all its attendant disaster, and her first opportunity to join the Blades would be her last.

To keep her mind from dragging her under, Thalia checked and rechecked her bow. It wasn’t the one she usually shot with, but it would suffice. She’d borrowed it from Bold’s youngest brother, who smiled at the thought of a woman competing against the area’s most skilled men. Thalia shook her head to clear more doubts. It was a typical Mongolian recurve bow, once the weapon of the unstoppable Mongol horde. She, like those warriors and any self-respecting herdsman, could shoot both on the ground and from horseback. But all she needed today was distance and accuracy on her own two feet.

After checking the fit of the leather bracer she wore on her right forearm and the ring of horn protecting her thumb, she glanced around the ger that had been set aside for the archers to prepare themselves. Every now and then, one of the competitors would look over at her and shake his head, yet, so far, no one had outright complained about or disparaged her presence in the tournament.

No, she’d been premature in that assessment. Tsend stalked into the ger, carrying a bow, and glared around the tent. Thalia wanted to run up and shove her elbow into his throat. The wounds that Gabriel had suffered at his hands hadn’t been severe, but any injury that Gabriel sustained was one too many, and to have the Heirs’ bully be the cause of those injuries was beyond endurable. She managed to restrain herself, though. Brawling wasn’t allowed in the nadaam. All her hate would have to be channeled into winning the archery competition.

When Tsend’s eyes fell on Thalia, he burst out into harsh laughter and pointed derisively. Most of the other
competitors looked away in embarrassment.

“You?” he snorted. “Are Englishmen so feeble that they must have their women fight for them?”

“And you must doubt your own skill,” Thalia countered coolly, “to belittle someone so clearly beneath your attention.”

“I doubt nothing,” he snarled back. Clearly, he was a man unused to being called out.

“Today is a good day to start.”

The giant Mongol took a threatening step toward Thalia. He was easily a foot taller than she, with a sizable weight difference. She did not back away, but stared straight at him, looking just a little bored. When he saw that she wouldn’t be easily cowed, he turned away and muttered something under his breath, and made a big show of adjusting his bow.

Thalia slowly let her breath out and forcibly kept her hands from shaking. She would not let him rattle her.

A tribesman poked his head into the ger. “The competition begins now. Please come out to the field.”

She and the seven other archers filed out of the tent, each carrying his or her bow and a quiver of marked arrows. Thalia made sure to put several men between her and Tsend. She refused to let him bully her, but she also wasn’t stupid. The crowd erupted into cheers at the emergence of the archers. Immediately, Thalia sought out Gabriel in the multitude. He was difficult to miss. Tall, broad-shouldered, radiating a soldier’s focused energy, and looking directly at her with crystalline, alert eyes. An immediate hunger curled through her like incense, and her trepidation about the archery contest disappeared under the thick blanket of desire. Just after the horse race, that kiss…and the night before, the things they’d done…how he’d made her feel…

That way led to madness. If she misplaced her concentration before this, possibly the most important moment of her life, everything would be lost, including her own self. And then it wouldn’t matter if she could have Gabriel touch or kiss her like that again. Nothing would matter.

She spared him a slight nod, which he returned, but his was just as terse. Even from a distance, it was impossible to miss how tightly he held his jaw, the fists he clenched at his sides. Did he doubt her?

Thalia turned her gaze upward, and she watched the clouds as they slipped across the sky. To make sure she had the wind’s direction exactly right, she scooped up some dust and let it scatter in the breeze. Her mind went through its quick series of calculations. The wind wasn’t strong, but it was enough to make a difference, and she would need to make adjustments with her arrow.

Steeling her shoulders, she turned her attention to Bold, who addressed the competitors.

“Your targets are there,” he said, gesturing almost a hundred yards away. Thalia noted the small leather targets, placed at a greater distance than at most nadaam festivals. She’d never shot a target at that distance. “You may shoot three times. Only four of you will move on to the next stage of the tournament. Fire only on my signal, and may the gods guide your arrows.”

Thalia swallowed hard as she and the other archers took their positions. The sun was hot on her shoulders and back. She positioned her arrow, lifted her bow, and drew back the string with her thumb, but it was more difficult than usual. Her arm shook a little. It felt as though every member of the Blades of the Rose, plus the Heirs of Albion, as well as Gabriel and her mother were all holding tight to the string, weighting it with their own expectations and agendas. Worse still were her own hopes, now building to a pressure that was almost insupportable.

Two hundred people watched her. So did Gabriel. And, from hundreds of miles away, so did her father. Her breathing grew shallow. The point of the arrow dipped and danced as her grip faltered. Could she do this?

Thalia lowered her bow and again rubbed her hands on her del. She refused to look at Gabriel, but felt his eyes on her all the same.

“What’s the matter, girl?” sneered Tsend from the end of the line. “Something wrong with your equipment?” He grabbed his crotch and laughed. Thalia remembered his bearing down on her beside the river outside Urga, the menace in his eyes, his very real threat. She felt cold.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Batu restrain Gabriel. She struggled with the impulse to run to him, hide behind him. No. Thalia would do her own fighting. She closed her eyes, focusing on the sounds of the wind ruffling the grass. She imagined herself an eagle, wings open, riding the currents of heat and air, lifting up and high over the plains.

*I am a Blade of the Rose,* she thought. *I help protect the world’s magic.*

Opening her eyes, Thalia raised her bow high. She drew back the string as she aimed. It pulled easier now. The world was quiet, her mind was quiet. The target waited, silently calling to her.

“Now!” Bold shouted, and at almost the same time, the crowd yelled, “Hit the target!”

Thalia fired, as did the men standing on either side of her. Arrows whistled as they split the air, hurtling up in an arc before sweeping back down to earth. Then came the distant, meaty sound of the arrows hitting the targets.
The crowd cheered. She wanted to look at Gabriel, but knew that the sight of his face would only distract her.

There was no time to know how she’d done. Bold signaled for the archers to raise their bows and aim. Thalia let herself think only of the target and her arrow, the movement of the wind, the feel of the bow in her hands, the strength of her arms as she drew back the string. And then Bold cried out to fire, the crowd yelled, and her arrow sang in its voyage across the field.

Two of the archers groaned as their arrows fell short. Unfortunately, Tsend was not one of them. Thalia could tell that she, Tsend, and the other four competitors had struck the targets, but only the judges would be able to tell who was the closest to the center. At this distance, she could not see. She’d hit the target, yes, but she could still be edged out. She grappled with an uprising of fear and doubt. What if she failed the Blades? Failed Gabriel? What if she failed herself?

She heard Gabriel shouting his support from behind her, yet, while his words warmed her, she didn’t take her encouragement from him. It had to come from within. If she relied on something, someone, outside of herself, then she would be no good to the Blades. She must be strong on her own.

The signal came to raise bows. Thalia did so, keeping her eyes trained solely on the target. She would be her arrow, and when she released the string, she would fly strong and true. The archers were commanded to shoot. The string leapt forward, propelling her arrow. How beautiful it sounded, whistling like a child.

Every arrow struck home, and the judges came hurrying out to examine the results. The judges consisted of Bold and several tribal elders. Four of the judges carried blue silk banners, which they would wave next to the winners’ targets. She and the other archers, with the exception of Tsend, exchanged concerned looks as the judges gestured and shook their heads. That could mean anything. Thalia risked a glance back at Gabriel, and the smile he offered her, small but proud, broke her heart a bit. No matter the result of the competition, he knew she’d done her best, and that was enough to satisfy him.

But she would not be satisfied if she cost them the ruby.

Thalia clutched at her bow as the first blue banner unfurled next to one archer’s target, a small sapphire flag waving across the grasses. The man grinned triumphantly as his family applauded. Then the next banner was waved beside another target, and the winner couldn’t stop himself from dancing in place with glee. As this was happening, Tsend muttered and swore under his breath. Only two more competitors could progress to the next round of the tournament. But when a judge ran next to Tsend’s target and waved the blue silk, he stopped muttering and laughed at Thalia with a vicious spite.

“Looks like your English fool should have left the shooting to the real Mongols,” he jeered.

A hard knot lodged in Thalia’s throat. She and four other archers remained, vying for a single slot. She wanted to close her eyes and pray to whatever deities listened, but she dared not look away from the judges. Bold, carrying a banner, walked slowly past her target, and she felt her eyes burn. She had failed.

Then Bold stopped, and turned back. As her breath abandoned her, Thalia watched as Bold ceremoniously unfurled his silk banner next to her target. He grinned, enjoying his theatrics.

The cheer that rose from the crowd was louder than any that had come before. Turning, Thalia saw that all the women watching the nadaam were yelling with an almost manic delight, while the men appeared more than a little puzzled. All except Gabriel, who was making so much euphoric noise—clapping, whistling, and even, good Lord, cussing—that she felt her face heat with happy embarrassment. Joy careened inside of her. She’d done it. Really done it. They were another step closer to the ruby.

Thalia turned to Tsend, who looked ready to commit murder then and there, if not for the presence of the tribesmen. She gestured to her del. “This is not a costume,” she said to him. “I am a real Mongol. More than you, traitor.”

With a foul oath, Tsend stormed off, shoving people out of his way.

Thalia barely noticed, because Gabriel was suddenly beside her, wrapping her in an embrace so tight, she saw stars. She tried to think of a time when she’d been happier, but couldn’t.

Thalia was already exhausted, wrung dry from the horse race and archery, but there was still one more competition to go before the ruby’s guardian could be determined. Even the short pause while everyone had some food and drink wasn’t enough to revive her. But her hardest work was over. The final challenge belonged to Gabriel alone.

“Does your Englishman know how to wrestle the Mongol way?” Oyuun asked Thalia. The chieftain’s wife and she waited with the rest of the crowd for the competitors to change their clothing and emerge once more.

“Batu and I explained the rules to him,” she answered.

“Explaining and doing are quite different things,” Oyuun pointed out. Thalia shot her a warning look, already close to her breaking point. She didn’t need anyone adding to her anxiety.
“He was a soldier for most of his life.” It still felt odd to speak of Gabriel’s military service in the past tense. In her mind, in her heart, he was a warrior, and always would be. “He knows how to fight.” She hoped his skills, and determination, would be enough.

The spectators cheered as the wrestlers began to come out of their private ger. When Tsend emerged, as massive and terrifying as fear itself, Thalia gulped. In the skimpy traditional wrestling costume, he appeared a barely civilized brute who used higher reasoning only when all other options had failed, and even then with resentment.

“I do not know who this Mongol is,” Oyuun whispered, “but his eyes are terrible and dead.”

For a moment, Thalia almost confessed that she, Gabriel, and Batu knew Tsend all too well, but then Gabriel came out from the ger, also wearing the prescribed wrestling costume. Her own ability to use higher reasoning disappeared instantly.

“Ah,” Oyuun said on a breath, “that man is not dead. And neither am I.”

Having been to numerous náadam festivals, Thalia was well-used to the clothing that the wrestlers wore, even if other Europeans found the outfit somewhat shocking. Classical Greek and Roman statues were only slightly more bare. Mongol wrestlers were shirtless, except for a very short jacket that was completely open in the front, and instead of trousers or even breeches, the wrestlers wore trunks much smaller than even the scantiest pair of men’s underdrawers. Typical boots and the pointed hat completed the rest of the costume, such as it was.

When she’d started to come of age, Thalia had been intrigued by male bodies, so unlike her own. There was a degree of openness and frankness with the Mongol people that allowed Thalia to see and learn as much as she wanted—within reason. She did have a father, after all. Then she and her father had traveled to Britain. What English girls knew, or rather, how much they didn’t know, about men and sex had shocked her, and she had happily returned to Mongolia. Certain gaps in her education had been mostly filled in, not literally, of course, by Sergei. They had never seen each other naked, but through their heated pettings and pawings, Thalia came to know the feel, shape, and size of a man. All of him.

And then there was Gabriel. She’d seen him partly covered the night they had taken shelter in the cave. The night before, he’d been almost completely clothed, but she’d felt him, their bodies pressed as close as possible, and him, inside of her. Thalia had a fairly good idea what he looked like undressed. It was a very pleasant idea, and one she couldn’t stop herself from returning to again and again in quieter moments.

Sometimes imagination did not do justice to reality. Gabriel in the extremely revealing wrestling costume was one of those times.

He was the mythic Warrior, the protector of magic, defender of causes, even those not his own. His body was a weapon, and a beautiful one.

Every year he had spent as a soldier showed. Each of his muscles were developed to their apotheosis, the ideal of form and use—the defined shape of his chest, made even more seductive by the light dusting of golden hair, the ridges of his stomach, undimmed by extraneous fat or flesh, some delicious muscles that curved from his hips under the waist of the trunks. Thalia had touched them through fabric, and they had felt marvelous, but she hadn’t known that they could rob her of the ability to remember her own name.

And what the wrestling trunks covered…Heaven and Earth…the man wasn’t even aroused, and Thalia couldn’t keep herself from staring. She’d touched him, he’d filled her, but she hadn’t seen, and was almost glad she hadn’t. She would have been terrified. At least she had the comfort of knowing she could accommodate him. Dimly acknowledging that she shouldn’t leer at Gabriel’s crotch, she forced her eyes lower, taking in his legs, tight and powerful. No wonder he rode horses so well, with thighs like those. They had been beneath her, between her legs. She had been the one riding him last night. A hot shudder of blazing desire coursed through her.

“You say he was a soldier?” Oyuun asked beside her. Thalia managed to pry her gaze away to look at the chieftain’s wife and nod. “I can see that now. He carries stories on his body.”

Thalia turned her attention back to Gabriel and saw, in the golden light of afternoon, that scars marred the perfection of his form. There, on his left shoulder, a round, puckered mark showed he’d been shot. And stretching from just under his ribs, on the right, a long, raised ridge made by—a jagged knife? The flesh there had closed without finesse, and Thalia winced to consider the length of death, unpleasant recovery from such a wound. But these were only the two most obvious. There were more scars, more tales of battles and meetings with death, on his legs, his back. Horrible. Her fingernails bit into her palms as she realized, at last, what Gabriel had been doing every day for the past fifteen years. It was miraculous that he was alive.

Not miraculous, but a testament to his capability, his will to survive.

Gabriel caught Thalia staring at him. Her face turned completely and obviously red, but she did not look away. For the barest moment, he seemed a little discomfited, despite their intimacy of last night. He would probably never consider wearing such an outfit in front of a European woman. But that awkwardness lasted less than a blink, and he slowly smiled at her. A carnal, deliberate smile. He knew she liked what she saw, and seemed more than ready to let
her look her fill. And later, more than look.

He started walking toward her. In motion, barely clad, he would make any woman renounce all vows. Thalia couldn’t suppress a measure of pride as women, from the blushing maiden to the wizened grandmother, watched him pass, but he saw no one but her.

“Perhaps there is a camel that needs milking.” Oyuun laughed, and mercifully slipped away.

“You think the British army might take this up as their new uniform?” Gabriel asked, coming to stand in front of her.

“Only if they want to inspire lust in their enemies,” she answered.

He grinned. “Is that what I do?”

“I won’t answer that. I don’t want you to get a swollen head.”

“Keep looking at me that way, and my head won’t be the only thing swollen.”

Thalia laughed, and said, lowly, “Hang on to that costume. It might be useful later.” Her smile, she knew, was pure feminine provocation.

Something like a growl rolled from the back of his throat as he stepped nearer.

“Huntley guai,” Batu said, jogging up. “I am to serve as your zasuul, your second. You will face that man”—he gestured toward a competitor—“and if you win, you will wrestle whomever wins that match.” He pointed toward where Tsend glowered at a rather intimidated-looking wrestler. “Let us hope that the Mongol defeats the Heirs’ ruffian.”

Gabriel looked toward Tsend. “I’ve got something that he doesn’t.” He turned back to Thalia, his eyes golden vows. “Someone to fight for.”
Chapter 12
Surprising Outcomes

It was, Gabriel thought as he flapped like a bird around the field, the stupidest he’d ever acted without the influence of alcohol. He was painfully sober. Gabriel didn’t really consider himself a drinking man, and hated the times in his life he’d been truly fuddled. Still, a measure of good whiskey right then would have done him a world of help. Here he was, definitely not drunk, in clothing even smaller than what he’d worn as a snotty child, prancing before a crowd of two hundred Mongols. For the love of hell, if anyone wanted to know if he was cold, they didn’t have far to look. The humiliation didn’t end there, however. Thalia had explained that all wrestling matches started with the competitors performing a dance that imitated the glorious phoenix. He performed the dance, but Gabriel felt that he didn’t resemble a phoenix so much as an ass.

Focus on the prize, Huntley, he told himself, as he waved his arms and circled like a wheeling bird. His bloody pride could take more than a few kicks to the stones. His stones might even be kicked, given how unprotected his goods were.

Finally, Bold came forward and announced that the contest would begin. The wrestlers stopped their dance and offered gestures of respect to Bold, who would serve as judge, the other competitors, and the crowd. Gabriel already knew that, of the four men entering the wrestling competition, only one would emerge victorious. That man had to be him. He couldn’t fail, not the Blades, and not Thalia.

She watched from the sidelines, Batu at her side. She didn’t seem to find his bleeding costume ridiculous. In fact, she’d liked it. Quite a bit. It took every drop of self-control he had to keep from showing her just how much he enjoyed seeing that naked lust in her face. If he wasn’t careful, he’d pop right out of the damned trunks and give every one of the tribesmen an eyeful of genuine English sausage.

Thoughts of lust scattered quickly when it was time to face off against his opponent. Gabriel had watched the man throughout the nadaam festival and knew that, even though he was shorter than himself, he contained a lot of power in a small package. The Mongol also had the advantage of a lifetime spent wrestling, whereas Gabriel had spent his years shooting rifles. Gabriel had done his share of hand-to-hand combat, though, including the time he’d had to defeat a giant of a mercenary near Kanpur with nothing but a broken bayonet. Almost lost his damn hand to that bastard.

Gabriel and his opponent faced each other and placed their hands on each other’s shoulders. At Bold’s command, the competition began. They strained against each other, testing resistance, learning each other’s strength. Gabriel gritted his teeth. The chap was a sturdy one, all right. He tried to grab the back of Gabriel’s jacket, twisting so he could flip him, but Gabriel muscled himself free and narrowly avoided touching the ground with his knee as he regained his balance. If any part of his body except the soles of his feet contacted the ground, he would lose.

For a few minutes, they shoved and danced back and forth. Their movements might have been small, but they cost quite a lot. Sweat stung Gabriel’s eyes as he repelled another attack. He and his opponent locked in another hold, pushing against each other. The crowd, clearly expecting the foreigner to lose immediately, roared its approval. Thalia shouted something, but seemed to recall in her excitement that Gabriel spoke no Mongol, and switched to English.

“Thrash him, Gabriel! Send him crying to mama!”

His arms were already tired from the horse race, but, hearing Thalia cheer for him, they came back to life as his mind planned his strategy. He lessened his hold just enough so that his opponent’s center of gravity shifted. Gabriel could see it in his legs. In that tiny moment of instability, Gabriel quickly moved his arms, grabbed the man by the waist, and tossed him over his shoulder. The man went down on his back with a grunt.

This time, when Gabriel performed the phoenix dance, he didn’t mind so much. Victory was victory, even if he did have to flap around like an ailing chicken. As the onlookers cheered, Thalia and Batu jogged up. She handed him a bowl of tea to refresh himself. It wasn’t whiskey, but he’d take what he was given, especially from a beaming and proud Thalia.

“Youre challenger was his tribe’s best wrestler,” Thalia grinned.

“He was a tough little bugger,” Gabriel answered. When the man himself walked by, Gabriel grabbed hold of his hand and shook it respectfully. “Nice job, gov’nor,” Gabriel said. “Maybe next year.”
The Mongol looked a bit confused, not used to shaking hands, but he took it in stride, smiling and bowing. He said a few things to Gabriel, which Thalia translated. “Those muscles of yours aren’t for show,” he said. “And you use your brain, too. You would make an excellent Mongol.”

“Much thanks,” Gabriel answered, oddly touched by his opponent’s praise. Thalia, too, seemed affected, her own smile getting a bit wobbly around the edges.

They all moved aside as Tsend and his opponent took the field. No doubt about it, the Heirs had done well finding themselves a bruiser. Even the good-sized man who was wrestling Tsend found the double-crossing bloke intimidating. The crowd itself sensed something sinister about Tsend, quieting a little and shuffling back just a bit as if trying to gain distance.

“Look,” Thalia whispered, nudging Gabriel. She frowned, and pointed out a host of birds taking flight from their perches in the grass and crimson flowers. They dotted the sky with their dark retreating forms. A strange and ominous shiver ran down his neck as he watched them disappear.

“What does that mean?” Gabriel asked.

“Birds are sensitive to magic,” she explained quietly, though almost no one nearby spoke English. “They must sense the Heirs’ presence around Tsend.”

Gabriel almost dismissed this idea as daft, but remembered that the world he once knew, the world without magic, was gone. He understood differently now. It was magic he was fighting for.

Taking the field again, Bold eyed Tsend with barely concealed mistrust. But a legitimate place had been won in the tournament, so the wrestling competition had to proceed. The two wrestlers placed their hands on each other’s shoulders and waited. Then Bold called out for the contest to begin.

Gabriel settled back to watch a wrestling match as involved and lengthy as the one he had just fought. Yet in less time than it would take to sneeze, the match was over. Gabriel barely saw it happen. Tsend sneered as his opponent was suddenly sprawled on the ground, wide-eyed with shock. Even the crowd and Bold were stunned into silence. Thalia went white.

“Good Christ,” Gabriel muttered in the quiet. “That was faster than a private with his first whore.”

At his words, Tsend turned to Gabriel and bawled out a laugh. “You are next, English fool.”

Gabriel nearly snarled back his own retort, but figured that only cowards and bullies felt the need to belittle their opponents. The more a man bragged and taunted, the more afraid he must be. So, without saying anything, he started toward the field.

“Gabriel, wait,” Thalia cried behind him. She grabbed at his arm.

He tried to quell a flare of temper as he turned back. “You’ve got to believe I can win,” he said lowly. “I need you to have faith in me.”

“I do have faith in you,” she answered readily, which gave him sizable comfort. “But I don’t know if you can win against someone who’s cheating.” She looked meaningfully at Tsend, who was making a big show of being bored, staring at the distant mountains.

“Cheating?” Gabriel repeated. “I don’t see how. We all watched him throw the other wrestler. He didn’t cast any spells. He’s not wearing an amulet or some such object.”

“You don’t have to cast a spell or have an object to use magic. Look.” She gestured slightly and Gabriel followed her direction. “He isn’t wearing any boots.”

“That gives him a disadvantage. Less traction.”

“Except the magic he’s using requires him to have bare feet. I just saw it, painted on his soles. The Mark of Antaeus.”

That didn’t sound promising.

“Is your woman too frightened for you to wrestle?” Tsend shouted.

Gabriel scowled at the Mongol, but ignored him. The crowd, however, started to get a bit fidgety. “Tell me what it is and how to defeat it,” he said to Thalia.

“Antaeus was the giant in Greek mythology who derived his strength from touching the earth,” she explained quickly. “He was impossible to defeat, because every time he was thrown down, he rose up even stronger than before. Only Heracles was able to vanquish him by holding him aloft until his strength drained away. If the Mark of Antaeus is painted upon flesh which contacts the ground, the wearer gains the giant’s strength. That’s how Tsend defeated the other wrestler.”

“You must take your positions now,” Bold announced.

Gabriel moved away from Thalia, and he heard the panic in her voice as she called after him, “It’s impossible to beat him.”

“I’ve learned that nothing is impossible,” Gabriel said over his shoulder, “since I met you.”
Late afternoon sun blazed low in the sky. No wind stirred the grasses and flowers at the edge of the field. Even the sounds of the animals, the soft chuffing and bleats of horses and sheep, faded away as Captain Huntley and Tsend faced each other. The world seemed to be holding its breath, knowing what was at stake as operatives from the Blades of the Rose and the Heirs of Albion prepared to fight for magic on the open steppes of Mongolia.

The Heir Lamb had commanded a hawk to serve as spy in the ail of red flowers. The bird, following Lamb’s orders, discovered this tribe’s prize—a massive ruby. Surely the gem was what the Heirs sought, so Tsend was dispatched to win it.

After Huntley and Tsend briefly performed the phoenix dance, they crouched opposite each other. Tsend smirked, confident in his superiority. Even if the Englishman had known about the Mark of Antaeus on the soles of his feet, it wouldn’t have mattered. The mark gave him power. Undefeatable power. Unless the Englishman used some magic of his own, there would be no way to conquer Tsend. But the blond man simply stared back, showing no fear. That made him a fool. There was always something to fear.

He and the Englishman placed their hands on each other’s shoulders, and Tsend was unpleasantly surprised by the strength he felt in the other man. It didn’t matter, he told himself. Even if his foe was the strongest man in all of Mongolia, he would be unable to best Tsend. He happily anticipated thrashing the man in front of the dark-haired Englishwoman, who watched with anxious eyes from nearby. Unfortunately, she was promised to Henry Lamb, so Tsend could only enjoy watching defeat in her face. Later, perhaps, when Lamb was tired of her, Tsend would have his chance to take his pleasure. Then, a new fear and horror would fill her face, making Tsend’s pleasure all the sweeter.

“Begin!”

Enjoying his advantage, Tsend let the Englishman push hard against him. He could still feel his opponent’s strength, but it was as if Tsend was at the bottom of a well, and the other man simply dropping pebbles rather than boulders. Huntley gritted his teeth and strained, shoving against him with enough force to knock any number of large men over. Any man except Tsend. He didn’t bother hiding his laughter. So pitiful, the futile efforts of the Englishman. But the experience quickly grew boring for Tsend. The sooner this wrestling foolishness was over, the sooner Tsend could claim the ruby, give it to Lamb, and receive his rewards. Although, with the strength of the Mark on his feet, there was no need to surrender the ruby to Lamb or his snarling friend. Why not keep it for himself? Then the power of Genghis Khan would belong to Tsend alone. Tsend had always felt, ever since he was a child without parents in the muddy lanes of Urga, that he was owed something, that the world conspired against him, cheating him. The ruby would change everything, finally give him what he deserved. Yes, that was an even better plan. Tsend smiled.

The Englishman must have sensed Tsend’s decision to end the match. Huntley let go of Tsend’s shoulders. With a quick shuffle, the Englishman moved back, out of reach. Tsend chuckled. So, Huntley had finally learned fear. It didn’t make any difference, not now.

Tsend took a step toward the Englishman, but as he did so, Huntley moved with a hidden speed, so quickly Tsend barely saw him move. Lumbering closer, Tsend took a swipe at Huntley, but the blond man ducked. Then the Englishman was right in front of him, wedging his boot underneath Tsend’s lifted foot. Huntley grunted under the weight, but he didn’t move away. Idiot. Tsend picked up his other foot, determined to put his full weight onto the Englishman’s boot and hopefully break some bones.

Just as he did so, Huntley shoved his other boot underneath Tsend’s foot. With a start, Tsend realized what the Englishman was doing. He knew about the Mark on Tsend’s feet, and was trying to separate him from the power of the earth. Already, with the contact broken, the magical strength started to ebb. Tsend tried to move back. He couldn’t. Huntley had grabbed him around the waist and, with an almighty groan, picked Tsend up and held him suspended a few inches above the ground.

Tsend struggled and thrashed. He easily outweighed the Englishman by at least fifty pounds, but Huntley would not let him go. It felt as if thick ropes were tight around Tsend’s middle, crushing the breath from him. Not only stealing his breath, but his strength, too. Tsend felt it draining from his body as if he was slowly freezing. He bucked and twisted, trying to break free. Somehow, with his own natural strength, Huntley continued to grip him tightly and hold him away from the earth.

Panic flared. Huntley’s fingers were laced together, so Tsend awkwardly reached back and clawed at them. Nothing. Even as the Englishman sweated and grunted with the effort of holding Tsend aloft, he wouldn’t let go.

From somewhere, the Englishwoman shouted encouragements, and that only fueled Huntley further. No matter how hard Tsend fought to free himself, swinging his fists and kicking, Huntley held fast. Tsend even bloodied the Englishman’s face with a strike from his elbow. It made no difference. The blond man continued to hold him, dangling Tsend above the one thing that would replenish his power. Nearly gone. Tsend writhed. He was so close to the ground. All it would take was one touch. But, no. The magical strength from the Mark shivered once, then...
disappeared completely.

Sensing this, Huntley hefted Tsend up, then tossed him onto his back on the ground. The crowd screamed its approval. Tsend blinked, stunned.

He’d lost.

A surge of strength from the earth filled him, but before Tsend could jump back up to his feet, Thalia Burgess rushed forward with a large bowl and splashed its contents onto the soles of his feet, destroying the Mark. As quickly as it had come, the power of the earth was gone.

Struggling to sit up, Tsend choked as Huntley’s arm wrapped around his neck. Tsend flopped around, his vision dimming, while his lungs screamed for air.

Dimly, he heard the Englishwoman cry out, “Gabriel! No! Not here, not now!”

“When, then?” Huntley growled.

Tsend did not hear her answer, but whatever she said made the Englishman release him with a shove. Tsend sprawled face first into the dirt, coughing and gagging.

“Go back to your masters, dog,” Huntley snarled. “And I promise you, the next time we meet, I’ll kill you.”

As Tsend crawled away, filled with rage and shame, he heard the chieftain proclaim the English man and woman as the winners of the tournament, and the new guardians of the ruby. Tsend wanted to rush back, steal the ruby for himself, beat Huntley lifeless and take the girl. But he barely had enough strength to slither on the ground, let alone rip the Englishman apart. He hated feeling weak. He destroyed weakness.

Yet, as he concentrated on placing one trembling hand in front of the other, Tsend couldn’t help the cold smile that tugged on his mouth. He would meet Huntley again. And when that happened, nothing anyone said or did would be able to stop Tsend from gleefully, slowly killing the Englishman. While his woman could only watch, and suffer.

Some things, a man got used to. Like, say, being awakened by rifles firing at close range. Or learning to go without food for days at a time. Or, worst of all, sharing a tent with Lieutenant Thatcher, who snored like a steam engine. Gabriel became inured to all of that, even the snoring. But he didn’t think he would ever get used to seeing Thalia laugh and smile. She turned from merely beautiful into something celestial, goddess-like. No, that wasn’t right. She was too tied to the earth, too full of real life and body and self to be heavenly.

As Thalia finished tending to Gabriel’s latest wounds—this set a few nasty cuts and bruises on his face courtesy of that cheating bastard, Tsend—she tried but could not contain her delirious joy, her exhilaration that she and Gabriel had won the tribe’s ruby. And he couldn’t stop his own pleasure at seeing her so happy.

“We should take it straight away to my father,” she beamed as she dabbed some healing salve on his cheek. “He’ll know the best thing to do with it, how to protect it from the Heirs. And, at last, I’ll be a Blade.” This last fact made her glow with euphoria.

“Haven’t been given the ruby, yet,” Gabriel pointed out. At least Gabriel had changed back into his normal clothing from the skimpy wrestling costume. Despite the fact that Thalia enjoyed it, the tiny scraps of silk offered less protection from the elements than a handkerchief.

“But we will have it in a few minutes,” she countered with a smile.

“The ruby belongs to Bold’s tribe.” He didn’t want to be contrary, but it was an important fact. “They’re not going to let us waltz off with their prized possession without having something to say about it.”

A small frown furrowed her brow. “Maybe if we explain…”

She didn’t get to finish this idea before Oyuun, Bold, and the ruby’s current, but soon to be replaced, guardian came into the ger.

“It is now time for you to accept your honorable duty,” Bold said as Thalia translated. Both Gabriel and Thalia started to rise from sitting on the ground, but Bold waved them back. “You must kneel to show your respect.”

Both Gabriel and Thalia did so. “Aren’t we supposed to do this in front of the tribe?” Gabriel asked, and, when Thalia translated this question for Bold, the chieftain shook his head.

“The glory comes from winning the responsibility,” he answered gravely. “What happens here is a private matter between yourself and your own sense of honor. Once the ruby is under your protection, we must trust you in all of your decisions involving it.”

Gabriel made sure not to glance at Thalia, kneeling beside him. That would surely give away that they had something planned. Conscience stabbed at him. Could they take the tribe’s most sacred and valuable treasure? Even if it meant protecting the greater good?

The ruby’s guardian stepped forward, opening its case. Once again, Gabriel marveled at the size and lustrous deep red color of the uncut gem. Many men would cheerfully murder babies and nuns in order to possess such an incredible object, regardless of whether or not it held any magic.

“You are to repeat after me,” the protector commanded. “I swear beneath the eternal sky and upon my own
immortal soul that I shall not suffer to part from this, the pride of generations, for the next cycle of the sun. For a year and a day shall I do this. May I endure the torments of a thousand flaming arrows if my greed or foolishness causes the jewel any harm in the course of my guardianship."

After a pause, Thalia repeated the oath in Mongolian, while Gabriel answered in English. He tried to rationalize that, technically, he wasn’t going to let anything bad happen to the ruby, but it wasn’t much comfort at all. Maybe Thalia was right, and if they just told the tribesmen what kind of untapped power they held…but then there was the possibility that the Mongols would want to use that power for themselves, and not let the Blades safely house it. Yet, it rightfully belonged to this tribe, not to the Blades of the Rose.

Gabriel inwardly grimaced. Though there were always areas of gray when serving in the army, he wasn’t used to such complicated issues of right and wrong.

Then Bold said something, stepping forward, and Thalia held out her hand. The hiss of a knife leaving its sheath caused Gabriel to spring to his feet. He didn’t have a gun or a knife of his own just then, but fists worked, too.

Thalia’s hand on his leg stopped him before he knocked the blade from Bold’s hand. “It’s a blood oath,” she said quietly. The ruby’s guardian also held out his hand, and Gabriel saw the faint scar that traced across his palm.

“There’s no need to cut you too,” Gabriel growled.

“I will also guard the ruby,” she answered. “So I must. I’m not afraid.”

Gabriel muttered, but knelt back down again. He did not look forward to seeing Thalia cut. Bold took the knife and scored the flesh of his own hand so that a line of bright blood flashed there; he hissed slightly in pain. Without a flinch or tremor, Thalia presented the chieftain with her palm. Gabriel gritted his teeth as the blade cut her skin, but she made no noise. Only a slight tightening of her mouth betrayed that she felt any pain. She pressed her palm to Bold’s, saying a few words in Mongolian as she did so.

Then it was Gabriel’s turn, and he made sure to bear the incision stoically. He took Bold’s hand, commingling their blood. “I swear that I will protect this treasure and the woman who guards it with my life,” Gabriel vowed. Thalia, the only one who understood what his words meant, turned startled eyes to him. But the gravity with which he said the words seemed to satisfy Bold, Oyuun, and, most importantly, the ruby’s protector. With a bow, the box holding the ruby was presented to Thalia and Gabriel. As soon as it had been taken from the guardian’s hands, he visibly relaxed and smiled for the first time. He said something to Thalia and Gabriel, then spoke with Bold and Oyuun before quickly leaving the ger with a noticeable spring in his step. Gabriel couldn’t help but wonder what the hell he’d gotten himself into.

Oyuun came forward, beaming, and spoke with Thalia and Gabriel excitedly. “Now you receive another honor,” the chieftain’s wife said. She began to lead them outside. “All of the ruby’s guardians have their own ger for the duration of the year. Our children will move your belongings.”

“What about Batu?” Gabriel asked as they followed Oyuun.

Blushing, Thalia answered, “He continues to stay with his cousin. So you and I will be…alone.”

Alone, with Thalia. Sweet Christ in Heaven. He’d been given a gift.

Oyuun stopped outside a ger. The door was open, and it was, indeed, empty of people, though typical furnishings were inside including, Lord Almighty, beds. Two of them. Oyuun waved Thalia and Gabriel inside.

He swallowed hard as he followed Thalia into the tent. Blood oaths and moral ambiguities seeped out of his brain as other, more animal, needs prowled forward.

“Come to our ger for dinner tonight,” Oyuun chirped before disappearing, closing the door behind her. Gabriel could have sworn he saw a wicked twinkle in the woman’s eyes, but she was gone before he could prove it.

So, there they were. Thalia and Gabriel truly alone together for the first time. It was time that he didn’t want to waste. He closed the distance between himself and Thalia, already reaching for her.

The door banged open, and Oyuun and Bold’s two older children came in, staggering under the weight of their baggage. Gabriel and Thalia jumped apart, then quickly came forward, relieving the boy and girl of their burden. Shyly, the children left without speaking, casting curious glances over their shoulders.

Reminding himself that he had a duty, Gabriel made himself concentrate on the box in his hands. He sat upon the ground and opened the lid, revealing the dazzling splendor of the ruby. Noiselessly, Thalia sat opposite him and stared at the gem. He waited to feel a thrum of magical power coming from the ruby, but all he felt was a hot need for Thalia building inside of him.

“The tribesmen have had this thing for generations, but none of them seem to know it’s magic,” Gabriel said, his voice little more than a growl.

Thalia reached over and picked up the ruby, testing its weight. Dark red glimmers glided across her face as light penetrated the jewel’s surface. “Perhaps there is some chant, or a phrase, that must be used.” She turned the ruby over and over in her hand with long, tapered fingers. They weren’t the fingers of a woman whose sole labor
consisted of lifting teacups and writing up guest lists. He wanted them on him, wrapped around him.

He forced his concentration to the stone and not the woman holding it. “Could be anything.”

Thalia frowned as she thought. “To begin, we ought to test its strength.”

“Another device by the talented Mr. Graves?”

She shook her head as she rose to her feet. Carefully cradling the ruby, she waited by the door for Gabriel to join her, then slipped the gem back into its case. Gabriel opened the door first, then, after checking to make sure that no one lurked outside and no Heirs were approaching from the horizon, nodded for Thalia. She stepped outside and walked toward the perches of a few hunting eagles tethered nearby, Gabriel following. The noble creatures took little notice of them, beyond shaking out and settling into their feathers.

“You know now that birds are sensitive to magic,” she said, standing next to one of the eagles. “So we can use these eagles to test the ruby. The more strongly they react, the more powerful it is. That way, we can know if its magic is dangerous, and what it might be capable of.”

With a nod, Gabriel opened the case and held it near the bird. He and Thalia waited.

“Nothing’s happening,” he muttered.

“Give it a moment,” Thalia answered.

They waited more. The eagle turned one gleaming eye toward the gem, then began preening, deucedly uninterested in either the ruby, Thalia, or Gabriel.

“Maybe this buzzard can’t feel magic,” Gabriel suggested.

“But all birds respond to magic,” she said grimly. “That has been true ever since magic was discovered. However, just in case…” She held the ruby near another hunting eagle, and then another, then another, but the reaction was always the same. Nothing.

Thalia looked baffled. “I don’t understand.”

“The last bloke who guarded the ruby might’ve switched it out.”

“I don’t see a stockpile of giant rubies around here, do you?” Thalia snapped, then rubbed her face contritely. “Sorry. It’s just that…this, this…nothing…isn’t supposed to happen.”

“Might not be a Source.”

“It has to be,” Thalia almost cried. “We followed the directions given to us by the stone tortoise. We found the moving field of crimson. And then this tribe happens to have an enormous ruby, just like the one Genghis Khan may have held when he was born. If this isn’t the Source, I don’t know what is.” She turned bleak eyes to Gabriel. “I can’t have failed the Blades. I can’t have failed Mongolia. Not when I’m so close.”

He wanted to pull her into his arms and shield her from disappointment, but knew that she would not want, nor accept, being sheltered. Words of comfort would only ring hollow and false.

They needed time to think, and, just then, neither of them seemed capable of deep contemplation. “We’ll take our supper with Bold and his family,” he said. “Afterward, we can go back to our tent”—he relished those words, our tent—“and figure this out, you and me.” He tipped up her chin and was glad to see not tears shining in her eyes, but fierce determination. God, she was extraordinary.

“I’m famished,” she said.

If Bold and his family noticed something preoccupying their honored guests, they didn’t mention it. Thalia and Gabriel ate mutton and drank tea without speaking much. The ger was filled with the chatter of the family, especially the grandparents talking with the excited children about the unusually thrilling nadaam. No one could quite believe that both a white man and a woman had won, and as a team. Then, there had been that big man who had competed, the one who didn’t wear boots during the wrestling matches. Something hadn’t been right about him, and they all agreed that everyone breathed easier when he’d gone.

Several times throughout the meal, Gabriel saw Oyuun look between Thalia and himself, speculative. The chieftain’s wife kept her counsel, however. Gabriel wondered what kind of confidence she and Thalia had shared. More of the female mystery that was both terrifying and intriguing.

When the meal was finished, Bold said to Gabriel, “Join me for a pipe, and we shall have some singing and storytelling.”

Gabriel exchanged looks with Thalia, torn. They needed to get back to their ger and figure out what, if any, kind of power the ruby had. Then there was the pressing matter of the fact that they hadn’t touched in over an hour.

Oyuun seemed to sense their dilemma, though she didn’t quite guess all of the reasons for it. Gently, she said to her husband, “Perhaps our guests are tired after such a trying day.” When she looked back at Gabriel, she winked. Bless her.

“Of course!” Bold said, getting to his feet. “There will be chances enough for pipes and stories.”

He and Thalia wished their hosts a good night before leaving as quickly as possible. Hand in hand, they strode
through the encampment, but were delayed often by different people’s coming up and congratulating them on winning the nadaam. Gabriel was starting to get some basic words, and was able to clumsily thank everyone who was so damned gracious and admiring. If only the Mongol people were a little less sociable, Gabriel could be peeling Thalia’s del off by now and stroking her bare skin.

By the time he and Thalia were within twenty yards of their ger, and still another herdsman tried to stop them and wax rhapsodic about the wrestling tournament, Gabriel couldn’t make himself stop or even slow down. He grunted his thanks to the gawking man, tugging Thalia behind him.

“That was rather rude.” She laughed as they entered their tent. She went to light a lantern.

Gabriel slammed the door shut and dragged a chest in front of it. He set down the case with the ruby. “Don’t care.” Then he stalked over to Thalia—feeling clearly the blood pulsing through his body, aware of everything about hers—and pulled her to him, one hand on her waist, the other cupping the back of her neck. She breathed in once, deeply, green eyes wide and shining as she looked up at him, her hands on his forearms. And then he took her mouth with his.

Open, wet. Neither of them held back. Last night had done nothing to sate his hunger for her. If anything, last night had made it sharper; he was desperate for more. He tasted the tea they had drunk on her breath, and the milky sweetness of her. But he wasn’t satisfied just to kiss her mouth, delicious as it was. Trailing down, running his lips along her neck, until he met with the heavy fabric of her del. He made deft work of undoing the fastenings, then pushed the del open. Underneath, she wore a light cotton camisole. No corset.

His hands slid over her breasts, small but full. The nipples tightened and beaded under the nearly sheer fabric. When he bent down and flicked his tongue over them, one and then the other, she moaned and clasped his head to her.

“Not enough,” he muttered. He shoved the del off of her, onto the floor, and tugged at her camisole until, impatient, he tore it right down the middle. Her aroused gasp was alive on his skin. Soft scraps of fabric drifted down to the ground, but he didn’t notice, he was licking her, swirling his tongue over her breasts. Her hips surged against his. Gabriel swore. He didn’t want to swear, not at that moment, but he’d no other way of expressing this, this tidal wave of sensation and emotion that her unrestrained response awoke in him.

As he nipped gently at the tip of her breast, Thalia moaned again and began to pull at his clothes.

He broke away from her and was next to one of the mattresses in an instant. Another instant, and he’d tossed the mattress across the ger so that it lay beside the other sleeping mat, doubling the size.

“Now,” he said, turning back to her with a feral grin, “we’ve got a proper bed.”
She’d known that when Gabriel turned his mind to something, he gave himself up to it completely and with a thoroughness that would shame most men. When he was a soldier, he was the consummate soldier. When he took the field in battle—or horse racing, or wrestling—he was unstoppable, ferocious. And when he was preparing to make love to her…

Thalia was stunned, a little giddy, as Gabriel stood by the large bed he’d just made and systematically removed his clothing, all the while holding her gaze with his own. First his jacket. Then his waistcoat. Braces, next, pushed off his shoulders. And when he unbuttoned his shirt, he revealed that he wore no undershirt beneath it. His chest, an expanse of tight golden muscle, marked here and there with puckered scars like a treasure map. Earlier that day, she had marveled at his masculine beauty, not marred but made more perfect by the numerous scars that crossed his flesh. New marks had been added since then, put there because he helped fight for her cause. And as each bit of his skin was revealed to her, sharp, greedy desire flowed in her own body, until she felt gathered dampness soaking between her legs.

When he started to pull off his boots, Thalia realized she was wasting valuable time, and shucked the remainder of her clothes with no thought to where the garments would land once she’d taken them off. What did she care of tidiness when Gabriel was now standing completely naked but two yards away?

Fully nude, fully aroused, Gabriel could not have been more beautiful. Thalia did not stop herself from staring at his erect penis. The head gleamed as it reached toward his navel, and there, at the very tip, a slight glisten of fluid. He was thick, but not frighteningly so. It was a marvel of perfect shape, perfect for being inside of her, claiming her. Thalia tore her gaze from his erection and looked her fill, all over. He was the essence of Man, a warrior who would possess his woman. And his woman, at that moment, was Thalia.

She was naked now, too. His jaw tightened, while his eyes glittered like dangerous magic. She watched as those eyes moved up and down her body, and everywhere they looked, she blossomed and blazed.

“You’re too far away,” he rumbled. He pointed to the bed. “Lie down.”

That was an order she wouldn’t disobey. Thalia hurried to the bed and lay down upon it. He stretched out beside her. Their bodies touched.

Perhaps they might, at some future date, be tender with one another, slow and deliberate, taking their time to learn and explore with the patience of scholars. Not today. They wrapped arms around each other, tight enough to bruise, as their mouths, demanding and urgent, met. His fingers tangled in her hair. Their tongues touched, stroked, and Thalia opened for him, as much as she could, trying to take him in all at once and be drowned in him.

Leaving the chaotic mass of her hair, his hands skimmed down her neck, down her shoulders and arms, then returned to the delicate place beneath the hollow of her throat. This was so far beyond what normal touch ever felt like, to Thalia it seemed as if she’d been given a fresh, new body that just now learned the world. And when his large, rough hands curved over her breasts, possessing them, she could not stop the febrile moan that rose up in her throat. He knew precisely how to touch her.

Then one of his hands moved over her breast, down across her belly, and slid lower. Already damp and ready, when his calloused fingers brushed between her thighs, her lips, Thalia arched up from the ground with a choked scream. One fingertip rubbed against her opening whilst another stroked her most sensitive place. Thalia could not set two thoughts beside each other. All she knew was that Gabriel, this man who was an expert shot and had waged brutal war, touched her and gave her pleasure as though he was born to do only that.

“I have to—” she said on a moan, then reached out and took him in her hand. The words that poured from his mouth were a combination of the foulest curses and the highest of blessings. He filled her hand. Her thumb and forefinger could not meet as she circled him. He felt satiny and rigid and exactly right. As Gabriel touched her, his fingers delving just inside her opening, she slid her own hand up and down the length of his shaft, using the drop of moisture from the tip to glide her progress.


He took her mouth again. Just as he did so, one long, blunt finger entered her as the heel of his palm pressed against her pulsing nub. Thalia bucked and cried out, gripping him tighter. Before she could draw another breath,
one finger became two, widening her. She gasped and flung her legs apart.

Gabriel pumped his fingers into her, all the while rubbing against her clit. Thalia had heard that word before, knew there was something wicked and crude about it, but just then, in her mind, that’s what that sensitive bit of flesh had become, as base and sinful as anything in creation. Names for parts of her body fled as Gabriel continued to work her, and she couldn’t keep hold of him any longer. She threw herself into the blinding pleasure and it hit her, all at once, breaking over her like a tidal wave of fire. She bowed up from the mattress as she cried his name.

The world shimmered around them, growing vaporous and gleaming. She felt her skin tighten and become, if possible, even more receptive.

Panting, barely coherent, Thalia watched as Gabriel took the fingers that had been inside of her, and slid them into his own mouth. “I want to taste you, sweetheart,” he said, licking them clean, “but later. Now, now, I have to get my cock inside of you.”

“Yes, now,” she urged, opening her arms to him. A gilded haze enveloped them, sparkling like a shower of coins, but to Thalia, it seemed natural, right.

He was between her legs in an instant. His weight settled over her as the head nudged at her opening. Thalia looked up into his face, dark and tight with desire. Love saturated her. She wanted to brand him into her mind, into her body, for now and tomorrow and all the days that followed, whatever they might bring.

The thrust of him into her sent her up from the bed, bending into an arch. At the same moment, the world dissolved. The ger disappeared and became, instead, the canopy of the night sky. But the stars took on a shine beyond their normal glitter. Instead, they had the crystalline perfection and sharpness of diamonds.

He drew back, sliding, then drove into her again. A wordless syllable jumped out of her as he groaned. God, to be this full, to envelop him like this—almost too pleasurable. And with each stroke, with each fevered kiss they shared, more and more of the world shifted and changed. She didn’t know if the change happened in her mind only or if there was something more.

“Gabriel,” she moaned. “Gabriel…look…”

Lifting his head, his forehead slick and his hair damp, Gabriel took in the protean landscape, which had changed again. Night was gone, day was gone. Instead, it was as if the skin of the world had been peeled back to show the magic beneath. Everything pulsed with it, in different colors and tones. The earth itself hummed with rich green energy, and each tree, every drop of water that coursed across the surface of the land, gleamed and sang.

He didn’t stop thrusting, rubbing himself along her. “What…?” he panted.

“I don’t know.” Yet she wasn’t afraid.

The earth was covered in a webwork, a net of power, from each animal, each human and flora, pinpointed with bright, heated loci that revealed the hundreds of Sources scattered across the globe. Thalia could see them all, wanted to reach out to them and hold them in her hands. But she would not release Gabriel. She gripped his shoulders tightly.


She mewled a protest when he slid out of her. Rising up onto his knees, he rolled her over, onto her stomach, then gently pulled her up so that she was on her hands and knees. As he maneuvered her, the landscape dimmed, the Sources began to fade. But when he took hold of her hips and pumped into her, everything blazed brightly again. Thalia could watch the swirling, living planet while Gabriel claimed her, took her without restraint, embedding himself in her dark secret places. Mating, like animals. She began to expand with ecstasy.

He was a clever animal. One hand left its grasp on her hip to reach forward, finding the flushed, full nub that nestled in her sex. His fingers stroked, rubbed. All the while, he kept his strong, sure pace. Thalia was consumed with limitless pleasure. She heard the insistent sounds of their flesh meeting, his hips to her buttocks. And as she neared closer and closer to the pinnacle, the energy of the world and the Sources grew brighter and brighter.

It hit her, the culmination. Her scream couldn’t be stopped. She felt herself completely torn apart, but in the best possible way. The frame that contained Thalia Burgess disappeared and was replaced by pure sensation. Moments later, Gabriel followed, stiffening, groaning her name. And she came all over again, hearing her name on his lips, feeling him pulse within her.

And as they both careened into fulfillment, everything expanded to dazzling, blinding brightness, until they were swallowed by it. All Thalia could think was, Yes, this is right, and even more so because my love is inside me.

Then, in the darkness that followed, she and Gabriel slept, two slick bodies twined together as if nothing could ever separate them.

It was the best morning of her life, and also the strangest. Thalia awoke in the warm shelter of Gabriel’s arms, both of them quite naked under the covers. Feeling the firm heat of him, nestled close behind her, she recalled the
events of the night before. Every moment of their sex came back to her with such vibrant clarity, she shivered.

For a long time, Thalia had wondered what it would be like to go to bed with a man. She’d known since adolescence the mechanics involved, but even the frantic groping she’d had with Sergei hadn’t prepared her for what it would truly be like to have a man fill her with his body, and not any man, but Gabriel. Whatever old ideas Thalia had about sex were gone, destroyed in the wake of the pure wonder they had shared. Though she’d enjoyed their sex outside the nadaam feast, within the sanctuary of their own ger, they’d been able to let themselves fully go, and go they did. Into a place she could not describe.

Had she imagined it, the dissolving of the tent, the revelation of the Sources? Could it have been an enchantment?

His voice behind her came as a husky surprise. She’d thought him asleep. She should have known by now that his soldier’s senses were too sharp to let him sleep deeply.

“It wasn’t a dream,” he rumbled, and she felt the low vibrations of his voice everywhere. His hand pressed low and warm on the curve of her stomach. She responded immediately to his touch as heavy desire tumbled through her. Her words alone dampened her.

Thalia rolled to face him, and in the faint haze of dawn light that filtered in through the top of the ger, the planes of his face were slightly smoother, less hard. To lie with him like this, skin to skin, was an intoxication she had never imagined. And his smile, sweet Heaven, was an intimate promise.

“You felt it, too?” she asked.

She moved so that one of her legs draped across his, and she could feel the heat and soft skin of his genitals brushing against her thigh. He wasn’t fully erect, but she vividly recalled the feel of him in her hands, in her body.

His arms tightened around her. “I felt everything,” he said, gravelly with morning. Within moments, he was almost completely hard, pressing into her skin, hot and ready. “Your mouth,” he said, nipping at her lips, “your neck,” he continued, trailing his tongue down and then over her collarbone, “your delicious, delicious breasts”—large, warm palms covered them, her nipples stiffening into sensitive points, then his hand moved lower, between her legs, which she began to spread without thinking—“and your silky, tight—”

“No,” Thalia panted, trying to keep her mind clear, which was nigh impossible when he touched her. “The… other part…the stars and the…Sources.”

His hand stilled, and he rested his head in the curve of her neck. “That, too,” he said.

“What was it?”

“I can’t figure.”

“Maybe the ruby.”

He rubbed the slight bristle of his beard against her, and the abrasion was exquisite. “The birds didn’t react to it,” he murmured. His fingers caressed the back of her leg in slow, liquid strokes that gathered heat in her sex.

Thalia’s eyes began to drift shut, but she forced them open. “Gabriel, please, you have to stop. I can’t concentrate when you…oh, God…do that.”

Unfortunately, he listened to her, and rolled onto his back with his hands behind his head. “Can’t seem to help myself,” he admitted ruefully, “where you’re concerned. But you’re right,” he continued. “We need to figure out two things. If the ruby isn’t a Source, what is, and what happened to us last night.”

He sat up, a tight focused expression on his face. “I need to question Bold and his family. They must have fed us something. Maybe our food was drugged.”

“Drugged?” Thalia repeated. “They ate exactly the same food we did. Drank the same tea.”

Gabriel threw back the covers and rose to his feet before starting for his clothing, which, Thalia noted, was strewn around the ger as if wild animals had attacked their luggage. But no, they had been the animals. She recalled his taking her from behind, like a stallion. Ah, she’d have to keep her mind away from last night, or else she’d forget everything and demand he return to bed immediately. Gabriel seemed to transition well enough, she noted dryly. He’d returned to the role of soldier, and while Thalia again drank in the sight of his superb nude body, he paid no attention to his state of undress. Instead, he quickly gathered his garments and put them on, muttering just loud enough for her to hear. “They could have taken some kind of antidote beforehand,” he said, dragging on his trousers. “So they wouldn’t be affected.”

“Why would they do that?” Thalia asked, also rising up from the bed. The covers fell away, and the cool morning air inside the ger touched her nakedness. Her nipples tightened.

In the middle of buttoning his shirt, Gabriel glanced at her, and his fingers stilled while his eyes narrowed. He growled—there was no other word for it. A primitive thrill coursed through her.

Focus, Thalia, she commanded herself. She hunted down her clothes. Trousers, drawers, del, socks and…scraps of cotton? She held up the pieces and realized that the fabric was all that remained of her chemise, which Gabriel had torn off her body. He recognized the chemise, too, judging by the flush creeping up his neck.
Gabriel returned to the buttons of his shirt, which for some reason seemed a difficult task for his agile fingers. “Maybe,” he began, but his voice was too full of gravel, so he cleared his throat and tried again. He busied himself with the last of his shirt buttons, then pulled on his waistcoat. “They didn’t want foreigners guarding the ruby, getting close to its magic, using it.” Gabriel checked the ruby’s case and was satisfied when he found it safe.

“They could have just prohibited us from entering the nadaam,” Thalia pointed out.

“Probably, they didn’t think we could win,” he said, rumbling. He pulled on his boots, strapped on his revolver and knife, and donned his jacket. “The Heirs might have had a hand in it, too.”

Thalia plucked a fresh chemise from her pack and finished dressing, shaking her head. “We should talk to Bold and Oyuun,” she said. “Not question or interrogate them. They have been our generous hosts until now, and I cannot insult them.” Fully clothed, Thalia faced Gabriel, placing her hands on his chest as he started for the door. “I will do the talking.”

He grumbled at this, but saw that she would not be dissuaded. “If there’s anything suspect,” he vowed, “then I’ll be the one breaking bones. You stay out of danger.” Thalia started to protest, yet his will matched her own. “Is that clear?”

Seeing that there was no way around him, she answered dryly, “Yes, sir.”

He looked down at her hands on him. Gone immediately was the toughened soldier, and his expression turned to something much more warm, and so incredibly wonderful it felt like pain. He picked up her hands in his own and kissed the backs of each, but it wasn’t exactly gallant, not the way his golden eyes glinted with undisguised sexual hunger. For her.

“I like this very much,” he said, nibbling on the tips of her fingers. “An army of two.”

“Who’s in command?” she answered as she fought for breath.

What a wicked smile he had. “Let’s take turns.”

There was no way to make her questions sound anything but accusatory, so Thalia figured the best approach was to be as straightforward as possible. Naturally, Bold and Oyuun both denied having put anything into Thalia or Gabriel’s food or drink. Oyuun, particularly, looked hurt by the questions, and Thalia could not blame her. Mongols took their hospitality quite seriously, and their guests had cast doubts on one of the most important tenets of their culture. It wouldn’t take much for word to spread from herdsman to herdsman that the white Mongol woman was one of those strange and foul creatures known as an ungrateful guest. Thalia and her father would not be welcome anywhere.

“That big man from yesterday at the nadaam,” Thalia quickly explained, “whom Gabriel guai wrestled at the very end—he is part of a group of men who want to hurt us, who want to hurt the whole of Mongolia. We are trying to stop them.”

“What do they want?” Bold asked stiffly.

“I cannot tell you, for your safety.” She turned pleading eyes to Oyuun, who had treated Thalia as a younger sister rather than guest and now looked betrayed. “Please understand, these men are dangerous and ruthless. They might have persuaded or even forced you to drug Gabriel guai and me.”

Oyuun said nothing, her mouth taut.

“These men might have treated our food without you knowing it,” Gabriel added, which Thalia translated.

“I cooked it myself and never once left anything alone,” Oyuun said. “I even brewed the tea myself in this kettle.” She marched over to the hearth and snatched up the object in question, an old, battered piece of metal that looked as though it had been in use for literally generations. “I boiled the meat in this pot,” she continued, striding to her well-used cooking vessel, which, even then, boiled milk for cheese.

Thalia’s attention snagged on something. “Might I see the tea kettle?”

Without a word, Oyuun thrust the kettle into Thalia’s hands, then she crossed her arms over her chest. Gabriel was immediately at Thalia’s side, making her color. “Tell me what you see,” he murmured.

She made herself focus on the iron vessel in her hands, even though she couldn’t stop her reaction to Gabriel’s nearness. “This kettle,” she answered quietly as she turned it over in her hands. “It isn’t Mongolian. It’s Chinese. The shape is different, so is the metal. Strange.” It was also, she realized, incredibly old. Having studied many objects and artifacts from Mongolia and nearby regions with her father, Thalia knew how to date a piece based on clues from its appearance. The heft, the way it was made, even the small dents and rubbings on its surface all told her one thing: the kettle was hundreds of years old, maybe even more. And it felt…alive…in her hands.

“Maybe they got it from a Chinese trader,” he suggested.

“What can you tell me about this?” Thalia asked Oyuun. “When did you get it?”

The chieftain’s wife looked at her husband, who answered, “We’ve always had that kettle. I remember my grandmother brewing tea in it, and she said it belonged to her grandmother. But we have made tea for everyone in
our tribe using it, and no one has ever become ill afterward.”

“And any visitors?”

“None of them, either.”

“Do you know if any of them...” Thalia could not bring herself to look at Bold. Concentrating on a painted cabinet that stood behind him, she cleared her throat and felt her cheeks heat. “Did any visitors...sleep with anyone...after?”

“We all sleep in the ger together.”

Everyone stared at Thalia; she wondered if it was possible to will oneself out of existence by sheer embarrassment alone. Mongols were open about their sexual lives, but there was a part of Thalia, a very English part, that couldn’t quite be comfortable with such complete candor. Even Gabriel, who was as unpolished as a wolf, looked a trifle red.

“Not sleep,” she said through her teeth. “Share a bed. Two people. In a bed. Together.”

The smile the chieftain and his wife shared made Thalia long for a herd of stampeding horses to come through. “Ah,” said Oyuun, momentarily forgetting her tension. “If they did, no one said so, and we did not see it.” Her husband nodded to confirm this.

Despite her embarrassment, a strange current began to run up and down Thalia’s neck as she stared down at the humble object in her hands. “I would like to borrow this for a moment.”

Before Bold or Oyuun could reply, Thalia was already outside, with Gabriel easily matching her long strides with his own. “What are you thinking?” he asked.

“Not sure, yet,” she said. “It’s only a feeling. But I believe we triggered something last night.” When she turned and headed toward where the hunting eagles were perched, he nodded with comprehension. Thalia smiled to herself. She did not need further words with Gabriel. He understood her.

As she and Gabriel neared the eagles, the birds began shifting on their perches and ruffling their feathers. The closer they came to the birds, the more unsettled the animals became.

Standing in front of the birds, Thalia and Gabriel exchanged glances. He nodded at her, and she held up the kettle so it was no more than a few inches away from the eagles. Their screeches flared out over the steppes, causing horses, camels, and sheep to look up from their grazing. Even the men and women who were performing their daily chores paused to see what was causing such a commotion.

Thalia quickly took the kettle away, and the eagles quieted. As a test, Gabriel held up the ruby again. The birds remained silent. Once more, Thalia presented the eagles with the kettle, and people, including Batu, came out of their gers to investigate the birds’ renewed shrieks. Bold and Oyuun were also watching from the doorway of their tent, mystified.

“Oh, my God,” Thalia breathed. “The Source isn’t the ruby.”

Gabriel put the ruby into the inside pocket of his jacket. He held her eyes with his as the weight of their discovery settled over them. It was both ridiculous and also profound. “The bloody Source everyone’s chasing,” he said with a shake of his head and rueful smile. “It’s a damned shabby kettle.”


“It seems strange,” said Thalia, “but the test with the birds is always accurate. Your tea kettle holds a powerful magic.”

“We would have known,” Oyuun put in. She examined the kettle as if it were a familiar dog that had suddenly begun to speak. She turned questioning eyes to Thalia and Gabriel. “Wouldn’t we?”

Since Gabriel was almost entirely unfamiliar with the realms of magic, he stood with his arms crossed over his chest and let Thalia do the explaining to Bold, Oyuun, and almost the entire tribe, most of whom were now gathered inside the large ger that had been used for the feast before the nadaam. Instead of engaging in raucous merrymaking, however, the large assembly of people were almost completely silent, save for a few babies and children fussing. Everyone wore similar stunned expressions. Except Thalia, Gabriel, and Batu.

“Not necessarily,” Thalia explained. Batu provided Gabriel with a running translation. “Sometimes magic is contained in an object and it takes a special set of words or actions to release it. But we already know that this kettle contains some kind of power. Gabriel guai and I felt it last night”—though she did not explain under what circumstances—“but more than that, the crimson flowers that follow the tribe come from that power.”

A murmur of startled understanding rippled through the crowd.

“How can we release the magic?” a man asked.

Now it was Thalia’s turn to look mystified. She honestly had no idea. Whenever she had discussed the use of Sources with her father and other Blades, they had never mentioned exactly what one might need to do to access a Source’s power. There were many combinations of words and rituals, too many to know where to begin. Then a
horrible thought occurred to her. Would she and Gabriel have to make love in front of the entire tribe to bring forth the magic? That was a spectacle in which she had no desire to participate.

“Water,” Gabriel said behind her.

Surprised, Thalia turned to face him. “What’s that?”

He strode forward, taking the kettle from Oyuun. “It has to do with water, I’d reckon. Why else place magic inside something that heats water?”

“But they boil water inside the kettle every day,” Thalia pointed out. “And nothing has happened.”

Gabriel considered this for a moment while staring intently at the kettle. “Water’s scarce in Mongolia,” he finally said. “So they might not have used enough or,” he added, brows drawn down in concentration, “perhaps they used too much.” He turned to Oyuun. “We’ll need water and a fire.”

Oyuun nodded at the translated command and gestured for some women to assist her, which made Thalia smile a little to herself. Ever the soldier, Gabriel could order around even a chieftain’s wife with no resistance. His air of authority would not allow questioning or disobedience. Thalia recalled how he’d demanded that she repeat her full name to him a few nights before, and ordered her to the bed, how she’d been unable to deny him. In the middle of the large ger, with hundreds of eyes surrounding her and the mystery of the Source unfolding, she couldn’t stop the rush of pleasure, remembering him buried deep inside of her.

Pressing a hand to her fluttering stomach, Thalia watched as a fire was set up and the kettle filled. Gabriel placed the kettle onto the fire.

“And now?” Thalia asked him.

He did not take his eyes from the kettle. “Now, we wait.”

In the strained silence of the tent, the noise of water gradually coming to boil could be heard like a soft song. Steam rose up from the spout as the water heated. After several minutes, the water evaporated, and the steam disappeared. Still, Gabriel would not take the kettle from the fire. Thalia shifted her gaze back and forth from the tea kettle to Gabriel, wondering what each would do next. It seemed somewhat useless to continue to heat the kettle without more water.

“I should refill it,” Thalia said, stepping forward.

Gabriel held out his hand, a wordless imperative to stay where she was.

Both she and the assembled tribe grew restive as they continued to wait. Yet no one would disobey Gabriel or even dare to move more than necessary.

After what seemed like lifetimes, the kettle heating over the fire, Thalia gasped. She reached out and gripped Gabriel’s arm. “Do you—?”

“I see it,” he answered, clipped.

It started as a small puff, but within a moment, thick, sweet-smelling steam began to pour out of the kettle. Nothing could be left inside the kettle to create that steam, and certainly not so much of it. But it continued to flow from the kettle unchecked, warm and fragrant. It formed a heavy cloud just above their heads. Figures began to appear within the cloud, gathering shape and substance.

Thalia’s pulse raced, and she felt Gabriel’s steady fingers intertwine with hers as the Source finally revealed its secrets.
Gabriel hadn’t thought, but had instinctively taken Thalia’s hand in his own. When the world fell apart and reshaped into something new, the only thing that felt right and balanced was her. He needed the touch of her skin, having her close and under his protection, as a warm vapor shaped itself into a thick cloud within the tent. Gabriel didn’t know what the hell the cloud was, what it might be capable of doing—good or ill—and had to be sure he could safeguard Thalia.

He waited, tensed, as shapes congealed within the mist. Gabriel’s other hand hovered over his revolver, just in case. Maybe a bullet couldn’t stop a magical steam creature, but it might, and he’d be ready.

Instead of a beast or something sinister, the figures revealed themselves to be people. They sharpened into focus, as did the world around them, until it was like watching a stage play hovering over the ground. The crowd watching the display shouted out as one, and even Gabriel had to swallow an oath. The figures in the clouds were the tribe themselves. Gabriel recognized several of the faces, including those of the chieftain and his wife. And, Great Gideon, Gabriel himself and Thalia, as they had competed in the *nadaam* and taken a meal with Bold’s family. Bizarre, to see himself manifested within the steam.

Everyone in the tribe appeared to be going about his or her normal life, performing chores, tending to the animals. And cooking. Oyuun gasped nearby as she watched herself in the mists, filling the tea kettle. Yet, these ordinary tasks were odd because—

“Everything is going backward,” Thalia murmured beside him.

“Like a zoetrope spinning in reverse,” Gabriel answered.

And in that strange pattern, the ordinary life of the tribe played out topsy-turvy, the sun setting and rising, west to east, and odder still, foals disappearing back inside their dams, tall grasses retreating as seeds into the earth, thaws turning to snow. Yet, through it all, the shadow play kept returning to the kettle as Oyuun and then many other women, old dames growing young, boiled water inside it as their families moved across the steppes. Always, the bright carpet of red flowers surrounded them, wherever they camped.

“My grandmother,” Bold exclaimed as one of the cloud women brewed tea. Then she disappeared and more women took her place. Whole generations, hundreds of years, passed in a moment. Even the kettle itself grew slightly less battered. The unceasing rhythms of life, even in reverse, made Gabriel feel humbled and small, knowing how brief his own time on this earth was in comparison to the bigger world. He gripped Thalia’s hand more tightly.

Then there was a shift within the clouds. The kettle left the tribe and was now carried backward in a horseman’s pack. A soldier, judging by his armaments. But he carried no firearms, only a blade and bow. It seemed to be far back in the past, possibly more than five hundred years. He sped through the steppes, through territory which seemed recognizable to Gabriel, and quickly he realized why. A thriving city appeared in a familiar valley.

“It’s Karakorum,” Thalia breathed.

“Except alive.”

The ruin was now the center of a flourishing Mongol Empire, and the whole stone tortoises supported pillars to mark the limits of the city. Carts, merchants, scholars, ambassadors, traders, and holy people from all over the known world streamed into Karakorum, and the riches on display made Gabriel’s eyes sting. Even the wealth of the gilded palaces in India could not compare to the piles of gold, jewels, and silks that flowed like a swollen river. And included in that opulence was the humble kettle, carried in by the soldier, where it found its home within one of the vast storehouses of treasure and plunder.

But it didn’t stay within the warehouse for long. Along with tapestries, polished blocks of jade, and scroll paintings, the kettle was placed into a cart and taken backward with a great army heading southeast. Even an old soldier like Gabriel could not stop the whistle of appreciation to see the size of this army, a huge column of riders and horses, stretching to the horizon and beyond. The ease and comfort of the men in their saddles marked them as the finest horsemen Gabriel had ever seen—and he’d been witness to incredible feats of horsemanship over the years. The vision within the mist moved along the enormous army, until it reached a single armored man, trailed by generals and guards, at the head of the troops. A man with ruthless intelligence glinting in his dark eyes as he surveyed the lands around him, missing nothing, assessing everything for his empire. Gabriel’s heart seized. The
man’s power was a palpable thing, certain.

A name rose up from within the tent, passing like a torch amidst the tribe watching the steam clouds. “Khan,”
the herdsmen murmured. “Genghis Khan.”

“Oh, my God,” Thalia gulped. “It really is him.”

Gabriel said nothing, stunned. He, Thalia, Batu, and the tribe were the first people to see the conqueror’s face in over six hundred years or more. There was no denying the man had the air of command about him, worn with complete assurance. And yet, the Khan was a man only. Not a myth, or a creature of magic, but flesh, as faulty and fragile as any other living thing.

Still, Genghis Khan knew warfare. And Gabriel witnessed its cruel machine as the kettle’s clouds showed smoking ruins turn into thriving towns, villages, and cities, the result in reverse of having the Khan’s army pitilessly subjugate and pillage with no concern for human life, only acquisition. Whatever settlement foolish enough to try to hold out against the Khan met with a gruesome, bloody end. Those who conceded defeat were spared, but those that defied him were destroyed utterly. The tribe, watching such scenes of slaughter, screamed and wept. Even Gabriel, who had witnessed things that would drive most men mad, felt his gorge rise to see men torn to pieces, women and children skewered, kings and ministers tortured to death. Thalia pressed her face into Gabriel’s shoulder as she shuddered. He stroked the back of her head, offering what comfort he could. It was made worse because it was going backward, and a mutilated corpse became, in a moment, a man fighting for his life.

“You must think me a coward, not to watch,” she gulped.

“I think you’re a good woman who hates death and suffering. No shame in that.” He was glad that he could still be troubled by such brutality. If it left him unmoved, that would disturb him.

Everywhere the Khan vanquished, he took. Not only treasure and goods, but people, too. Learned men and craftsmen were taken prisoner, added to the spoils. Yet the kettle continued on with the army, taken past the grassy steppes until the terrain grew barren and rocky, thirsty plains swept by the wind. A vast and pitiless desert.

“The Gobi,” said Thalia, who’d lifted her head from the shelter of Gabriel’s shoulder. Shining wet tracks marked her face, and he brushed away the moisture with gentle fingertips. “I’ve only visited the very edge with my father a few times.”

“A harsh place,” Gabriel replied.

“But beautiful, from what I saw.”

He had to agree that it was, in its desolate way. People lived there, too, tending short-legged camels and sheep. The isolated herdsmen were left undisturbed by the Khan, who passed them by. Through the hard desert rode the huge army, covering miles and miles, the porous border between Mongolia and China, until, appearing on the horizon, rose a craggy peak. At the top of the peak stood a thickly walled building with the distinctive sloped ceramic roofs of Chinese temples. The army was making its way, backward, toward the temple. A cold ember settled in Gabriel’s stomach. Monks and holy men would be no match for the Khan’s soldiers.

“Look away, Thalia,” he commanded her quietly.

She complied without a word of protest, pressing her closed eyes into the curve of his neck, so he had the strange double feeling of watching the army of Genghis Khan slaughter a temple full of Buddhist monks while Thalia’s warm breath fluttered over his skin. She smelled of grasses and sandalwood.

“They’ve gone now,” Gabriel said, after a time, “and the kettle stayed behind.”

Thalia raised her head to watch. “I wonder if the monks knew what the kettle was?”

“If they didn’t, they’re taking damned good care of a simple teapot.” It wasn’t used in daily routine, but was kept in a locked cabinet in the head monk’s chambers; the head monk held the key. Seconds earlier, a Mongol soldier had smashed that same cabinet as a monk tried to defend it.

Moments later, just before the killing blade stopped him, the monk stood before the cabinet, hands in the air. Bright energy glowed briefly. He’d been trying to cast a protective spell.

“Oh, God,” Thalia said, under her breath. “They knew it was magical.”

What, exactly, the powers of the kettle were wasn’t revealed, for it stayed safely hidden for still more generations. Until, one day, the cabinet was opened, and a monk took the kettle far into the depths of the temple, through courtyards and passageways. Then sparks and flame. A man, stripped to the waist, pounding metal into shape. The kettle was made and then unmade over the blacksmith’s anvil. A swirling ball of light was released as the kettle became raw material. Close at hand, a senior monk chanted, drawing magic from the fires of the forge. The kettle and its power was then unborn.

The thick clouds of steam shrank quickly, retreating into the kettle, until nothing was left of the history everyone had just seen but a lingering damp warmth.

For long moments, no one spoke. Not even a baby fussed.

Gabriel turned to Thalia. “Looks like we’re going to China,” he said.
“I will send my best horsemen and hunters with you,” Bold insisted. “We may no longer be soldiers in the khan’s army, but, if we have to protect the magic from wicked men, we can fight.”

A small council had gathered in Bold’s ger to discuss what should happen next. It was certain that after Tsend’s defeat at the nadaam, the Heirs would come soon. They still believed the Source was the ruby, would kill for it, but when they did learn that the ruby had no power, they would destroy everything and everyone in the search for the true Source. There was little time to spare. The kettle had belonged to the tribe for generations, but everyone had agreed that it needed to be returned to its place of origin, the Chinese temple on the other side of the Gobi, and safeguarded by those who had created it. The temple survived, or, at least, it had at the time the khan’s army left it. They had to take the chance that it still stood, hundreds of years later. There was no alternative.

Through Thalia, Gabriel said to Bold, “The men we had spoken of before, they’re dangerous, and they’ll be hunting the magic, to take it by any means necessary. Including killing. I can’t ask you to risk your men’s lives.”

Bold drew himself up proudly. “It is our decision to make. All of us would gladly sacrifice ourselves to defend our country, our families, those that we love.”

Gabriel understood. He glanced over at Thalia, her face serious and focused as the literal fate of nations was being decided. She showed no fear, no hesitation, only a burning desire to see the just thing done. If all Englishwomen were raised in Mongolia, they’d be formidable creatures. That wasn’t right. There was only one Thalia, and no nation could claim her as its exclusive handiwork. It was her uniqueness that made him all the more determined to see no harm come to her, no matter the cost to himself.

“Fine,” Gabriel said, his voice clipped. “Get your men together. We leave in an hour. Some must stay behind to protect the ail if the Heirs return.”

With a nod, Bold left the ger, taking the men who had gathered for the council with him. Gabriel could hear the chieftain, issuing orders as his tribesmen hastened to do their duty.

“Batu,” Thalia said, turning to him as he stood nearby, “you must ride for Urga immediately and let my father know everything that has come to pass.”

“Everything?” Batu repeated, looking from Thalia to Gabriel and back again. So, the man knew what had happened between them. Gabriel supposed it wasn’t that hard to figure out, given that every time he looked at Thalia he felt as though he’d drunk pots of wine. He probably had damned stars in his eyes, like some fool in a Walter Scott epic. But he didn’t feel like a fool. He felt…her.

“Everything about the Source,” Thalia said firmly. Still, a deeper blush stole into her cheeks as she spoke. “Tell him where we are going.”

Batu narrowed his eyes, but agreed. “I will pack my belongings now and be off at once.” He took a few steps, then stopped and held out his hand to Gabriel. “This is how it’s done?”

Gabriel swallowed his momentary surprise. He would have figured Batu would have tried to castrate him instead of shake his hand. “Yes,” he said, taking Batu’s hand and giving it a shake. “You’re a fine man, Batu. A fine soldier.”

“You, as well, Huntley guai,” was the solemn answer. “We would have been quite lost without you. I would have been dead many times over.” With a meaningful glance at Thalia, he added, “And I trust you to do what is right.”

“Batu!” Thalia yelped.

“I will try to do right,” Gabriel replied. “In everything.”

That seemed to satisfy the loyal servant. Releasing Gabriel’s hand, he turned to Thalia and quickly enfolded her in a tight embrace, which she returned. Batu said something in Mongolian, before saying in English, “Be safe, child.” His voice sounded thick.

“I will. And you, too,” Thalia said, and murmured something else in Mongolian. She held him close, this man she had known almost her whole life and who was to her as close, if not closer, than blood. He’d taught her to ride and helped her move past the silencing grief of her mother’s death, felt her injuries, and struggled to keep her from harm. Gabriel, jaded as he was, felt his own eyes grow wet to see the unconditional, fierce love between these two old friends.

Then Thalia forcibly stepped away, pain and resolve warring in her expression. “Tell my father I love him. And I will do him and the Blades proud. I swear it.”

“You have already, Thalia guai,” Batu said, blinking. After dragging his sleeve across his eyes, he strode hastily from the ger, as if afraid another moment would see him disgraced.

Now Gabriel and Thalia were alone in the ger. They stared at each other for a moment before he crossed over to her and put his arms around her. She felt strong and alive. They knew what the Source was now, and what they had to do with it. The Heirs would be coming, and they would be desperate. Which meant they would do anything to
claim the Source for themselves. Including killing anyone, even a woman, who stood in their way.

He was glad women weren’t soldiers. If he’d fallen in love with a female soldier, each day in the army, each
day facing death, would’ve been hell, knowing that a precious life could be lost.

“Don’t try to send me with him,” she said, willful.

“I want to, yes,” Gabriel answered, and when she started to protest, he continued, over her objections, “but I
won’t try. It’s your right to protect the Source. Just as it’s my right to protect you, whether you want that protection
or not.”

Her expression softened as she linked her fingers behind his neck. “I wish I knew what tomorrow might bring. I
wish I knew we had a future together.”

For the first time in a long while, Gabriel understood what a torture it was to want a future. Especially knowing
there was a high degree of likelihood that it wouldn’t come to pass. In war, there were always casualties. All he
could try to do was make sure that she wasn’t one of them.

Wars required soldiers, and Henry Lamb knew that he, Edgeworth, and Tsend, even driven as they were, made
up a piss-poor, meager army. To that end, Lamb had dispatched Tsend to find them a decently sized batch of
mercenaries. The Mongol had grumbled about being sent on such a menial task, but Lamb needed to punish the
bastard for failing to win the ruby.

Turned out that the ruby wasn’t the Source after all. Ironic, that. The enchanted hawk that Lamb had circling
the herdsmen’s settlement had kept Lamb and Edgeworth partially informed. He’d seen it himself, albeit from a
distance, when the hunting eagles had nearly torn themselves from their perches when presented with the genuine
Source. Definitely strong power there, perhaps the strongest Lamb had ever seen. As Lamb sat at his folding camp
desk, penning a letter to the Heirs back in England, he wondered how to best phrase, “The Source is a grubby old tea
turtle,” in a way that didn’t sound completely ludicrous, or, worse, make him look like a buffoon.

Hell, he hadn’t gone to Cambridge for nothing. Lamb managed to cram several polysyllabic words into a few
sentences, obfuscating the truth just enough so that the higher members of the Heirs’ inner circle would consider
Lamb, and themselves, very clever. It was a trick Lamb had mastered years ago at King’s College, and even earlier,
when he’d written letters to home while at Harrow.

“Where the hell is that filthy bugger?” snapped Edgeworth, pacing.

Lamb blotted his letter with a grimace. He felt honor-bound to correct Edgeworth’s abominable swearing habit,
but knew he couldn’t cross the younger man. His father was too important to make an enemy of the son. Besides,
Lamb needed to stay in Jonas Edgeworth’s good graces. As soon as they returned in triumph to England, Lamb
planned on calling on Edgeworth’s sister, the cumbersomely named Victoria Regina Gloriana London Harcourt, née
Edgeworth, and more familiarly known as London. She was a pretty woman, perhaps a little too clever, but kept
ignorant of the existence of the Heirs through scrupulous manipulation. London’s husband, Lawrence Harcourt, had
been an Heir, and it had been on an assignment three years ago that Harcourt had died at the hands of a Blade,
Bennett Day. London never learned the details of her husband’s death. If Lamb could secure the widow London’s
hand in marriage, he’d be that much closer to Joseph Edgeworth and the inner circle.

With that in mind, Lamb was careful to keep his tone unruffled. “He’ll be here soon with the men we need.”
Lamb rose and walked with the letter to their campfire. He reached into his pocket and produced a sprinkling of
dried flowers.

“But the Burgess bitch and that tyke soldier are already on the road,” Edgeworth complained. He pointed to the
seeing mirror, which indeed revealed Thalia Burgess, the Yorkshireman, and a dozen Mongols riding south, toward
the desert. “We don’t know where they’re headed, and we’re out of spells and Sources to slow them down.”

Lamb tossed the letter and flowers into the fire at the same time. The letter curled up quickly, then disappeared
in a small cascade of glowing ash. It would reach its destination within hours: a continual fire, burning in the study
of the Heirs’ headquarters in London. Such communication was kept to a minimum, since the dried flowers that
enabled the spell were exceedingly rare, but Lamb knew that the inner circle would need to know about the latest
development in the pursuit of the Mongolian Source.

“The imbeciles only use magic which belongs to themselves, pretty puny stuff, so it stands to reason that
they’re going to try to take the Source someplace safe, someplace they believe we won’t be able to breach,” Lamb
explained to his short-tempered protégé. “It’s true, I don’t know where that might be, but it doesn’t signify. We’ll
catch them before they secret it away. They are merely a bunch of shepherders led by a woman, with some brute of
a common soldier providing muscle. Nothing to fuss about.”

Any further complaint from Edgeworth was drowned out in the sound of approaching hoofbeats. Both Lamb
and Edgeworth watched as Tsend rode up. Mongols were largely, and disgustingly, loyal to their homeland, and
Lamb had entertained not a little fear that Tsend would be unable to find men desperate and greedy enough to betray
their motherland. But gold always seemed to unearth the rapacious, like pigs rooting in shit.

“Where are the men?” Lamb snapped, looking past Tsend.

Wordlessly, Tsend pointed down the road. What Lamb saw there made him truly smile for the first time in weeks, and even Edgeworth shuddered.

Gabriel had been lulled into a false sense of calm. For those few, brief days with Bold’s tribe, he hadn’t been a campaigning soldier. There were those incredible, but brief, hours with Thalia that reminded him he was a man. True, competing in the nadaam hadn’t exactly been a seaside holiday, but Gabriel had been focused on one goal at a time, instead of keeping constant vigilance. The way he was doing now, back on the road, racing toward uncertainty with enemies in pursuit.

Or so he believed. “One of the bloody frustrating things about the Heirs,” he growled to Thalia riding beside him, “is that you can never see them until it’s too late.”

“I’d say that maybe they aren’t following us,” she said, “but that would be hopelessly naïve. But I have to ask: are you sure?”

Gabriel glanced around. They were moving too quickly for him to do proper reconnaissance, which scorched his sausage. How was he supposed to protect Thalia and the Source if he couldn’t get a feel for the land, or sniff out those inbred Heirs? It was enough to make a man chew on his own bullets.

“They’re out there,” he said. “Thanks to their damned magic, I don’t know where, exactly, but they’re on our tail.”

“It’s been nearly a week since we left,” Thalia pointed out. It had been endless hard riding until the horses were half-dead. The end of each day saw Thalia, Gabriel, and their escort collapsing into brief, exhausted sleep; then they rose before dawn to ride even more. It had been tough going, but no one, including Thalia, had complained. Gabriel’s body, on the other hand, was grumbling something fierce, being so near to her but denied the pleasures of her skin.


“We’re not running away,” she answered. “This is a…strategic retreat.”

His smile was wry. “You sound like a commissioned officer covering his arse.”

“Commissioned?” She snorted. “Hardly.”

“That’s right. You’re too smart.” He said, thoughtful, “You’d have made a first-rate soldier.” But he was glad she hadn’t been.

Thalia laughed quietly. “I can’t take orders, or haven’t you noticed?”

“I’ve noticed.” And he liked it.

Had Batu reached Urga by now? Gabriel tried to imagine what the servant was telling Franklin Burgess, not only about the quest for the Source and its uncovering in the most unlikely place, but about him and Burgess’s daughter. He didn’t know how someone told a man that his daughter had taken a lover. Seemed deuced uncomfortable. But what about the return? Gabriel wouldn’t let himself think of what would happen after the Source had been brought back to the Chinese monastery. If he did, he would start having hope, making plans—both surefire ways to meet disaster and pain.

The best way to avoid that was to stay on guard. That proved difficult with long days in the saddle and not a single opportunity to be alone with Thalia. Their riding company was all men, and while Gabriel didn’t think any of them would blame him for sharing her pallet for the night, he sure as hell didn’t want to treat any of them to listening to a rendition of that particular sound Thalia made, high, in the back of her throat, moments before she came.

Gabriel then treated himself to the longest and most elaborate streak of mental cursing he’d ever embarked upon. He couldn’t let himself remember the sounds she made, or he’d lose his godforsaken mind.

In his saddlebag was not just the kettle, but the ruby, as well. Both objects weighed on him constantly. Just before he’d left Bold and his tribe, the chieftain had reminded him that the ruby was still his and Thalia’s charge for the year. Which meant that it would have to be guarded and returned. Gabriel was no stranger to duty and responsibility, but he felt himself stretched thin. He wouldn’t allow himself to break.

After a few more days, the grassy steppes began to disappear, replaced by long stretches of rocky, scrub-dusted plains. Whatever moisture was in the air vanished just as the greenery did. It wasn’t hot, but light bounced off the arid earth, and biting winds raced unimpeded to choke them with dust. Still, it was beautiful, the way a knife was beautiful, spare and brutal in its precision. Gazelles, white-tailed and spry, leapt in herds like laughter, or grazed on the scarce grasses. Their curious black stares followed the group as they kept up their tough pace. Overhead, falcons wheeled in the sky. They had been keeping constant company with the riding group, only sometimes diving down to
snatch tiny, unlucky prey from the plain.

“Amazing anything can live out here,” Gabriel said to Thalia.

“People do, too,” she answered. “If life on the steppe is hard, the Gobi is harder. And this is just the outlying lands. I’ve never traveled so deep into it before.”

“Suppose that puts us on equal footing, then.” He smiled.

“You have no equal, Captain.”

They had just crossed a rock-strewn rise, when Gabriel wheeled his horse around. The other riders cantered on, but Thalia stopped and brought her horse back. Both mounts stamped impatiently, edging back and forth.

“What is it?” Thalia asked as Gabriel stared at the sky.

“Birds.”

She followed his gaze. “There are always hawks and falcons.”

He shook his head. “Something’s not right. Feels like they’ve been following us.” He took a spyglass from his saddlebag and trained it on the birds of prey. “I could swear they look familiar.” He handed her the glass, and she looked as well, but could only shrug her shoulders.

“I can’t recognize them.”

Gabriel couldn’t shake the feeling, a cold awareness prickling his scalp underneath his hat. Even as his horse tugged on the reins, impatient to join the rest of the group riding southeast, he kept scanning the sky, the horizon. Both the sky and the earth felt immense, stretching into eternity. Nothing could hide here. Except—

“There!” The shimmering surface of the ground danced in waves, then broke for a moment, revealing the truth beneath.

“Oh, my God,” Thalia breathed, standing up in the stirrups.

No need for a spyglass. Even a nearsighted clerk could see them. Only a few miles away and headed straight for Thalia and Gabriel. With nothing between them except rock and scrub.

“They bought themselves a whole damned army,” Gabriel spat.

He’d anticipated that, in their push to claim the Source, the Heirs would find a handful of men to add to their strength. Instead, hammering across the stark earth like vengeance itself was a thick, dark swarm of riders.

“How many?” Thalia asked.

A quick calculation. “Seventy-five, maybe more.” Gabriel glanced over to where their own Mongol complement had stopped, waiting for Thalia and him to catch up. Two dozen men of their own, and, despite their willingness to fight for and defend their home, likely no match for nearly a legion of mercenaries. Mercenaries fueled by greed and magic.

Without another word, he and Thalia kicked their horses into gallops, heading as quickly away as the already tired animals would allow. Gabriel’s mind raced faster than the horses as he cursed himself. He’d no idea how long the Heirs had been following them, and, had he known, wouldn’t have let them get this close. There was no way to outride them. No way to lose them. The land was too flat, leaving no place to hide. Maybe, if he—

“No,” Thalia shouted at him over the pounding of their horses’ hooves.

Bent over the neck of his mount, Gabriel looked at her.

“I won’t let you sacrifice yourself to help us gain time!” she yelled.

He scowled. Holy hellhound, she’d read his bloody mind. “I don’t see any other damned alternatives,” he snarled back. He wanted to give her the ruby and kettle, and send her ahead whilst he provided a distraction. Clearly, she didn’t care for this plan.

They had reached their own group of riders, who, catching sight of Thalia and Gabriel racing toward them, inferred that they were being pursued. Thalia let their men know what they were up against. Eyes widened in surprise, but not fear. They began talking amongst themselves. Twenty of the men jumped down from their horses and began gathering fallen branches and sticks from the low saxaul trees. And while they did this, the Heirs’ army thundered closer.

“Come on, damn it,” Gabriel bellowed at them. “We’re riding, now!”

But the men paid him no mind, even as Thalia urged them on in Mongolian and Gabriel swore at them with every foul word he knew in English. They tied the branches to their horses’ tails, then remounted. One of the men, whom Gabriel remembered from the nadaam, spoke tersely with Thalia before setting his heels to his horse. The twenty men then rode off with him, veering toward the west. The branches tied to the horses’ tails dragged on the ground, kicking up enormous clouds of dust. The air became thick and yellow.

“What the hell do they think they’re doing?” Gabriel demanded. “They’re leaving a trail.”

“But not our trail,” Thalia answered with a shake of her head.

A gruff laugh sprung from Gabriel. She was right. Their Mongol allies were creating a huge screen of dust, not only creating the illusion that Thalia and Gabriel were headed west, but hiding them in the process and drawing the
Heirs away. “An old trick from the days of Genghis Khan,” one of the remaining riders explained. Gabriel couldn’t help but admire their ironclad bollocks. No time to waste on admiration, though. He, Thalia, and the other riders wheeled their horses about and sped on their way, deeper into the unforgiving desert.

Henry Lamb was a ponce, or so Jonas Edgeworth thought. He’d complained to his father about being sent to Mongolia with a man who had more starch in his underwear than most blokes had in their entire wardrobe, including shirts for church. For Christ’s sake, Lamb didn’t even follow cricket. But Joseph Edgeworth had insisted that his son accompany Lamb.

“Ponce or not,” his father said, “Lamb is a valuable Heir. He can show you a few things out in the field that you can’t learn at home.”

Jonas was just now learning that you never, ever made Henry Lamb angry. The man might’ve been a ponce, but when he was enraged—devils protect Jonas. Satan himself would piss in his brimstone drawers from fear.

When Lamb discovered, after a whole day of chasing Thalia Burgess and her band of supporters, that he had been tricked, only God or Queen Victoria could have inspired so much terror. The eighty battle-hardened, heartless fiends Tsend had found cowered meekly as Lamb ranted and raged, actually tearing small trees up from the ground and using their trunks to bash in the head of an unlucky decoy they’d managed to catch. The others fled, but they had to hear the stomach-churning gurgles coming from their dying comrade.

Jonas, no stranger to brutality, couldn’t even watch as Lamb’s immaculate clothing became spattered with brains and blood. When the chap was quite dead, Lamb wasn’t done with him. Lamb’s prized Sheffield knife, polished and gleaming, was used to cut him into bits, which were left for the animals. Jonas would’ve been sick, but was afraid that, in Lamb’s frenzy, any sign of such activity would send him off on another berserker rage. So, instead, he swallowed his gorge and looked away as the true face of Henry Lamb was revealed.

After a half an hour of this, Lamb seemed to have sufficiently calmed for Jonas to speak to him. “Jesus, Lamb,” he said as they both mounted up, “all that wasn’t necessary, was it?”

Lamb barely spared the desecrated remains a glance. Of greater concern to him were the stains on his Bond Street clothing. He tsked and frowned over them like a disapproving valet surveying the night’s damage to a dinner jacket.

“Oh, that,” Lamb drawled. “That’s nothing compared to what I plan to do to that Yorkshireman.”

“And the girl?”

The gleam in Lamb’s eyes caused Jonas’s stomach to clench. “She won’t go quite as quickly.”

With that, Lamb ordered the men out, and no one complained about how tired and hungry they were, not a single man. Jonas rode alongside Lamb and wondered what, if anything, he could tell his father.
Chapter 15

Allies or Enemies?

The reprieve would be temporary. As much as Thalia admired the courage and ingenuity of their tribesmen compatriots, nothing could keep the Heirs away forever, except outright defeat. She didn’t know how that might be possible. Only six remained in her company. The Heirs had many, many more, and she didn’t doubt that whatever men Henry Lamb had found were likely the sort who killed readily and happily for money. She, herself, had killed only once in her life, and never wanted to repeat that experience again. But being able to keep her hands unspotted with blood now seemed doubtful.

As the Heirs drew closer—and she knew they couldn’t be more than a day behind—she felt her first true taste of fear, finally understanding the extraordinary danger one faced when joining the Blades of the Rose. It was entirely possible that either she or Gabriel, or both of them, wouldn’t survive the mission. She shook her head, trying to clear it of the terror of losing him.

“You can still ride for Urga,” Gabriel said to her. They had stopped in the shadow of one of the large cliffs that had been rising from the earth for the past few miles to rest their horses, which were half-dead with thirst and fatigue. She pitied the poor animals, but they could not afford to let them go and attempt the remaining trek on foot.

Thalia, sitting on the rocky, barren ground with her arms braced on her knees, looked up at him wearily. She took the canteen he offered and allowed herself only a few sips of water, though she wanted to finish the whole thing. Everyone’s rations, not only those of the horses, were low.

“No,” she croaked back. “Stop asking me to.” She returned the canteen.

Caked in red dust, lips dry, tiredness turning his face into hard planes of bronze, Gabriel had never looked more beautiful. Campaigning sat well with him. Lean, sharp as a cutlass, capable of anything. He easily folded down to sit beside her and capped the canteen, despite the fact that he’d barely touched any of the water himself. Saving it for her.

“Have to ask,” he said without apology.

“Make this the last time.”

He shook his head with a rueful smile. “You’re stubborn as hell.”

Despite her own bone-deep weariness, Thalia couldn’t help but return the smile. She reached over and ran her hand along the sculpted lines of his cheek, his jaw. She felt it, even exhausted and thirsty, the insistent pull whenever she touched him. The pull that demanded she touch him more, until they were bare of everything except desire. She struggled, still, with the knowledge of her love. Impossible to tell him here, in the midst of danger. She did not believe he would run from her love, yet she also understood that knowledge of it whilst fighting for life and magic would be a distraction neither of them could afford. She hoped that, one day, and one day soon, she could tell him how he filled her heart. Instead, she said, “And you, my dear Captain, are one of the most biddable men I’ve ever met.”

Clasping her hand with his own, holding her to him, he asked, “Biddable, or beddable?”

“Both,” she chuckled, then sighed. “What I wouldn’t give for a few gallons of water, a bath, and a nice, green place for us to lie down together.”

His eyes glinted with hunger as his fingers tightened around hers. “I’d kill for that.”

“We might have to.” She refused to consider that now, though her desiccated blood turned to sleet to think of what lay in store for them, what chased them. “So odd,” she murmured.

“What’s that?”

“After all this time, after I’d given up hope. To meet you now. Here.” She waved her hand at the austere beauty of the Gobi, silent except for the wind stirring the coppery dust. It was very far, in distance and feel, from the lush steppes on which she’d grown and lived. Whether or not they had actually crossed into China was a matter of debate. Borders, like so much of life, never remained fixed, but shifted without warning or reason.

“Not so odd.” He pressed the palm of her hand to his mouth. “Just right. For people like us.” Then his eyes sharpened, his body tensed. He stood, pulling her up with him. Their four remaining escorts looked at him, questioning, as he pulled his rifle. “Someone’s coming.”

“The Heirs?” Thalia asked. She was already heading toward her saddle for her own firearm.
He tilted his head, listening. “Too few. Not on horseback. Something else.”

Finally, Thalia was able to hear it, too. Coming closer. But the cliffs made it almost impossible to tell where the sound was originating from, or how near. Gabriel tucked the wrapped bundle of the kettle under one arm and the ruby into a pocket. He motioned for everyone to gather in a circle, facing outward with their weapons drawn. Thalia’s heart knocked into her ribs. Perhaps the Heirs had found a way to bribe more men into tracking them down.

The wind picked up, raising clouds of dust. Thalia squinted into the swirling grit. Voices. Footfalls, but heavy. She tightened her grip on her rifle, her finger hovering over the trigger. And then large, dark shapes emerged. They made a hideous sound, an awful, hoarse bellowing.

“Stop!” Thalia shouted out in Mongol. “We are armed and have nothing of value.”

“You are valuable, English Mongol woman,” a voice atop one of the large shapes responded. The brief eddy of dust settled, revealing ten men mounted on shaggy, short-legged camels. One of the camels let out another terrible bray. Heart sinking, Thalia saw that the men were armed, too, with Russian rifles all pointed at her group.

“I think you must be valuable, indeed,” continued the man who’d spoken. He kicked his camel forward, so that only a few feet separated the unknown man and her. Gabriel immediately stepped in front of her, deliberate fury tightening his jaw as he kept his rifle trained on the man. “See how you are guarded?” the man said. “And you are chased by almost an entire army.”

“Did they send you?” Thalia shot back. The man shook his head, but she would not yet feel relief. They were outnumbered, and, she realized as several of the men drew pistols from their belts, outgunned. “Tell your English friend that we will shoot him and then you if he does not lower his weapon.” Thalia had no choice but to convey the message.

Gabriel swore, but he could see, just as clearly as she could, that there was no way out of the situation. Everyone in their party was too tired and thirsty to put up much more than token resistance before being killed. With another oath, he lowered his rifle. Several of the men on camels dismounted and came forward, relieving everyone of their guns, then looked to the man who was plainly their leader.

“We are sent by no one but ourselves, and we would like to know,” the man said, bending over his saddle with an assessing stare, “just what it is that makes you so worth pursuing.”

The camp crouched in the maze of ravines, rising gold and red all around them. Winds had carved grooves into the cliffs, and sang through these ridges with an eerie, sad lament. As she, Gabriel, and the tribesmen slowly rode, the bandits behind them, pushing them forward, Thalia saw more men perched in these cliffs like nimble-footed goats. Goats who were also armed. She turned her gaze back toward the camp they approached.

“They don’t know what the kettle is,” Gabriel said lowly, glancing at his saddlebag where it lay. “Maybe we can give them something else.”

“But what?” Thalia asked, also careful to keep her voice down. “All we have of value is the ruby.” Glancing over at him, she realized that was exactly what he was thinking. She hissed, “We cannot! We swore to protect it.”

“The Source, and our lives, come first,” he pointed out, expression impassive. Thalia scowled, but he wouldn’t be dissuaded. “I had to make these damned decisions almost every day when I was in the army. The greater good. The lesser of two evils, and all that tripe. But,” he added, “as you’ve pointed out before, I’m muscle, and you’re in charge of this mission. The final choice is yours.”

“And you’d honor that choice?” She looked at him in disbelief.

“You don’t know what the kettle is,” Gabriel said lowly, glancing at his saddlebag where it lay. “Maybe we can give them something else.”

“You don’t know what the kettle is,” Gabriel said lowly, glancing at his saddlebag where it lay. “Maybe we can give them something else.”

“Might have an idea or two about that,” Gabriel murmured.

They had reached the camp. Far from a civilized place, with families and animals, this was a place of basic necessity only. Thalia saw no women, no children. Only men slung with bullets, gathered around fires and watching the newcomers, appraising. Their clothing was a mixture of Mongol, Chinese, and Russian, taken, obviously, from the few remaining traders and merchants that traversed the old silk trade routes. Camels, not horses, were the mounts of choice in such an arid place. Shelter was comprised of makeshift tents, rather than gers. Hard living for a harsh clime, and the men were just as remorseless.

She couldn’t help but longingly stare at the bowls of tea the bandits drank, and the smell of roasting meat made her dizzy. Everyone dismounted, tensely watching one another. The leader of the bandits came forward. He was the same height as Thalia, but brawny, dark from the desert sky, and sharply intelligent. That mental agility glinted like obsidian in his eyes. He said something to another man nearby, who scuttled off quickly to do his bidding. “Have
something to eat and drink,” the bandit leader said. At Thalia’s look of surprise, he said, laughing, “We are thieves, but we are Mongols, too. It’s more wrong to deny a guest than to take their belongings.”

They were herded toward a fire, where bowls of tea and meat were given to them. Gabriel eyed his suspiciously, and would not let her eat or drink until he saw some of the brigands eating and drinking the same food. “Strange code of honor,” he said over the rim of his bowl. They both watched as their horses were given water.

Thalia, busy gulping tea down her parched throat, could only grunt in agreement. Nothing had ever tasted quite so wonderful. But as her thirst was quenched, trepidation took its place. The bandits were not friendly, open tribesmen of the steppe. They weren’t even reserved but benign desert-dwelling nomads. For all her experience in Mongolia, as much as it was her home, she’d never had any interaction with men whose sole means of living was through thievery and other unsavory means. They could be capable of anything.

She glanced over at Gabriel, whose expression revealed nothing. Thalia tried to take some comfort in knowing that Gabriel probably had faced men such as these bandits many times over when he was in the army. She hoped he had some plan, because, short of bribing their way out of the bandits’ lair with the ruby, Thalia could think of nothing to extract them. Catullus Graves, no doubt, would have created some terrifying new contraption within seconds from nothing more than a few rocks and a piece of mutton. Bennett Day would have charmed everyone, and soon had them telling bawdy stories of conquest over shared drinks of arkhī. But Catullus wasn’t there—he was probably safe in Southampton, tinkering on his latest diabolical design—and neither was Bennett—sneaking out of some married woman’s bedroom window, no doubt—so it was left to Thalia and Gabriel to escape unharmed on their own.

The leader of the bandits stood across the fire, lighting his pipe. After a few puffs, he said, “Now you must repay my generosity by telling me what those Englishmen and their army want with you.”

Telling the truth was impossible. Fortunately, none of the tribesmen were willing to betray their precious cargo, and they kept silent, as did Thalia.

“A race,” Gabriel said in Mongolian.

Quite possibly, Thalia was more surprised than anyone. Next, he would start tatting lace. “I didn’t know you could speak Mongol,” she said in English, turning to him.

He shrugged dismissively. “Been picking up a few words here and there. Always had a head for languages.”

“What kind of race?” the bandit leader asked.

“Sponsored by a rich lord. For treasure.”

“Like this?” prompted the leader. He strode forward and, striking as quickly as a snake, plucked the ruby from Gabriel’s jacket pocket. Thalia and the tribesmen all yelped in horror, but a quelling look from Gabriel held them all back.

“That is nothing,” Gabriel said, indifferent. “Compared to what awaits.”

The leader considered the glow of the fire through the ruby, casting deep red light across his face and beard. “Then you will tell me where the finish for this race is.”

“At a temple.”

“Which temple?”

Gabriel, as if he had all the time in creation and didn’t care that the Heirs could ride up within moments, or that the bandits might slit their throats without hesitation, reached into his jacket. The bandits clustered around their leader tensed, but were held off by a restraining hand. Thalia thought she might shatter with tension. Gabriel wouldn’t possibly try to shoot their way out with a hidden pistol, would he?

But all he produced from his pocket was a cheroot. He bent forward and lit it, as casually as if he was in the officers’ club and not some brigands’ encampment in the middle of the Gobi cliffs. Nothing could disrupt his sangfroid. After taking a few draws from the cheroot and exhaling the smoke, he reached out and offered it to the leader.

Intrigued, the man took it, still holding his pipe. He puffed on the cheroot, then, magnanimously, offered his pipe to Gabriel. With the same casual air, Gabriel took the pipe and placed the stem in his mouth. Such strange masculine courtesies that communicated worlds more than simple words.

“We need fresh mounts,” Gabriel said around the stem. “Food and water. And we need to leave soon. Or we might lose the race.” He breathed out a small cloud of smoke.

The bandit leader smiled, wry. “Ah, I see. We give you those things, and you tell us where to find the treasure.” He took a few more puffs from the cheroot, then took it from his mouth and contemplated the smoldering tobacco. “This is very good. But I think I have a better idea.”

“What’s that?” Thalia couldn’t stop herself from asking.

“My men and I will come with you.”
The horses were freed to find their way home. How ridiculous was it that Thalia envied them? Fed and watered, the animals cantered away without sparing their former riders a single glance. She watched them go, coveting their liberty.

“We’ve exchanged one problem for another,” she said to Gabriel as their baggage was transferred to camels. “Or rather, we now have a whole new problem, in addition to the Heirs.”

“Always something,” he commented. “Made a deal once with some Manipur warlords. Safe passage to Imphal in exchange for a case of Enfield rifles. A damned hard choice, but without them watching our backs, we’d never have made it.”

“But we’ve no rifles or anything else to give this lot.” Thalia indicated the milling group of brigands, who saddled their camels and prepared for a long journey. “Assuming they don’t just slit our throats during the trip, once we get to the temple, they’ll know they’ve been duped. Between the Heirs and these bandits, we’re going to have a hell of a fight on our hands. What?” she asked, as Gabriel grinned at her.

Stepping in close, so that no more than an inch separated them, he said warmly, “I love it when you talk flinty.”

“Skirmish,” Thalia whispered, husky. “Trounce the bastards.”

Under his lowered lids, his pupils dilated, and he slowly licked his lips. Despite the fact that they were standing in a brigands’ encampment, the Heirs close behind them, and every part of her ached with weariness, Thalia wanted him so badly her knees shook. And not only because he was strong and alive and handsome, but because she was fully herself with him, and he didn’t turn away. He embraced it, the whole of her. And wanted her, too.

Now, though, was not the time. Visibly collecting himself, he moved away. “The leader isn’t trusting anyone with the ruby. He keeps it in his coat. I’m no pickpocket, so he’s going to have to keep it for now.”

“What if we made tea in the kettle and gave it to the bandits?” Thalia suggested. “The magic could distract them long enough for us to make an escape.”

A corner of his mouth turned up. “Sounds good. After we give them the tea, you can suggest to them that they just start buggering each other so that the magic can take effect.”

Perhaps I’ll formulate another plan, Thalia mumbled, reddening. She had no desire to see a brigand orgy.

His smile faded as he kept a watchful eye on their captors. “We might not be serving them tea, but I’m going to make sure nobody’s filched the kettle,” Gabriel said, then strode off.

Thalia, too, set to work. She ignored the stares of the bandits as she helped pack the camels, and, within the hour, everyone was on the road. Thalia hadn’t much experience riding camels, but she soon grew used to the cantankerous beasts. Weaving their way through the labyrinth of canyons, they emerged into late afternoon, when the setting sun set the cliffs to flames and everything glowed like burning dreams. The sky, too, had caught fire as trails of golden fleece danced around the sun. In this light, Gabriel, riding beside her, his eyes shaded by the brim of his hat, was living myth.

The camels took the terrain better than horses. Rocky, dusty land flew beneath her as she rode. Having something decent to eat and drink had revived her considerably, and she took in the spare landscape with an appreciative eye. Gabriel looked over at her, and they exchanged smiles. It was absurd, but she was actually enjoying herself. It seemed that he was, too. Something must be wrong with them. Or perhaps, Thalia amended, other people were too tame in their needs for happiness.

This was no holiday, however. She, Gabriel, and the steppe tribesmen kept to themselves when it came time to stop for the night. More than once, the tribesmen muttered about the bandit chief possessing the ruby, but Gabriel assured them that he’d find some way to get it back. There was no way to know how long the brigands would be content simply to accompany them to the temple, rather than kill them and try to seize what valuables they could.

They watched as Altan, the bandits’ leader, ordered his men around with the same directness and surety as any military officer.

“If he wasn’t a bloodthirsty thief,” Thalia whispered to Gabriel, “I’d say you two would have a jolly time together.”

“I’ll save my jolly for you, thanks all the same,” he answered.

Over the evening meal, Thalia and Gabriel stayed close together while the bandits laughed and shared arkhī. “We could try to sneak away,” she suggested, “after everyone goes to sleep.”

“Men like these don’t sleep all at once,” Gabriel answered. “They’ll keep watch.”

Thalia noticed that some of the bandits were already asleep, camped a little ways from the communal fire. In a few hours, one of their comrades would wake them to take a later shift. Hell. “What if we got them drunk enough?”

He shook his head. “Even if we could get away, this desert is their home. They’d find us before we had time to wipe our noses.”

“They can’t come with us all the way to the temple,” she protested, but she wasn’t saying anything he had not already considered. Even though they were simply eating a meal at the end of a very long day, his mind was never at
rest, always assessing, considering.

“I’ll think of something.”

“No,” Thalia corrected. “We will.”

His smile was private, meant for her alone. “We will, indeed.”

She slept right beside Gabriel that night. He kept his arms wrapped around her, and even though he wasn’t armed, Thalia knew he’d fight hard if anything happened to her during the night. She dreamt of kettles, rubies, and a golden lion, pacing back and forth without tiring.

When they woke the next morning, it was to news that the Heirs had been spotted by a scout a day’s ride behind them. Somehow, their cloaking magic had stopped working, rendering them visible. But this was a small comfort, knowing how close they were. Which was worse? The known threat of the Heirs, or the unknown potential of Altan’s men? If only she, Gabriel, and the tribesmen could elude the bandits, at least one threat could be eliminated. Yet escape seemed impossible, and they were too untrustworthy to try to forge a true alliance.

Opportunity came in a strange guise the following day. One moment, the entire group was riding their camels, the day placid and still. Within minutes, a fierce wind began to scour the dry, rocky plains. Thalia had no idea where it came from. It pulled like claws at their clothing and threatened to topple them from their saddles. She clung to the reins of her camel, ducking her head from the onslaught. Clouds of grit and dust scraped at any exposed skin.

Gabriel gave Thalia a kerchief to wrap around her mouth and nose, while he took a spare shirt from his pack and used that to protect the lower half of his face. The brigands were well prepared, having lengths of fabric stuffed into their coats for just such an event.

Through the punishing winds, they continued on, until one of Altan’s men turned and pointed. Everyone turned to look behind them.

“Oh, hell,” Thalia said, but her words were lost in the wind.

A wall of flying sand hurtled toward them, billowing, as tall as a cliff and just as terrifying. Red and impenetrable, it bore toward them with an awful, quiet inevitability. A protean killer that had no body but was all sharp claws and teeth.

“The Heirs?” Gabriel called to her.

“No, just your average deadly sandstorm,” she yelled back. “I don’t think we can outrun it.”

“Do what they’re doing,” he shouted back, pointing to Altan and his men, who were dismounting and making their camels sit. The large beasts folded their legs underneath themselves and tilted down until they were sitting upon the ground. Each camel’s reins were staked to the ground. As if used to such storms, the bandits immediately hunkered in the lea of the camels, pulling their coats close to keep out the racing sand. The animals themselves didn’t seem to mind the sand, viewing it with boredom through their long eyelashes.

The four tribesmen quickly imitated the bandits, sliding off of their camels and finding shelter in the creatures’ bodies. Gabriel did the same, but Thalia could not get her blasted camel to cooperate. She wrestled with the stubborn animal, pulling on the lead ring in its nose to get it to sit, but she did not want to pull too hard and tear the ring right from the tender flesh. So she pushed. The camel bellowed at her, and if the wind had not been gusting so hard, she would have been covered with foamy camel spit. She desperately missed horses.

Glancing between the camel’s humps, Thalia saw that the sandstorm was almost upon them. Cursing, tears torn from her eyes, she shoved and coaxed her mount. No doubt the bandits were having themselves a good laugh at her expense. Meanwhile, she could barely breathe or keep her eyes open.

Then Gabriel was beside her, taking the reins from her. “Sit your bloody arse down or I’ll put a damned bullet in it,” he roared at the camel.

The animal stared at him for a moment, and then placidly sat.

In the next moment, the sandstorm slammed into them. It hit like a million stinging wasps, biting without mercy at any unprotected flesh. Sight was nearly impossible. Even if she had been able to open her eyes fully, only a few feet would have been plainly visible. Everything else was swallowed in the crimson air.

Gabriel started to pull her down next to the camel, but they both stopped moving when an animal bawl rent the air, followed by a human scream. A bandit’s camel, spooked by the storm, had torn itself free from its stake and galloped away into the punishing clouds of sand. But the camel’s rider had tangled in the reins, and now dragged behind the animal as it ran in a panic. Thalia clutched at her throat. If the storm itself didn’t kill the man, then tumbling and pounding across the rocky earth would. Altan and his men half-rose from behind their camels, clearly torn. Saving their comrade meant risking their own lives, or getting hopelessly lost in the disorienting blizzard of dust.

A hard hand shoved on Thalia’s shoulder, pushing her behind the camel. “Don’t move,” Gabriel snarled at her, before he ran off, disappearing into the storm. She did not even have time to say no nor clutch at his sleeve. The sand had taken him.
He was a jelly-brained fool. What the hell compelled him to run into a sandstorm just to save the life of a thieving scoundrel who’d likely stab him in the throat, given the opportunity? He’d done it, just the same. Gabriel had made sure that Thalia was secure—at least some part of his mind was functioning properly—before rushing into what felt like the devil’s breath, hot and brutal and capable of tearing flesh from bone.

Only the flood of water demons from the True Hammer of Thor came close to the torture of pushing through the swirling, howling sand. Gabriel ran, squinting into the red darkness, trying to pick out the terrified man’s screams above the wind. Thank God his hearing was good. There. Faint and growing fainter. Instinct shoved Gabriel along, through the biting void, fighting to stay on his feet, until, yes, the form of the terrified camel came into view. His rider still skidded behind, but what condition the man was in, Gabriel had no way of knowing. Face and back probably cut to shreds by now. And he’d stopped hollering. Not a good sign.

Gabriel threw himself forward, grabbing hold of the camel’s saddle. He dug his heels into the ground and pulled to the side with every ounce of strength he had left. The camel was young, saints be praised, and relatively small, so it stumbled when Gabriel pulled back. He shouted at it, though he hadn’t a single idea what stream of abuse poured out of his mouth, all the while pulling to the side so that the camel moved in a circle. As soon as the animal began to slow, Gabriel pulled his knife from his belt and hacked at the reins tangled around the rider. The man came free, going limp, at the same time that the camel decided it’d had enough running around. Gabriel wrapped one arm around the man, and was relieved to discover he was unconscious but alive. He looped his other arm around the camel’s neck and tugged the beast down. It staggered, then sat.

Immediately, Gabriel crouched next to the camel, also pulling the insensible man into the shelter of the animal’s body. He tugged the man’s coat up, covering the brigand’s face, before doing the same for himself. And that was how he spent the next who knows how long, tucked into himself like a giant tortoise, as the sandstorm continued to scream and tear.

Gabriel lost track of time, could hear only his own breathing and the roiling sand, as he waited and waited, and continued to wait some more. He hoped like hell that Thalia had been intelligent enough to sit out the storm, unlike his own moronic self. Jesus, if anything happened to her…No, he wouldn’t let himself think about that; otherwise he’d do something even more stupid like dash off into the storm again, trying to find her, and get either lost or buried in the process.

After minutes, hours, or maybe even days, the winds calmed. Carefully, Gabriel unwound himself from his shroud and lifted his head. Sand poured from his shoulders. The swirling cloud of dust retreated toward the horizon as the sun reemerged. Gabriel checked the man next to him, relieved to see that not only was he relatively unharmed, save for a goodly sized black eye and cuts on his face, the bastard was snoring.

“Reveille,” Gabriel growled, shaking the man awake.

The bloke blinked and slowly roused. When he realized that he was alive, he began babbling a stream of indecipherable words, throwing his arms around Gabriel.

“Don’t need another sweetheart,” Gabriel snapped, shoving the man away. He rose to his feet, and the man did the same. The camel stared at them both, chewing its cud, then continued to stare at the barren landscape. There had not been many landmarks even before the storm; the sand had further erased anything that might look familiar.

Gabriel looked up at the sun, then down at the earth, checking shadows. An hour. The whole damned thing had lasted only an hour. Before the sandstorm had hit, he’d made sure to check the position of the group, and now he drew upon his directional and tracking skills to get him and his new best chum back to their companions. There wasn’t enough room for two on the camel’s back, so both he and the other man had to walk as they set out to find everyone else.

Some half a mile later, he found them. Bless his beer, Thalia was with them, whole and well. The bandits had gotten back onto their camels, as had the tribesmen, but Thalia was not mounted. Altan was yelling something at her, and she was shaking her head, her feet planted, refusing to get into the saddle. She was shouting something back at him. Then a few of the brigands caught sight of Gabriel and their compatriot and began shouting all at once. Everyone turned, including Thalia. She ran toward him.

“Lost my damned hat,” he started to say, before she launched herself at him. Already weary from fighting the storm, not to mention wrestling with a camel, Gabriel almost lost his footing as her arms wrapped around him. She gripped him tightly, her body shuddering. A soft stream of Mongolian bubbled from her lips, and though he didn’t catch all the words, he knew words of thanks just the same.

“It’s all right, sweetheart,” he murmured as his own arms came up. “I’m—ow!”

She’d punched him. In the shoulder. Hard.

“Did the wind blow away your damn mind?” she shouted. “Don’t ever do anything that stupid again!”

“No promises about my stupidity,” he said. “You giving me orders?”
Her lovely face was tear-streaked and furious. “I’ll bloody well tie you to the sodding ground, you mad, brave idiot!” She started to stomp away. “Lord protect me from heroes!”

He didn’t let her get very far. One hand shot out, grabbed her arm, and pulled her back, hauling her against him. She began to launch into another string of abuse. His mouth on hers prevented it.

The hooting of the bandits brought them back to their surroundings, and then only after a goodly while. Breaking the kiss, Gabriel saw that the whole company was watching him and Thalia with enormous grins plastered on their faces, like fond uncles at a wedding. Christ, what he wouldn’t give for a quiet, dark room with a bed and plenty of privacy.

Altan walked his camel to where Thalia and Gabriel stood, with the man Gabriel had rescued trotting beside. The bandit chief looked at Gabriel for a few moments. Gabriel stared back, keeping one arm tight around Thalia’s waist.

“You did not need to do that,” Altan said at last. “We would not have endangered our lives to save you.”

“I know.”

“Foolish. We are your captors.”

“He would have died unless someone did something.”

“And that someone was you.”

Gabriel shrugged. “You all seemed pretty busy protecting your own arses.”

Altan barked out a laugh. “That is our first rule. But, it seems, not yours.” He glanced at his men behind him.

“None of them have your courage.”

“You need to find better men.”

“Or make better allies.” Shaking his head, Altan reached into his del and produced the ruby. He tossed it to Gabriel, who caught the large gem with one hand. “There is no race.”

“No.” Gabriel slipped the ruby into the inside pocket of his jacket. He did not miss the looks of relief exchanged by the tribesmen.

“Nor treasure.”

“Not exactly.”

“Yet you are chased, just the same.”

“We are trying to protect something more valuable than the ruby, to take it someplace where it will be safe,” Thalia said. She wiped her wet cheeks on the sleeve of her del, erasing the traces of her relief and terror. She displayed more resilience than most men Gabriel knew. He didn’t quite understand how fate had been so kind to him. “But,” she continued, “if it falls into the hands of those men who pursue us, you will lose it all. The freedom you love. Your control over your own destiny. They will take everything that gives you pride.”

Altan tugged on his moustache while he contemplated this. His eyes scanned the northern horizon, seeing things even an experienced tracker like Gabriel never could. As much as Gabriel admired the unsparing landscape of the desert, the rolling steppes called to him more. Maybe because the steppe was Thalia’s home and always would be.

“Go on, then,” Altan said, tugging the reins of his camel so that he walked back toward his gathered men. He shouted something at a handful of his men, and they dismounted, carrying several packs. The men handed the packs to Gabriel. He opened them and found the kettle and all of their pistols and knives. Two more men came forward and handed Gabriel and Thalia their confiscated rifles. Gabriel carefully checked each and every gun to ensure they were still loaded. With an inward sigh of relief, he strapped on his revolver, sheathed his knife, and shouldered his rifle. Thalia and the tribesmen did the same.

“Go save the world,” Altan said.

“Are you setting us free?” Thalia asked.

“Free?” Altan repeated, shifting in his saddle so he looked at them. “Yes, you can go free.” He turned back to his men and said something so quickly, Gabriel couldn’t translate it. Whatever it was, the men agreed to it, and with great enthusiasm.

No point in questioning the gift. Gabriel and Thalia hurried to their camels, mounted, and, after Gabriel rechecked their position, started in the direction of the temple. Hopefully, it wasn’t more than another day or two away. The kettle hadn’t been forthcoming in mundane details like distance. Whatever the distance, Gabriel wanted it traversed speedily. The storm might have bought them more time—with any luck, the bleeding Heirs were buried under mountains of sand, though that happy outcome was unlikely—yet if they did make it to the temple before the Heirs caught them, it still wouldn’t be time enough to prepare for a siege. If the temple still stood, Gabriel wondered how many monks were there, and if any of them were fit for battle. He prayed that was the case. Otherwise it would be him, Thalia, and four herdsmen against an entire army.

Thalia, Gabriel, and their companions began to ride south. But they were making a hell of a lot more noise than
a handful of camels might. Gabriel looked over his shoulder. Altan and his men rode with them. The whole pack of brigands rode along, peaceful as lambs.

“This does not feel very free,” Gabriel said to Altan.

“Oh, you have your liberty,” the bandit chief answered. “But my men and I have decided that we are fond of our own freedom, as well. So we will help you in your task. Besides,” he added with a wry smile, “when I asked if there was treasure, you said, ‘Not exactly,’ which is better than ‘No.’”

“The men that chase us are killers,” Gabriel said.

“So are we. In fact, we are very good at it. And, in truth,” he admitted, “we have been a bit bored with our prey. They put up so little fight.”

“If you join us,” Gabriel warned, “you will have plenty to fight.”

Altan grinned. “Good.” He kicked his camel so that the beast broke into a canter. “I hope it will be soon,” he called over his shoulder.

It was Thalia’s soft chuckle that next commanded Gabriel’s attention. She wasn’t fearful, or angry or even annoyed. No, she was actually amused. He looked at her, and she saw the question in his eyes.

“Men,” she said, rueful, “are the most absurd creatures on this green earth.”

“But there are camels,” Gabriel pointed out.

“Believe me,” she answered, “I’ve taken camels into consideration.”
Chapter 16

Oasis

He’d had enough. Since Gabriel had saved the life of their comrade, the brigands had treated him like a lost brother, urging food and arkh on him with abandon. Thalia and the steppe tribesmen weren’t neglected, and given more than their share, but it was Gabriel who held pride of place around the campfire. His Mongol wasn’t strong enough to keep up with the endless male bluster that comprised most fireside talk. Still, it satisfied the bandits’ needs, so they could laugh and cuff each other like friendly bears.

But this had been going on for hours. Meanwhile, the night was growing darker and a quiet Thalia sat close, her legs touching his. In the glow of the firelight, the dusky desert behind her, she shined with beauty like an elemental fairy. Time in the Gobi sun had gilded her skin, and strands of copper and chestnut glimmered in her dark hair. He swayed precariously close to losing his wits if he didn’t have some time alone with her.

Yet, no matter how jovial the bandits were, Gabriel hadn’t any certainty that their allegiance would not change as quickly as the wind changed directions. Getting up from the fire with Thalia in tow might rile Altan and his men, something that they needed to avoid. So, like a boy stuck in a classroom, agonizing after a girl in the front row, Gabriel sat and ached. He tried to turn his thoughts to the mission.

“Tell me what you know about the monastery where we are heading,” he said to Altan. “You have heard of it?”

The bandit chief mulled, tugging on his beard. “Yes, but it has always been too far away for our interests.”

“So, it still stands?” asked Thalia.

Altan nodded. That was a relief. “It is called the Monastery of the Mountain. An isolated place. Only a few pilgrims go there.”

“It must be rather empty,” Thalia remarked.

“I do not think so,” Altan said. “Some of my brother bandits tell me that several dozen monks live at the monastery, those that want to be far from the world.”

Gabriel mulled over this, considering what it meant for their future battle site. It was hard, though, to concentrate on anything besides the hunger for Thalia that pulsed through him.

“Are the arkh and mutton not to your liking?” Altan demanded during a lull.

Gabriel immediately drained the skin he’d been given. The potent alcohol left a trail of heat in his throat. “Both are good. Damned better than the weak stuff served to me by the Maharajah of Kalam.”

Altan nodded with approval, glad to have bested a maharajah in something so important.

“Our Englishman has another hunger,” chortled another bandit, flicking his eyes toward Thalia.

Gabriel fought the urge to leap up and grab the leering bastard by his throat. Thalia seemed more sanguine, saying nothing but smiling a little. Her smile, Gabriel noticed, showed a hint of strain in the corners.

“For example,” Altan continued, “just today, that sandstorm wanted to rip us apart and would have killed stupid Dorj here if you had not come to his aid. And yet,” the chief went on, “not but a few hundred yards south of here is a small oasis, a little sheltered spot hidden amongst the rocks.”

This sounded rather promising. “Why are we not camped there?”

“It is not large enough to hold more than two people.”

“Sheltered,” Gabriel mused aloud.

“Private.” Altan did not smile, but it was clear in his voice. “And safe.”

He’d suffer the consequences, if there were any. But that was doubtful. Altan was giving Gabriel a gift. He wasn’t so thick-skulled to refuse a present. Gabriel took Thalia’s hand and rose to his feet. The revolver still hung from his belt, and he had a knife, as well. If anything happened, he would be prepared.
Looking up, Thalia saw the intent in Gabriel’s eyes, and stood. Her own eyes glittered, fire-warmed emeralds, as her grip tightened in his.

“Good night,” Gabriel said to Altan.

The chief nodded and drew on his pipe, keeping silent.

As Thalia and Gabriel left the group, knowing laughs and some coarse words trailed behind them, but neither he nor she paid attention. Gabriel collected the kettle, the ruby, and a blanket from the packs while Thalia waited, then, claiming her hand again, he strode off with her into the dusk.

They didn’t speak as they walked. Already, breath came fierce and fast in his chest. In the darkness, he could not see Thalia’s face, but heard her shallow breathing, felt heat suffuse her hand. Jesus, he wasn’t even sure they could make it as far as the oasis.

Nimble as mountain sheep, they leapt over the rocks, sometimes stopping to help one another traverse a particularly uneven bit, seldom letting go of one another unless absolutely necessary. The going was slower than Gabriel would’ve wanted, his anticipation already priming him like a pistol. Better to tread carefully than risk a twisted ankle. If only he had the power of flight, just to speed them on their way. At least his eyesight was well adjusted to the darkness, so that everything became shades of gray and purple, including Thalia, a shapely form keeping pace alongside him.

“Oh, thank Tenger,” she breathed. “I thought we’d never get here.”

The rocks encircled a pool, no bigger than a ger, with grasses and a few saxaul trees rustling softly in the breeze as they gathered close to the water. The banks surrounding the pool were narrow and pebbled. Overhead, the dark blue bowl of the sky reached infinity, evening stars coming out like coy birds. Altan was right. There was only enough room for two people. The rocks that surrounded the oasis couldn’t be traversed by a camel or horse. Anyone approaching would be heard. Utter privacy, for once. Merciful bloody heavens.

Gabriel leapt down from the rocks into the enclosure. He set down the blanket, kettle, and ruby, then turned, placing his hands on Thalia’s waist. He swung her down to join him. Once her boots touched the ground, he didn’t release her. She twined her arms over his shoulders, pulling herself against him, and the moment their bodies touched, desire exploded.

They took each other’s mouths, open, withholding nothing. It really was a taking, no use trying to make it sound pretty or delicate. Two people prodigiously hungry for each other. He stroked her mouth, its warm, willing sweetness, and she touched her tongue to his without restraint. He felt the slim strength of her waist and lower back. Just there, that small dip of her spine. He wanted to lick it. Gabriel pressed her close, and she made a sound that had only one meaning: more.

Stepping back, Gabriel pulled at his clothing. Everything came off. Thalia, clever and avid, did the same. All the while, they stared at each other, at their bodies being revealed, garment by garment. Soon, a pile of their combined clothes formed on the bank of the pond. She was a tall woman, but her clothing looked so delicate and feminine beside his own, and something as ordinary as her sock became ethereal and tender when draped over his rough leather boot.

When they were both completely naked, Thalia started toward him, but he shook his head and began backing toward the pond with his hands outstretched.

“Am I so bedraggled that you won’t touch me unless I bathe?” she asked, wry.

“I want to clean you.” His voice was barely more than a growl. “Everywhere.”

With deliberate steps, Thalia followed him into the pond, her hair dark and loose over her bare shoulders, brushing over the pink tips of her breasts. The water touched his ankles, and it was cool, almost bracing, but she kept coming toward him, so that when the water reached his calves, then higher up his thighs, he barely felt it. It was only her he knew.

They were both in the pond now, the water reaching their bellies. It was a measure of how much he wanted her that his cock did not flag or shrink in the chilly water, but stood upright, reaching for her. Thalia tried to take hold of him, but he edged away.

“I’ll see to you first,” he said.

Cupping his hands, he filled them with water, then poured it onto her shoulder. She gave a small shriek and laughed. “Ah, that’s cold!” She hit the water with a palm, splashing him.

So much for tender, worshipful ministrations. He should have known Thalia wouldn’t submit like some untouchable temple priestess. She was a witch taking a lover to invoke lusty magic, far too earthy for distant worship.

Gabriel splashed her back, dragging his fist through the water. Thalia stared at him, then pushed both hands across the surface of the pond, soaking his chest. In moments, they chased each other around the pond, dashing water back and forth. They laughed and taunted like children. Soon, neither noticed the temperature of the water.
Gabriel hadn’t played like this since he was a lad swimming in the quarry pool. It was bloody marvelous.

Both of them sopping, Gabriel lunged. Thalia yelped as he snared her legs. They both toppled completely into the water, submerging briefly. When they came back to the surface, they twined and sported like otters, swimming in the shallow pond in a tangle of wet limbs. When Thalia tried to grab him to duck his head underwater, he seized her wrists and hauled her against him. Then he kissed her.

Hot, so hot, her mouth. For long minutes, they kissed as water swirled around them. Thalia kissed as though there was nothing else on earth that gave her more pleasure, and only he could give it to her. He stroked her sleek body, she caressed him, pressing the wet flesh of her breasts into his chest, her nipples taut points brushing against him, erasing thought. When she wrapped her legs around his waist, the heat of her sex cupping his rigid, pounding erection, he groaned.

Gabriel scooped her up and strode from the pond, water churning around him. He set her down just long enough to unfold the blanket. She didn’t wait to be invited. Thalia lay herself down and held her arms out to him. But he had plans.

He knelt between her legs, his hands spreading her thighs. She raised herself up on her elbows to look at him with wide, aroused eyes. “Been wanting to do this since I saw you wearing only a blanket and a blush,” he rumbled. And before she could say anything, he lowered his head.

“Gabriel,” she cried as his tongue touched her. “God!”

The pond hadn’t washed away her desire. She was slick and full and tasted of sweet midnight. Gabriel traced the shape of her lips, delved deeper, pushing his tongue inside her, then out, swirling over the firm bud of her clit. He held her down as she thrashed against him, barely able to keep screams from uncoiling deep in her throat. Her legs draped over his shoulders, her heels pressing into his back as she arched up from the blanket. He reached up and rubbed the tips of her breast, and she gasped, thrusting her chest high. He could come from this alone.

“Stop, stop,” she mewed.

He immediately stilled, looking up with her juices glistening on his mouth and chin. “What is it, love?”

“I want to try,” she panted. “I want you in my mouth.” His cock jumped. Thalia lifted herself up and began crawling to him. She pushed him down onto the blanket. He went willingly.

Thalia knelt between his legs as he had hers. She stared at his impatient cock, licking her lips. “Tell me what to do,” she breathed.

“Take it,” he rasped, “take it in your hand. That’s right…oh, Jesus. Now, run your hand up and down. You can go harder than that. Yes.” He tried, without much success, to keep his head up so he could watch her. She looked so incredible, his cock in her hand, her eyes glazed but sharp with lust. It didn’t take her long at all to find the right pressure, the right rhythm.

“When can I take you in my mouth?”

“Now…now would be good. Start with your tongue. The head. That’s the most sensitive.” He groaned as her tongue flicked out to twirl around his penis, lapping at the fluid that leaked from the tip. Up and down she licked him, as if he was barley candy, while her hand stroked him. “Bloody Christ. Holy God.”

“I want you in my mouth,” she said between tonguings around him.

“Yes, in.”

She went slowly, adjusting to the feel of his cock in her mouth, first the head and then, when she grew more bold, further. When he felt himself engulfed in the heat of her, her tongue wrapped against his shaft, Gabriel’s hips bucked. “Fucking hell!”

He felt her smile around him. “Such language.”

“I can’t—ah, sweet Jesus—stop.” He gritted his teeth as she sucked, pulling at him, giving him an incredible pleasure he’d never experienced. He propped himself on his elbows, needing to see her, desperate for the sight of her lips wrapped around him. He swore again as he saw her thighs rubbing against each other while she sucked his cock. She wanted touching there.

“I’ll do that,” he growled.

Thalia lifted her head, dazed, but understood readily when Gabriel pulled her up and turned her around. He lay on his back and she straddled him, her thighs on either side of his head. She faced his legs. With shaking hands, he gripped her thighs and lowered her closer to his mouth. At the feel of his tongue against her folds, Thalia gasped, then sank down, taking his penis back into her mouth.

God, he was so close. So close. He tried to concentrate, licking, sucking, drawing on her clit, her pussy so unfathomably wet, so beyond delicious. He’d never heard a sound so wonderful as Thalia screaming her climax around his cock. But he wasn’t satisfied. Not until she screamed again, and again, panting around him. When the last tremor subsided, Gabriel flipped her onto her back, placed himself between her legs, and plunged into her with one, fierce thrust. She bowed up from the blanket, moaning.
He showed no mercy, not to her nor to himself, as he fucked her with hard, deep strokes. Thalia writhed and clawed, wrapping her legs around his waist, unable to form words except long trills of sound. Gabriel pounded into her, giving her everything. “So good,” he rumbled. “Goddamn it.”

Wrapping one arm around her waist, the other hand braced against the ground, raised up on his knees, Gabriel held Thalia tight and let his body speak what he never could articulate with enough satisfaction. Inside her. Forever. That’s all he wanted. That’s where he belonged.

Thalia screamed once more, clenching around him. Then his climax hit him, so hard he almost lost consciousness. Anyone within miles could hear him, but he didn’t bloody care. He cared for only one thing, one person, and she was beneath him, singing out her own pleasure.

“Thalia,” he gasped. “I love you. I love you so goddamn much.”

He kept himself from collapsing on top of her, but only barely. She sighed when they rolled onto their sides, facing each other, with him still inside of her.

The sun had long since set, but she glowed, as brilliant as her soul. She trailed her fingers through his damp hair. “Gabriel, my warrior,” she murmured. “I never knew I could love anyone the way I love you.”

“And how is that?” he asked, languorous but exhilarated by their declarations.

She pressed kisses against his jaw and snuggled close. “Without fear.”

But as they drifted in a dream bliss, Gabriel could not say the same. He loved her. She loved him. And that scared the hell out of him.

Neither Thalia nor Gabriel were quite ready to return to the encampment, so they wrapped themselves in the blanket, body pressed to body, warm and alive in the shelter of the rocks. Full night had fallen. She wasn’t sure how long they had been at the oasis—time seemed to lose its weight. Minutes, or years. It didn’t matter to her.

“Why did you join the army?” she asked. He was snug against her back, cupped, with his arms around her waist, his wonderful rough hands stroking the curve of her belly. Thalia felt such peace, such rightness, being with him this way.

She felt his breath in her hair as he spoke. “Not much choice in Brumby. Work in the mines, or don’t work at all. I was lucky to go to school most days instead of working in the pit, like other children.”

“I don’t know much about coal mining,” Thalia admitted. “Sounds…dark.”

“And dangerous, and filthy. There were floods, collapses, explosions. The chokedamp and afterdamp that could kill if you breathed it.” His voice sounded flat, as if he was used to such horror. “So I enlisted after my da died. He was my last family.”

Thalia shuddered to think of Gabriel, who radiated light and life, shut down into sunless mines where every moment was peril. She knew that in the army he faced danger nearly every day, but there was something so relentless and futile about clawing fuel from the depths of the earth, where the enemy wasn’t another country’s soldiers, but the work itself.

Whatever darkness took him, she wanted to chase it back. “You must have liked the army, to stay for so long.”

“Well enough. Fine days and bad, like anything. Sometimes, I do miss it. I didn’t like killing, but I liked being on missions, having a purpose. And the day-to-day life could be good. I remember,” he said, growing a bit more relaxed, “think it was in Nagpur, and the rains had come. Months and months of it. Hard to imagine in a place like this.”

“I like being wet with you.”

Gabriel’s eyes glittered with hunger. “This won’t be the last time, sweetheart.”

Her body, much as she wanted him again, was spent. She tried to turn the conversation back. “So, the rains in India?”

He understood her tiredness. “Months of this, constant rain, and we were ready to lose our taffy. One day, me and Lieutenant Carlyle start thinking of everything we’re going to do once the rain stops. Things outside. Paint a picture. Write a letter. Tune a piano.”

“Do you know how to tune a piano?”

“I’d learn, just so I could do it outside.”

He puzzled her, after all this time, but in a way that delighted her. “So, did you learn?”

“No. But this went on a while, Carlyle and me trying to top each other with our after-the-monsoon plans, until somebody, Reynolds, I think, told us to either get off our arses and do something, or shut our gobs. So we went out and played football. After a bit, some more men came out and joined us. Sepoys, too.”

“In the rain?”

“In the rain. The pitch was muddy.”

“Who won?”
“My team. Made Carlyle polish my boots every evening for a month.”
“That doesn’t sound so bad.”
“With his pillowcase.”
Thalia heard herself actually giggle, for the first time in years. “I hope you got them good and grimy.”
“Always walked through the stables before coming back to my quarters.”
Now she shook with laughter, and Gabriel joined her. It felt so good, to share this with him. When he’d first come into her father’s ger in Urga, Thalia never would have suspected he could be this light, this playful, yet the more she learned about him, the more she felt right in giving him her love. She felt light, too, having at last spoken of her feelings to him. And he loved her. Loved her. Such a blessing.
“I can’t believe I can get a laugh out of you, talking about muddy football and horseshit,” Gabriel chuckled.
“Doesn’t speak very highly of me,” Thalia said wryly. She felt herself turned so that she faced Gabriel, and, even in the dark of night, his eyes burned golden and serious.
“I’m a bloody lucky bugger,” he said with a guttural rasp. “A rough soldier who’s known little of softness or niceness. Never thought I’d find a woman I could talk to without making a complete ass of myself. But you don’t expect me to have dainty manners, and you even like being with me, just as I am.” He sounded genuinely surprised, and he was not a man to devalue himself.
“Just as you are,” she repeated solemnly, then kissed him, her hands on the archangel sculpture of his cheekbones. “I never thought I would find the same, either.”
“Any man would be daft not to want you.”
Her laugh was low and rueful. “Wanting and loving are very different. I know that men can want quite easily.”
Gabriel muttered something about Russian bastards that needed castrating.
“Yes, him,” Thalia said, rather appallingly pleased with his desire for vengeance on her behalf, “but most others, too.”
“Your father is so honest with you?”
“Oh, no. He never wanted to remarry after my mother died, and he had plenty of opportunity. And when it came time to discuss…family matters…” She grimaced. “I think he was more embarrassed than I. But most of my friends are male, and they’ve been good enough to be candid about themselves. And their appetites. Which almost never include things beyond the most basic and physical. Whenever I see Bennett—”
“Who?” Gabriel demanded.
Thalia kissed him again. “Bless you for your jealousy. But I’ve known Bennett Day since I was fourteen. He’s a Blade. He could have very easily been recruited to the Heirs. Extraordinary with maps and codes, and from a good family, too. And, to my father’s unending disappointment, but vicarious thrill, the worst libertine. By ‘worst,’ I mean successful and unrepentant. God, the stories Bennett tells over pipes late into the night. My father always sends me to bed so my delicate ears aren’t harmed, but I listen outside.”
“Burgess should keep you locked up whenever that Day is around,” Gabriel grumbled.
“To Bennett, I’m more of a younger sister than potential seduction,” she said. “And, though I admit to a small childish infatuation with him when I was around sixteen, I’ve not once been tempted, nor has he tried. He’s perfectly happy moving from one conquest to another. I wish I could say that, underneath it all, he’s desperately lonely, but that isn’t the case.”
Gabriel rolled onto his back, pulling Thalia with him so she lay partially atop him. He ran his hands up and down her back, and she shivered with pleasure at his touch. “Not every man is like this Day bloke.”
“Thank God for that. Or we would be faced with a population explosion.” She let her hands drift over the healthy brawn of his chest, feeling the dusting of hair, the puckered flesh of scars. The body of a man who’d lived with energy and purpose, and would continue to do so. At least, as long as circumstances kept him alive. It was horrible that, possibly within a day, the Heirs would do everything in their power to crush out Gabriel’s life, and hers. Horrible for so many reasons.
“Thalia,” Gabriel said, “I’m not the sort of man who’s ever had to think of anybody but himself.”
“You’re not selfish, if that’s what you’re saying.”
“Maybe not. But what I mean is”—he turned his head to look at her—“what I mean is, I don’t mind the battle that’s ahead, but the thought of your being hurt or worse—”
“That’s not going to happen,” she said immediately.
He shook his head. “Years of combat taught me. I can fight and fight, but that might not be enough.” His voice rusted and caught, but he cleared his throat. “Now that I’ve found you, it scares me witless to think of anything happening. To you. I’m not used to being…afraid.”
A sudden realization came to her. “So this is love,” she said quietly. “The daily prospect of joy or disaster.”
For a long time, neither of them spoke as they considered this, touching each other with gentle caresses. Then
touch warmed, grew heated. Her tired body revived itself. Gabriel’s hands moved from her back to cup the curves of her bottom while her hands also moved down, from his chest to lower, where she wrapped her fingers around his stiffening erection. He stroked her breast and between her legs, and soon they were both gasping. Wordlessly, Thalia mounted him, thrusting him deep inside of her, wanting to take him as far into her as she could, as if there was a place, protected by the intimate bond of their joining, where they could take shelter and know with conviction that they would share tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that, and all the days that followed.

There was no certainty to be found, but as their bodies and hearts moved together, pleasure overtaking them both, Thalia hoped that even this small moment of rapture caught the dispassionate gaze of the world’s magic, and that, somehow, there might be just enough enchantment to keep her and Gabriel safe.
Chapter 17
A Good Place to Stand and Fight

The rider approached, and his face looked grim. As he neared the waiting group, he shook his head.

“They are no more than a day behind us,” he said. “And their numbers are growing.”

“Is your friend sure?” Gabriel asked.

The rider looked over his shoulder, to where another man on camelback rode away. “He saw them himself, and his cousin did, as well. There are over a hundred men now. Impossible to miss on these gravel-covered plains.”

Yes, the huge stretches of barren expanse would do little to hide an advancing army. And there was no way for Gabriel to hide the tracks of his party. Everything stirred up dust, making their trail blaze like lightning. If they could outrun the Heirs, it would only lead them straight to a battle. He glanced at the assembled group. Two dozen brigands, four tribesmen, himself and Thalia. Against over a hundred. Possibly the monks at the monastery might fight, but Gabriel couldn’t count on that. He’d faced tough odds before. But he’d never gone up against an enemy that not only outnumbered his own forces, but had magic as a weapon.

“And the monastery?”

“It is known as Sha Chuan Si, and it is fifteen miles from here, so says my kinsman.”

“No, the huge stretches of barren expanse would do little to hide an advancing army.”

Can we do it?” Thalia asked. She tried to keep the worry from her voice, but wasn’t completely successful.

He turned to her, and there it was. The sweet, sharp pain of loving her in the midst of madness. “We will,” he answered, and had to believe it or else lose his mind. “But we ride hard.”

“I thought we had been,” she said, her smile weary.

“A Sunday promenade, compared to what we have to do.” When she nodded, he put his heels to his camel. Altan and his men immediately followed.

As they rode, Gabriel’s mind filled with a hundred different scenarios. If the Heirs overtook them en route. If they reached the temple but could not get inside. If they could get inside but the monks conspired against them. If the monks would not fight. If the monks would fight. The permutations were endless. And through it all, Gabriel twisted his insides, trying to figure how he could keep Thalia safe throughout all this. She wouldn’t agree to shutting herself up in some locked room while a battle raged around her. He loved her for her fighting spirit, but that same spirit put her in harm’s way.

No. He had to turn his thoughts to something else. So he reviewed past sieges, trying to find the best possible strategy.

Midday came and went, and they stopped briefly to rest the already tired camels. The sturdy beasts were being pushed to their limits. One of them had already died earlier that morning from the hard pace, and a pack camel had taken its place. After everyone shared a quick meal, it was back into the saddle. Gabriel estimated they’d traveled over ten miles.

“Not too much farther,” he said to Thalia.

“You’re an optimist at heart,” she answered.

“If I was an optimist, then I’d say that not only was the temple close, but that they likely had fifty cannons, two hundred rifles, and a huge canopied bed.”

“A bed won’t do much in a battle.”

“I’m thinking about after.”

She smiled wickedly as her cheeks flushed. “I’m beginning to embrace positive thinking myself.”

As she rode ahead, Altan drew up alongside Gabriel. “Are most white women like her?” the bandit chief asked.

“If so, perhaps I should consider moving west. Or go to Russia.”

“You won’t find any other woman like her,” Gabriel said tightly. He didn’t care for the way Altan looked at Thalia, not so much a leer as speculation. If Gabriel had his way, he’d make the whole damn party wear blinders.

“That is too bad,” Altan said. “Is she for sale?”

“Don’t want to keep your testicles,” Gabriel replied. “Or maybe you want to wear them as jewelry.”


“And tell your men.”
“Judging by the way you look at her, they already know.”

“Oh, thank Tenger,” Thalia sighed hours later. “We made it.”

Gabriel kept his relief in check as he surveyed their destination. He wasn’t certain that the monks would even let them inside the front gate, let alone let them use their monastery as the location of the upcoming stand against the Heirs. Assuming that the monks did welcome them and were somehow willing to take on the Heirs, the monastery of Sha Chuan Si was formidable and well-situated. All the gilded temples in Urga, even the busy sprawl of Erdene Zuu, couldn’t equal the impressive sight of the desert monastery perched at the summit of a broad, flat-topped rock. Though other large rocky outcroppings rose nearby, the temple on its hill stood alone, the square fist of man in the middle of stark wilderness. Wide, dun-colored walls surrounded the temple, topped by curved red Chinese roofs. A tall, round tower stood just inside the front wall. A single steep escarpment led up the side of the rock to a giant, heavy door. Gabriel saw no windows, either. It seemed impenetrable.

“A good place to stand and fight,” he said to Thalia and Altan.

“Hopefully, our welcome will be a little less fearsome than the building itself,” Thalia answered.

“Do you speak Chinese?” Gabriel asked.

“A little.”

Gabriel turned to Altan. “And you and your men?”

“We can say, ‘Throw down your weapons,’” Altan replied.

“I’ll need you to translate,” Gabriel said to Thalia.

There would be no hiding their approach. As the camels struggled up the slope, getting closer to the front gate, Gabriel saw several shaved heads peering at them quizzically over the top of the wall. Judging by the number of guns his party carried, they couldn’t be mistaken for pilgrims, unless pilgrims judged devotion by number of bullets.

Once they were a few dozen yards away, Gabriel dismounted. “I need you and your men to stay back,” he said to Altan.

Grumbling, the bandit chief and his men obeyed.

Thalia and the tribesmen stayed close and dismounted. Gabriel tucked the wrapped kettle under his arm, put the ruby in his pocket, and kept one hand resting on the butt of his revolver. It might not be the most friendly stance, but he was willing to make a bad impression to save lives.

Thalia walked beside him as they neared the massive gate. He resisted the urge to take her hand, since he needed to keep himself ready for any possibility, but he wanted her close.

“It’s very quiet,” she murmured. Their boots on the gravel crunched loudly. “Should we be concerned?”

“Always.”

“Not particularly reassuring.”

“Realistic.”

Nearing the thick wooden gate, he saw there was a small door set into the surface. No doubt to make entering and exiting easier. He didn’t like simply approaching head on, it was too vulnerable a position, but there was no other choice. Just as he wondered whether he was supposed to knock, the small door opened. But instead of a monk waiting for them, they were met by a white man. In English clothing.

Gabriel immediately pulled his revolver. Too bloody late. Somehow the Heirs had gotten to the temple ahead of them.

Then Thalia yelled, bolted from his side and ran toward the man. Jesus, did she think to tackle the bloke herself? “Wait, damn it!” Gabriel shouted, but she flung herself at the Englishman, throwing her arms around him.

“Get out of the way!”

Thalia glanced over her shoulder at Gabriel, the smile on her face freezing. “Put the gun away, Gabriel,” she said with enforced calm. She let her arms fall from the Englishman’s shoulders. Gabriel was aware of other people coming through the temple door, but he remained focused on the Englishman, who was smiling with remarkable good humor, considering he had a revolver pointed at his handsome face.

“A new friend, Thalia?” the unknown man asked with a quirked brow.

“Who the hell are you?” Gabriel demanded.

Thalia took the stranger’s hand and drew him forward, reaching toward Gabriel with the other. As politely as if they were in a drawing room, she said, “Bennett, may I introduce Captain Gabriel Huntley, late of Her Majesty’s Thirty-third of Foot. Gabriel, this is Bennett Day. Of the Blades of the Rose.”

“A pleasure, I’m sure,” murmured Day as he held out his free hand, though he didn’t release Thalia.

“The libertine?” Gabriel asked, turning to Thalia. She reddened, but Day laughed.

“Is that what they call me? What a charming name. Most people just call me bastard.”

Gabriel grudgingly gave Day his hand to shake, eyeing the man without attempting to hide his mistrust. He
didn’t quite have Gabriel’s height, but he was a pretty collection of bones, dark haired, light eyes, and built like a
boxer. Day might smile and twinkle like a beau, but Gabriel didn’t doubt he could lay out a decent right hook. His
grip was strong enough.

Day turned to Thalia with an easy smile that probably charmed scores of women. “Desert living must agree
with you, Thalia. You look positively radiant.”

She made a face while Gabriel considered how far down the man’s throat his foot might go. “You mean, I look
sunburned and haggard,” she corrected.

“A bit more golden, perhaps—” Day conceded, “but lovely, just the same. Or perhaps”—he turned a
considering eye to Gabriel—“it isn’t the desert, so much as the company.”

Thalia must have sensed how close Gabriel was to pummeling Day, because she quickly changed the subject.
“What are you doing here?” Even though it was a perfectly ordinary question, it rankled a bit to see how much
pleasure Day’s presence gave her. This was the man she had admitted to fancying once. The man who bedded
women as often as most men put on their boots. Who still held her hand.

“You father sent us,” Day answered.

“Us?” Gabriel repeated.

“Yes, us,” said a deep voice behind them.

Everyone turned, and Thalia let out another girlish yell to see the newcomer, breaking free from Day.

“Catullus!”

One of the most elegant men Gabriel had ever seen smiled down at her as he embraced her. He looked as
though he’d just stepped off the pages of a fashion journal, complete with dark green embroidered waistcoat,
perfectly fitted gray coat and trousers, and sparkling boots. He wore neat, wire-trimmed spectacles that barely hid
the powerful intelligence in his dark eyes.

“Gabriel, this is Catullus Graves,” Thalia said, stepping back. “The Blades’ scientific wizard.”

Gabriel couldn’t stop himself from blurtng, “But, you’re Negro.”

“I know,” Graves answered, his gaze hooded.

“Sorry,” Gabriel said, shaking his head. “Damned glad to meet you, Mr. Graves. That viewing eagle you created is brilliant. Really saved our arses. You’ll have to tell me how you came up with the idea.”

Relaxing, Graves shook Gabriel’s hand. “Glad it came in handy, Captain. It’s a design I’ve been refining for
the past few years.”

“Hsiung Ming,” Thalia said brightly as she turned to a lean Chinese man who had come forward, “This is quite a reunion.”

“Graves and Day collected me in Peking,” he answered with a smile. His English was perfect, better than
Gabriel’s; it spoke of private tutors and exceptional intellect. “Graves, brilliant as he is, has no ear for the Chinese
language, so I have accompanied them from there.”

Thalia introduced Gabriel to this man, adding that he represented the Blades in Northeastern China. It was
certainly one of the most strange experiences of Gabriel’s life, standing outside the walls of a Buddhist temple in the
Gobi Desert, cordially shaking hands with men who were all part of a secret society with as much pleasantry as if
they were meeting by a punch bowl.

Before any of them spoke any further, Thalia, Graves, Day, and Hsiung Ming gathered in a circle, with Gabriel
looking on curiously. The four linked hands.

“North is eternal,” Thalia said.

“South is forever,” said Graves.

“West is endless,” said Day.

“East is infinite.” Hsiung Ming was the last to complete the watchwords. At their conclusion, everyone seemed
to breathe just a bit easier. Then Day turned a shrewd gaze toward Gabriel.

“Can he be trusted?” he asked Thalia as he kept his eyes fixed on Gabriel.

A reasonable question, given the circumstances, but Gabriel still wanted to plow his fist into Day’s well-formed
face, perhaps see how well he’d fare with a broken nose. Although, a small bump already marred the bridge of
Day’s nose, so maybe someone, a jealous husband, had already enjoyed the privilege.

“I trust him completely,” Thalia said with absolute sincerity. She laced her fingers with Gabriel’s, and he felt at
once the effect of her touch and words, like warm satin sliding over his skin.

An older man in monk’s yellow robes approached and spoke with Hsiung Ming, who quickly translated. “Have
you the Source?” he asked Gabriel.

Unwrapping the fabric that swaddled the kettle, Gabriel revealed it to the monk, whose eyes widened. “Please,
inside, everyone,” said the monk. “And quickly.”
“But who are these men?” Day asked, looking at the tribesmen.
“Friends,” Thalia answered.
“Pretty rough bunch,” Day murmured, looking at Altan and his men further away.
“The Heirs have over a hundred men,” Gabriel said. He drew Thalia close, until her hip touched his. It wasn’t the most subtle signal, but Gabriel didn’t give a damn. “Being snobbish isn’t an option.”

The head monk began to look frantic, waving his arms. With a groan, the giant gate was opened so everyone in the party, including their camels, was able to enter the monastery. Monks of every age watched the strange parade of brigands, steppe tribesmen, Englishmen, including one of black skin, a Chinese man, and a white woman in Mongol clothing filing into the large outer courtyard of the temple. Once everyone was inside, the door was shut as quickly as possible, which wasn’t very fast at all, and bolted.

“Impressive defenses for a place of worship,” Gabriel remarked. He noticed that the stone pagoda he had seen earlier was seven stories high. It stood just inside the walls, close to the gate, and would make for an effective lookout station.

“It is not uncommon for the monastery to be attacked by bandits,” the head monk said, casting a wary eye at the brigands. The men in question looked around at the gilded pillars that supported the interior buildings, as if trying to figure out how to pry the gold from the columns. Gabriel wondered if the bandits would simply cut the pillars down and strap them onto their camels’ backs.

“Then you’re prepared for a siege.”

The monk shook his head. “We are not equipped for warfare, only for protecting ourselves.”

Gabriel cursed as he surveyed the monastery, trying to determine the best ways to fend off an attack. Their numbers had increased slightly, but that only barely increased the probability they could not only keep the Heirs back, but defeat them as well. As he scanned the courtyard, Thalia spoke with the Blades.

“Tell me how you got here,” she insisted.

“Found out about poor Tony the morning after he was murdered,” Graves explained, somber. “We knew he was heading to Mongolia, so Day and I took the first ship we could, but it was weeks later. Like Hsiung Ming said, we met up with him in Peking and went to your father in Urga. He told us that you and Captain Huntley were already on the trail.”

“While we were there,” Day continued, “Franklin’s servant Batu showed up and told us all what had happened, and that you and the captain were trying to get the Source to a place of safekeeping. Quite a tale. You’ve done an incredible job, Thalia. You and Captain Huntley both have, and neither of you are even Blades.”

Thalia didn’t seem to focus on his praise, though Gabriel knew it meant quite a bit to her. “How on earth did you get here so quickly?” she asked. “We nearly killed ourselves covering the same amount of distance.”

“Graves,” Hsiung Ming said, admiration plain in his voice. “He built…I suppose you might call it a ship that sails upon the land. It took us here much faster than any horse or wagon, and never tired.”

Gabriel turned and couldn’t help gaping at the inventor. “That is something I need to see.”

“Perhaps later,” Graves said with a smile. “First, you and your party need to get something to eat, and then we can discuss strategies. I believe Lan Shun, the head monk, wants to be involved. This is his monastery, after all, and he knows more about the Source than any of us.”

“The Heirs aren’t more than a day behind us,” Gabriel said, grim. “And I don’t know if this place is going to have what we need to defeat them.”

“Captain, there is something you should know.” Graves took off his spectacles and carefully cleaned them with a fine lawn handkerchief, embroidered on the corner with CAG. “If there’s one word to describe me, it’s resourceful.”

Thalia hadn’t any actual experience with war councils, but she found it difficult to believe that a finer collection of minds had ever been assembled, though the location was a bit unusual. Buddhist monasteries were places of peaceful contemplation and prayer, yet there was nothing peaceful or contemplative about the discussion going on at that moment inside Sha Chuan Si’s temple.

Statues and images of the Buddha and his disciples stared out from altars, unruffled and unconcerned with earthly matters, as the council sat on the floor to debate their strategy. Hsiung Ming provided an ongoing translation for Lan Shun, the head monk. Since Gabriel was deeply mired in the conversation, Thalia translated the English for Altan. Catullus sketched out a plan of the monastery’s layout, which consisted of the temple, several halls, courtyards, and smaller living quarters and spaces for meditation. The tall, round pagoda soared seven stories high close to the front wall. Even though it was plain that Gabriel didn’t much care for Bennett, he’d set aside his ill feelings so they might confer on the placement of what Gabriel kept referring to as “troops,” although Altan took umbrage at the idea that his men were so weak-minded they needed to be in the army.

A mechanically minded intellect, a seasoned soldier, a code breaker and expert strategist, a Chinese scholar, a
Buddhist monk, a bandit chief, and an Englishwoman more at home on horseback than in a salon. All talking battle strategy. It sounded like the beginning to a bizarre joke. Yet there wasn’t much amusing about the situation they faced. The Heirs would most likely be at the monastery by the following morning, just over twelve hours hence.

Thalia kept glancing at Gabriel as he was deep in discussion with Altan and Bennett, translating back and forth from Mongol to English and back again. Focused, intense, Gabriel reviewed options and proposed ideas, sharply alert so that his eyes glittered like golden coins. She watched the play of muscle in his arm as he pointed out an area on the monastery map that would need particular attention, and wondered at the strange design of the world, to give her the man she needed but at a moment when everything was uncertain. Such a short amount of time they had left together. She knew they needed to plan for the battle that lay ahead, but she wished desperately that the hours they had remaining could be spent more privately.

Every now and then, Gabriel would look over at her, and their gazes would lock and hold. The paired intoxicants of desire and tenderness overwhelmed her each time. It amazed Thalia that he could be at all jealous of Bennett, when everything she felt for Gabriel was plainly written in her face, her eyes. The polished charm of Bennett Day meant nothing to her compared to the real emotion one gruff soldier had shown her.

The Blades were her brothers, but Gabriel was her heart.

“They’ll try to breach the outer wall,” Gabriel said, interrupting her thoughts, “through the door, but we should also consider their coming over the walls themselves.”

“Grappling hooks?” Bennett asked.

“Most likely, since they won’t have time or resources to build siege towers or ladders.”

“Perhaps we could cut the lines attached to the grappling hooks,” Thalia suggested. “Though I don’t know with what.”

“I believe I have an answer to that, though it doesn’t involve cutting the ropes, exactly,” Catullus said. On another piece of paper, he drew up a diagram and quickly explained how the idea he had in mind worked. Everyone agreed that this invention would make itself very useful, so a few monks were given direction by Hsiung Ming on how to assemble the devices.

“My men can take up sniper positions on the outer wall,” Altan offered.

“That will be helpful,” Gabriel said. “But we need to consider what will happen if the Heirs get inside the monastery. How are they with hand-to-hand combat?”

The bandit chief grinned. “It is one of their favorites.”

“And Blades receive training in close combat,” Bennett added. “Although Thalia—”

“Will be fine,” she said firmly. The idea that she might, and probably would, kill someone soon set her stomach to flipping over and over, but if it was a choice between the life of an Heir or their mercenaries versus someone she cared about or an ally, she knew she could make the right decision.

“You should have seen her at the nadaam festival,” Gabriel said, pride warming his voice. “She could outshoot Genghis Khan.”

They shared an intimate smile. Only Gabriel could make a compliment on her archery sound like the wickedest kind of flirtation. She felt herself already growing damp.

Catullus cleared his throat, reclaiming their attention. “I will construct some incendiary devices for outside the monastery walls. I’ve also been working on a weapon that I think will be effective for closer combat, should the walls be breached.” He showed them another drawing that made Thalia gape like a baby at the circus. “The construction of it will be somewhat involved,” Catullus continued, “so I believe I will have to take care of it myself as soon as we have finished here. Operating the weapon is a two-man job so Hsiung Ming and I will commandeer it during the battle.”

“Holy hell,” Gabriel said with a shake of his head. “You must be running a fever, to keep the machinery in your brain going so fast.”

The smile Catullus gave Gabriel was rueful. “A family blessing and curse. I never get a full night’s sleep, since I’m always jumping out of bed to write something down.”

“Perhaps you need a better reason to stay in bed,” Bennett suggested.

Catullus rolled his eyes. “I’m surprised you get anything done, since you’re always in the prone position.”

“Not just prone, but standing, and sitting, and—”

“Gentlemen,” Thalia said, interrupting. “We’re discussing warfare, not Bennett’s acrobatics.”

“We’ll need to find someplace safe for the monks,” Gabriel said. “One of these dormitories could work.”

“Excuse me,” Lan Shun interjected through Hsiung Ming. “The kettle is ours to protect. We will not meekly hide while you risk your lives to defend us and the kettle.” The object in question was cradled in his arms.

“You said that you weren’t equipped for warfare,” Gabriel said. “Only for protecting yourselves.”

The head monk nodded. “That is true. But we have a special way of protecting ourselves that, I think, will be
more than useful.” He rose and bade everyone follow him into the courtyard outside the temple. When they had assembled, Lan Shun called two monks, who gathered in their bright robes and bowed, first to Thalia and her party, and then to each other. Only Hsiung Ming seemed to understand what was about to happen, but he kept silent.

“I don’t see how that is much of a defense,” Bennett said dryly. “Unless the monks plan on ‘courtesying’ the Heirs to death.”

Lan Shun paid Bennett no heed. “Watch.” At his signal, the monks tucked their robes close to their bodies and bowed to each other again. Then one monk, slightly taller than the other, advanced on his brother with a series of flying kicks that happened so quickly, Thalia could barely see them. The shorter monk nimbly dodged the blows, then launched his own attack. With powerful fists, he struck out, and the taller monk barely avoided catching one in his chest. The tall monk tried to sweep his leg under the short monk and knock him to the ground, but again, the short monk danced out of reach. When the tall monk advanced, throwing sharp punches with the sides of his fists, the short monk leapt forward, grabbed his opponent’s arm, twisted it around, then flipped the tall monk onto his back. While the tall monk lay on the ground, the shorter one brought the side of his hand down onto his throat, just pulling up so that he did not actually make contact, but the intent was clear. If the shorter monk had wanted to, he could have hit his opponent with a choking strike.

Then the short monk backed away, the taller one stood, and they faced each other again before bowing. They left silently when Lan Shun dismissed them.

Everyone, with the exception of Hsiung Ming, gawked. “What the bloody hell was that?” Gabriel demanded after a pause.

“Shaolin kung fu,” Hsiung Ming said, and Lan Shun nodded. “An ancient art of defending oneself and harnessing the body’s magical energy that the monks practice. I have seen and studied it, myself.”

“I want to learn,” Gabriel said.

“Me, too,” seconded Thalia, simultaneously with Bennett.

“As would I,” added Catullus.

“It takes many years,” Lan Shun said. “Which we do not have. But you will not shoulder the burden of protecting the kettle alone.”

“How many monks reside here?” Gabriel asked.

“With myself, fifty-three.”

“And do you have any weapons, or are you trained only in hand-to-hand combat?”

“Spears and short swords. I retain the key to the armory.”

Gabriel nodded. “We’ll need someplace to keep the kettle so that it remains secure.”

“It will do its part,” Lan Shun answered.

Thalia asked, “You’ll use its magic?” When Lan Shun nodded, she turned to Catullus. “Can Blades do that?”

“The code of the Blades prohibits them from using magic that is not their own, but it allows for the Source’s original owners to do so,” he answered.

Intrigued, Thalia asked Lan Shun, “What does it do?”

“As I said, it will do its part,” was all the head monk would say.

“Can you not tell us anything about it?” Catullus asked. “Its purpose, its age?”

Lan Shun walked from the courtyard, everyone following, into a smaller building, stocked to the rafters with scrolls of paper. A library. The room whispered of ancient knowledge and smelled of ink. Though Thalia read no Chinese, she would have loved to spend at least a few hours pouring over the scrolls, feeling the power of the words they contained. Lan Shun spoke with the monk who tended the library, and the librarian took a ladder to scale the walls. At the very top was a locked cabinet, which the librarian opened using a key tied with yellow silk around his wrist. He took from the cabinet a fragile scroll, brittle around the edges, and carefully brought it down to Lan Shun.

With reverence, the head monk spread the scroll out on a table. Painted upon its surface were Chinese characters, accompanied by small detailed paintings. In the first, a man was shown with his arms spread wide as he stood beneath the nighttime sky. “The kung fu that you just witnessed is part of our belief in harnessing chi, the energy of the body. Chi does not merely exist within the human body, but within every living thing.” He looked up to see if any of the strangers or Westerners would debate this notion, but if he wanted an argument against the concept of living energy, he wouldn’t find it amongst the Blades of the Rose. Even Gabriel seemed to accept the idea readily. Thalia smiled to herself, thinking how much he had changed since she first met him weeks ago, and yet the essential core of him had not altered.

“Over a thousand years ago,” Lan Shun continued, “one man known as Po Tai thought to harness as much chi as he could and contain it within himself.”

“Why would he do that?” asked Thalia.

“Po Tai was not the first nor the last man to covet power,” Lan Shun answered. “So he performed many
forbidden rituals to gather chi.” He pointed to the next illustration, of a man glowing with energy, but the man, instead of looking triumphant, was bent over and clawing at his own flesh, agony clearly evident in his face. “There is a reason why no man should claim that much chi for himself. It can drive a human mad. The chi destroyed him, but when Po Tai was obliterated, the chi did not simply disappear back into the universe.”

The next illustration showed what looked like a beast, made of many animals, rampaging through the distinctive tall peaks of Chinese mountains as tiny people fled in its path. “The chi could not be stopped. Finally, the emperor called forward the monks from this temple to find a way to contain it.” Another illustration depicted a small army of brightly robed monks chanting, their eyes closed, as they arrayed themselves in front of the beast. “It cost nearly all of them their lives, but they managed to bind the chi to a physical object. In order to ensure that no one would ever be tempted to use the gathered chi for his own selfish purposes, it was contained in the most modest of things, using the humblest materials.”

“A tea kettle,” Altan said.

Thalia looked at him with surprise. “How did you know?”

The bandit chief smiled. “I can always tell if something is valuable, and the way you carried that thing like a treasure told me just that.”

Lan Shun nodded, gesturing to the final illustration of a monk at a forge, and with a start Thalia recognized the scene as the same she had witnessed in the kettle’s steam. She met Gabriel’s eyes and saw his recognition, as well. “The kettle was kept by the monks here,” Lan Shun said, rolling up the scroll, “and carefully studied, until Genghis Khan and his horde took it, never knowing what they stole. A good thing, too, for if the khan had possessed an idea as to what the kettle could do, how much power it contained, he would have destroyed the world in his quest for dominance. Though the kettle has not been at our monastery for over six hundred years, tales of its power were passed to each head monk. We were all taught, should the kettle ever be returned, how to control it so that no harm befell anyone. And it is capable of a very great harm.”

Thalia shivered and found herself pressing close to Gabriel for the reassurance of his solid body. God, if the Heirs managed to obtain the kettle, the resulting disaster would be unfathomable.

“Why not simply destroy the kettle?” Catullus asked.

“Once chi has been gathered, it cannot be diffused. We would only destroy the physical cage of the chi. If the kettle ceased to exist, then the concentrated chi would be unleashed, and we would have to find another object to which we could bind it. Then the cycle would begin again.”

Everyone was silent as they absorbed this information. They all stared at the kettle which Lan Shun held. So odd. It still looked like an ordinary kettle, useful only for brewing tea, and for generations, that was exactly what it had done. Yet it contained such power that even those most familiar with magic—Bennett, Catullus, and Hsiung Ming—looked a bit awed. Thalia was sorry that her father could not be there just to see it, but then she was glad he was far away, and safe. Should the Heirs know what the kettle might be capable of doing, they would stop at nothing to make it theirs. She might have to witness the death of her good friends, of the man she loved. Icy with fear, Thalia wrapped her arms around Gabriel’s waist.

He seemed to understand her, his own arms coming up to hold her close. He felt strong and real, and she had to believe that they would make it out alive, together. She had to believe, because the alternative was too awful to comprehend.

“Enough standing around and gabbing like fishwives,” Gabriel said in the silence. “We’ve a battle to prepare for.”
Chapter 18
The Siege Begins

Thalia wiped the perspiration from her face as she finished burying the last of Catullus’s incendiary devices outside the monastery wall. After the war council had broken, Catullus immediately went to where herbs and chemicals were stored for making medicine and tinkered with them until he was satisfied. Though he had explained to her how the combinations of substances worked, she did not quite fathom all the complex reactions or how they could produce explosions. It did not matter. All that mattered was that they reduce the number of the Heirs and their mercenaries.

Sentries were posted on the ramparts, keeping watch and guarding those working outside the safety of the walls.

“I believe we are finished with this stage,” Thalia said to Catullus, who stood nearby and directed the placement of his device for cutting grappling hook lines. Monks strung thick lengths of rope, soaked in chemicals, all the way around the monastery’s exterior wall. Each rope was suspended midway up the wall, held in place by metal spikes.

Since night had fallen, everything was done by torchlight, and Catullus thoroughly surveyed his handiwork. “Careful,” he shouted to a monk and waved his arms. “Don’t get the torches close to the rope!”

Though the monk did not speak English, nor Catullus Chinese, the words and gestures had their intended effect. The monk moved the torch away from the rope.

Catullus dabbed at his forehead with his handkerchief. “We don’t want to blow ourselves up,” he said to Thalia. “So mind where you walk, as well.” He eyed the mounds of dirt that subtly marked where each incendiary device was buried.

“I must admit,” Thalia said, “I’m surprised to see you away from Southampton.”

Catullus smiled faintly. “I can fight as well as any Blade.”

“I don’t doubt that,” she said quickly, afraid she had insulted him. “But, you are so valuable to us—to the Blades, I mean.” She wasn’t a Blade herself, at least, not yet, but if she survived the siege and kept the Source safe, then surely she would be inducted into their ranks. But all of that was too distant even to consider. “If anything were to happen to you…”

“My sister Octavia is just as adept as I am when it comes to devising new contraptions. She can easily take my place if I am killed.”

“The prospect of your death does not seem to bother you,” Thalia said.

His smile was larger, but no less rueful. “Believe me, I’d rather not die. There are so many inventions I’ve considered but haven’t had the opportunity to create. Yet when we take the Blades’ Oath, we must keep the possibility in mind that serving the cause could result in injury or worse. Not just for ourselves, but our friends as well. Those that serve with us.”

“Have you heard from Astrid?” Thalia asked quietly.

Catullus’s smile faded, and he looked tired and despondent. “No. Not a letter from her in nearly a year. She never recovered from Michael’s death.”

Thalia’s mind immediately went to Gabriel. He, Bennett, Hsiung Ming, and Altan were busy within the monastery walls, planning more strategy and troop placement. She and Gabriel had not had a moment alone together since they’d arrived at the monastery, many hours ago. It felt like years.

“Would you excuse me?” Thalia asked Catullus.

He seemed to understand exactly what she meant, and did not mind when she left him to go back into the monastery. Thalia strode through the outer courtyard, passing monks, bandits, and a few tribesmen in furious preparation for the siege. Yet she could find no sign of Gabriel. Thalia went into the central courtyard, and even ducked into the temple, but still, she could not locate him. In the walled monastery garden, where food for the monks was grown, Thalia found Bennett and Hsiung Ming with a map of the monastery. They both looked up from their discussion when Thalia appeared at the entrance to the garden.

“He isn’t here,” Bennett said before Thalia could speak. “Try the walkway around the outer wall. There are stairs that lead to it in the northwest corner.”
She barely breathed out her thanks before heading for the stairs. They were steep, but she took them two at a
time to reach the walkway. Sha Chuan Si’s outer walls were constructed with parapets, much like a castle, so that a
monk could observe the surrounding landscape in relative safety. Sentries stood atop the ramparts, but Thalia’s gaze
was drawn to one man.

Gabriel leaned against the parapet, staring out at the moonlit desert. It wasn’t quite bright enough for her to be
able to make out the details of his face and dress, but she knew his wide, strong shoulders, his soldier’s bearing, the
hard beauty of his long-limbed body that contained the potential for both action and pleasure. Though he did not
move when she approached him, she knew he heard her boots on the wide, rough stones. Thalia stood beside him,
also leaning against the parapet, to take in the dark plain. With the silver glow of the moon bathing everything in
pearly luminescence, the Gobi appeared to be as otherworldly as the moon itself. A cold, dry breeze danced over the
surface of the desert, up the mountain and the walls of the monastery, until it stroked Thalia’s face and ruffled
Gabriel’s hair. Atop the wall, darkness gave them only a temporary sort of privacy from the sentries, but she would
take it, just the same.

She did and did not want to touch Gabriel. She wanted to feel him, his skin, his self, but feared that if she did,
she would never want to let him go. Would plead with him to run away with her, leave the defense of the Source to
the Blades, and find some secluded corner of the Mongolian plains where they could be safe and untroubled. A ger
only for them, where they could spend their nights making love, their days on horseback, with the sky above and the
steppe below.

“I wish the morning would never arrive,” she said softly, without looking at him.

“Can’t come soon enough for me,” he answered. His voice was so low, such a gravelly rasp, she could barely
hear him.

Thalia turned to him, resting her hip against the parapet, and crossing her arms. Temper, strained by
anticipating the siege, flared. “Are you so eager for battle? Perhaps you were too hasty in leaving the army.”

His profile was a gold and silver coin, his jaw tight, as he continued to study the desert. “The sooner it’s
morning, the sooner the Heirs get here. Once they get here, I can fight them. Once I can fight them, I can crush
them. And then,” he continued, turning to her, his eyes gleaming in the night, “as soon as the Heirs have been
defeated to the very last man, I’m going to ask you to marry me.”

Her heart slammed inside her chest, and her mouth dried. For one of the first times in her life, Thalia felt as if
she might faint. “Only then will you ask?”

“Only then. I’m not fool enough to court disaster by asking now.”

“Would it…be tempting fate, if I said that when you do ask me, I would say ‘yes’?”

“It might,” he answered with a growl. “But I don’t give a damn.” He pulled Thalia against him and kissed her,
open-mouthed, as if trying to draw her completely inside of himself, and she pressed herself to him, kissing him
back with a frantic hunger. “I need to be alone with you,” he rumbled against her mouth. “I’ve an idea.”

Taking her hand, Gabriel led her down the stairs, through the bustling courtyards, until they reached the
pagoda. Silently, they climbed all seven stories, until they reached the very top. Moonlight poured in through the
open windows, and the sounds of battle preparations were far away. A sanctuary, for now.

He took her in his arms. He was warm and alive and all she would ever want to know of love. “Haven’t got any
gift for words,” he murmured in the shadows. “But my body can tell you what my words can’t.”

In that place of light and darkness, they made love, and even though Thalia never demanded pretty avowals of
devotion, she understood everything in the way Gabriel touched her, his mouth against hers, on her skin, hands and
flesh communing. She let her own body speak for her, as well. Each caress was a promise, and each moan and sigh
was a vow. Their climaxes, when they came, sealed their bond.

While Gabriel was still inside of her, her mind could not help but drift to Astrid Bramfield, burying herself
alive somewhere in the depths of the Canadian wild. When Thalia had first learned, several years ago, that Astrid’s
husband Michael had been killed on a mission for the Blades, Thalia had been sorry for her friend, comprehended
her loss, but could not fully understand how grief completely shattered Astrid. Surely, Astrid would mourn for a
time and then move on, for her own sake. But she hadn’t. And now Thalia understood why.

When Gabriel and Thalia regained some measure of calm, they reluctantly disentangled themselves. After
rearranging his clothing, Gabriel helped clean and dress her, his ministrations economical but tender. They both
stood.

She felt her legs weaken, and she tottered. Gabriel immediately supported her. He swung her up into his arms
easily. Thalia murmured a protest but hadn’t the strength to fight him.

He walked down the pagoda’s stairs, then headed toward the dormitories. “Sleep,” he said.

“I can’t,” she objected, though her words were slurred. “Too much to do. Doubt I could sleep, anyway.” She
could barely lift her head up to see the quizzical expressions of the monks in the dormitory as Gabriel strode into the
He laid her down upon an unoccupied mat. Though the monks did not usually share their quarters with women, these were doubtless special circumstances, and no one in the room complained as Gabriel pulled a blanket over Thalia.

“Rest then,” he commanded her softly. He brushed the hair back from her face, and she struggled to keep her eyes open, just to look at him a few moments longer. He appeared tired, preoccupied, but there was no mistaking the love that softened his expression. Gabriel bent forward and brushed a kiss against her mouth. “Think of where you’d like to go for our bridal tour.”

A foolish idea, she thought, when they might not survive the morrow. Even so, Thalia fell asleep smiling.

He was no stranger to the morning of a battle, though it had been many months since he’d experienced one. Sometime, in the hours before dawn, he’d managed to catch a little sleep. Soon after enlisting, he had faced his first night before combat. All night, he’d shook with a combination of fear and excitement, so that when the actual conflict began, he was already exhausted. Only several cups of coffee and his own nerves kept him upright. After barely surviving that battle, Gabriel learned it was better to sleep than stew.

So, after finalizing preparations with the Blades and Altan, Gabriel returned to the dormitory and stretched out next to a completely slumbering Thalia, setting his rifle down beside him within reaching distance. He wrapped an arm around her waist, and, in her sleep, she sighed and burrowed close to him. Even though he knew better, he tried to keep his eyes open, stay awake so he could memorize the feel of her, but his body demanded rest, and he slept hard for a few, brief hours.

Next thing he knew, Bennett Day was shaking him into wakefulness. Day had a rifle in one hand and a spyglass in the other. “They’ve been spotted,” Day said, quiet and urgent. “About an hour’s ride from here.”

Gabriel forced himself upright and nodded his thanks when a cup of steaming tea was put into his hand. Another was provided for Thalia, who was rubbing her face. “Five minutes,” Gabriel said.

Day nodded and quickly left the dormitory. As Gabriel sipped his tea, he studied Thalia over the rim of his cup. She looked pale and worn, and the sun had barely begun to lighten the sky. Knowing that the enemy was nearly at the gates, Gabriel waited for the sense of calm to come over him that usually did in the hours before combat. But it didn’t come. His hands were shaking. And he knew why. In order to survive the day, in order to protect her, he would have to think of her as another soldier and nothing more. Otherwise, he very well would lose his godforsaken mind.

“You should eat something,” he rumbled, his voice still hoarse from sleep.

She shook her head. “I couldn’t possibly keep anything down.” She glanced at him as if expecting him to argue, but he didn’t.

“Finish your tea, at least,” he said, and she complied. Once they had both drunk the last of their tea, he set their cups aside and rose to his feet. He didn’t help her up, even though he wanted to. Instead, he shouldered his rifle.

Thalia stood, looking at him quizzically. Before she could speak, he turned and left the dormitory. He heard her follow. Dawn turned the sky violet and pink, and the air was cold. Gabriel’s breath turned to white puffs in front of his face. Gathered in the central courtyard were the monks, the bandits, the tribesmen, and the Blades, wearing expressions that varied from eager to terrified, to, in the case of the Blades, alertly ready. Everyone turned to Gabriel when he entered the courtyard, looking at him expectantly.

“Given that you’ve years of military experience,” Graves said, “it would be best if you went over the final preparations. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Not a bit,” Gabriel answered. “I like telling people what to do.”

Graves smiled a little at this. With Hsiung Ming translating for the monks and Thalia translating for the brigands and tribesmen, Gabriel addressed the crowd. He didn’t bother standing on a box or anything else to elevate him and demand attention. His voice could do the job.

“We have a slight advantage in our location,” Gabriel said. “High up, with only one true entrance. First line of defense will be Graves’s devices, and half of Altan’s men on the parapet. But the Heirs will find a way to breach the wall, and when they do, you monks and tribesmen will do your best to disarm the mercenaries. Graves and Hsiung Ming have their weapon, which is mounted on top of the blacksmith’s building. Altan and I will guard Lan Shun, who will be in the temple with the kettle. Some of Altan’s men will serve as skirmishers and the rest with Altan and me in the temple. Everyone clear?”

“What about me?” Thalia asked. “Where shall I be posted?”

He addressed her as if she was an infantryman. “You and Day are our best shots, so you’ll both be in the pagoda, sniping.” He pointed to the tall, round structure. “It has windows on all sides, so the position is excellent both for defending the front gate and for getting shots at anyone who should breach the walls.” Gabriel didn’t add
that it wasn’t only her excellent aim that earned her the post. Out of everywhere in the monastery, it was the most protected location, the one furthest from the actual battle, and he would only have to look up to know exactly where she was at all times. Having Day serve as her guard was a bonus. Gabriel might not like the charming bastard, but he knew that Day would do his utmost to keep Thalia safe.

Thalia seemed to guess the other part of Gabriel’s rationale for situating her in the pagoda, but at least she didn’t argue. Gabriel quickly went over a few of the final directions for the siege. “I believe that’s everything,” he said when he finished. He wanted to take up his position as soon as possible and get on with this damned fight.

“Not everything,” Lan Shun said, coming forward. He carried the kettle under one arm, and in his other, he held a gold silk pouch. A younger monk took the pouch from Lan Shun and began distributing its contents to everyone. Gabriel could not tell what they were being given, but when the monk approached Gabriel and motioned for him to hold out his hand, he did so. The monk set something tiny and round into Gabriel’s palm before moving on. Looking closely, Gabriel saw that he had been given a plant seed.

Even the Blades appeared puzzled as they studied the seeds in their hands. Lan Shun and his assistant both took seeds, as well.

“Place the seed here,” Lan Shun instructed, pointing at the hollow of his throat. Everyone obeyed, and Lan Shun started to chant.

No sooner did the words start to leave the head monk’s mouth, but the seed between Gabriel’s fingers became incredibly warm. He moved to drop it, but the seed didn’t move from where it nestled at the base of his neck. Instead, it began sprouting at an accelerated rate. He couldn’t see it happen on himself, but watched Thalia as she underwent the same experience, her eyes wide with surprise. Green tendrils curled out of both sides of the seed, curving up and around their necks like serpents. Gabriel tried to pull at it, but Lan Shun called out, “No! Let the seed do its work.”

Not particularly fond of snakes, even if they were actually plants, Gabriel struggled to keep from wrenching the seed away. But he endured the sensation of slithering, coiling plant shoots wrapping around his throat, until they met at the back of his neck. A living necklace.

“No, under any circumstances, remove the seed,” Lan Shun commanded. “It will protect you.”

“From the Heirs?” Altan asked.

“From this.” Lan Shun held up the kettle.

Thalia, Gabriel, and the Blades exchanged looks. What the hell were they getting themselves into, unleashing the power of the Source? But Lan Shun appeared confident, and, since Gabriel had almost no experience with Sources of any variety, he didn’t challenge the head monk.

“The Heirs will be here soon,” Graves said, checking his pocket watch.

Gabriel cocked his head to one side, listening. “I can hear them coming.” The hooves of their horses made a dim thunder, nearing the monastery. He knew the sound well. “Everyone, to their positions.”

As the assembled crowd dispersed, Thalia threaded through the men to Gabriel’s side. She reached for him, but he edged away from her touch.

“I can’t,” he growled. At her unspoken question, he continued. “I have to tell myself that you’re just another soldier. If, for even a minute, I thought of you as Thalia, the woman I love, the woman I want to be my wife, then I’d—” His voice hitched, cracked, and he squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, she’d taken a step back.

Her lips pressed tightly together, her eyes glistened, while twin spots of red stained her cheeks. “No kiss, then,” she said on a rasp.

Gabriel shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. Thalia nodded, looking not angry but determined, and then walked off in the direction of the pagoda. He curled his hands into fists to keep from reaching for her, and would only find much later the cuts his fingernails had made in the flesh of his palms.

Armed with a rifle and plenty of ammunition, Thalia climbed the stairs of the pagoda, Bennett following. Her feet took the steps as she ascended seven stories, but her mind was down in the courtyard with Gabriel. As much as she wanted one final embrace, one last kiss before the battle, she could not find fault with his decision to distance himself. If pushing her away was what it took to ensure his survival, then she’d let him. Anything to keep him alive.

Upon reaching the top floor of the pagoda, Thalia tried to suppress her potent memories of making love with Gabriel in that same room the night before. She looked out of the arched windows. As Gabriel had pointed out, the pagoda provided a view of every part of the monastery. She glanced down into the monastery to see people taking up their positions, and from her high vantage point, everything looked small and removed. Except for Gabriel. Her eyes went to him immediately—he commanded her attention, moving confidently and decisively through the monastery.
“You aren’t going to start sighing and languishing, I hope,” Bennett said dryly.

Thalia shot him a look as she moved toward the windows that faced the front monastery wall. “I should think you’re quite familiar with that.”

He grinned at her. “I’m long gone by the time the sighing and languishing begins.”

Her retort died on her lips as she and Bennett looked out the front windows. The Heirs and their mercenaries massed at the foot of the escarpment. They were a thick, bristling mob, a dark wound against the desert’s red plain. A handful of riders broke off to circle the mountain, but within minutes they returned. Scouting for a way up besides the front slope, and unsuccessful. Thalia spotted Lamb’s fair head at the front of the mob as he consulted with the riders. Seeing no other way up, he waved for the mercenaries to take the escarpment. The men surged forward.

“I see Henry Lamb is taking up his usual location at the rear,” Bennett muttered. “Protecting himself. What an ass.”

“Jonas Edgeworth is with him, as well.”

“That belligerent puppy? I suppose that’s Lamb’s punishment. And who’s that enormous heap of a man riding with them?”


“And Huntley defeated him? Good Lord, remind me not to get your captain angry.”

The sounds of the advancing horses grew louder as the Heirs and their army neared. Individual faces began to form from the crowd, all of them cold and ruthless, ready to kill for the promise of gold. As she fingered the strange necklace of plant shoots around her neck, Thalia wanted to crawl away to the other side of the pagoda and hide. She also wanted to throw boulders at their foes. Instead of doing either, she settled into position, shouldering her rifle and training the barrel on the approaching men. Bennett did the same in the window beside her.

Closer, closer. Thalia kept her finger on the trigger, though she knew she would have to wait until exactly the right moment to begin firing. Bullets were not in endless supply, and the moment she shot, her position would be revealed. She was no happier about having to kill, but she had no choice. One more mercenary alive meant one more person able to hurt Gabriel.

The mercenaries halted their advance fifty feet away from the monastery’s front gate. Horses pawed the ground, restive, and the men shifted in their saddles, ready for war.

“Last chance,” Lamb’s voice boomed out. It was so loud, Thalia’s teeth rattled. “Give us the Source, or you will all be slaughtered.”

“How can he do that with his voice?” she asked Bennett, her ears ringing.

“Caesar’s Clarion,” Bennett answered grimly. “A charm used by conquerors to intimidate their enemies.”

But those protecting the Source would not be cowed so easily. Stony silence met Lamb’s demand.

“Death, then,” Lamb thundered, sounding almost pleased at the opportunity to kill. He shouted to his men, and, with a collective roar, they surged toward the monastery gate.

“Now?” Thalia asked Bennett.

“Wait.”

The mercenaries drew nearer.

“Now?”

“A moment longer.”

The pagoda shook with the force of an explosion. Horses reared, and mercenaries were thrown as Catullus’s incendiary devices, buried in the ground, were trod upon. They were clay pots filled with an exact proportion of chemicals that combined and detonated when pressure was put on them. One after the other, the advancing mercenaries triggered the devices, which heaved dirt and chaos as they blasted. Confusion struck, and some tried to retreat while their brethren pushed forward.

At the same time, the brigands stationed along the front wall began firing into the group. Smoke and noise. Men pitched backward off of their mounts.

“Now!” Bennett commanded.

She and Bennett fired. Thalia tried to pick her targets wisely, only taking shots she knew she could make. Some men went down. Between each shot, she ducked down as the mercenaries returned fire. Chips of stone flew from the window as bullets flew overhead.

But there were only so many bandits stationed at the wall, and she and Bennett were only two, versus well over a hundred men intent on getting inside the monastery. Before too long, the mercenaries were at the front wall and swarming around the sides. As Gabriel had predicted, they had ropes attached to grappling hooks, and Thalia soon heard the clank of the metal hooks thrown up the walls and finding purchase.

Thalia continued to shoot, watching as the mercenaries began to scale the walls. When the attackers were
midway up, a few monks tossed burning embers down. The mercenaries laughed as the embers grazed passed them, but their laughter cut off abruptly. Flaming embers caught on the ropes that Catullus had wrapped around the monastery walls. Soaked in a chemical solution, the ropes burned quickly, then exploded. Men toppled from their severed grappling lines like ants.

“Remind me to kiss Catullus later,” Bennett shouted over the din.
“You’ll have to queue up,” Thalia yelled back. “I’m first.”
“Don’t think your captain would appreciate that.”
“He’ll be second in line.” Thalia reminded herself that Gabriel was ensconced in the temple, protecting Lan Shun and the Source, and, for now, he was safe. Turning her attention to the action outside the monastery wall, she continued to shoot, reload, and shoot. Even though their grappling lines had been cut, the mercenaries continued to swarm up the walls with makeshift lines.

Knowing that bullets were precious, Thalia scanned the advancing mob, trying to find the Heirs in the midst of the pandemonium. If she could wound or kill Lamb and Edgeworth, the mercenaries might turn. Go for the officers, she remembered Gabriel telling her once. An army without leaders couldn’t fight.

But Lamb, damn him, was elusive. Never staying anywhere for long, ducking in and out of the attacking mercenaries, he kept himself well hidden behind a human shield. And Edgeworth…

“I can’t find Edgeworth!” she shouted at Bennett.

Bennett scanned the horde, using his spyglass. “Where did that squirrelly bugger get to?” he muttered. “Wait— I see him! But what the hell is he doing?” He handed Thalia the glass, and she followed his direction.

Kneeling in the dirt, far at the back of the invaders, Edgeworth focused on the soil at his feet. Something metal glinted on the ground. It looked as though he chanted, and, as he did so, a small whirlwind of dust began to gather and twist in front of him. Edgeworth continued to chant as the eddy grew and gathered momentum. Soon, the whirlwind was taller than a man. And it glinted and glittered with the presence of magic.

“He’s casting some kind of spell,” Thalia said darkly as she returned the spyglass.

“Not if I can stop him.” Bennett took up his rifle, aimed, and fired. “Damn! He’s too far to get a decent shot.”
“Maybe I can get closer,” Thalia said. “If I went down to the wall, perhaps I could—”
“No,” Bennett, his gaze still fixed on Edgeworth, rose from his crouch. “I’ll go.”

He told you to keep me up here, didn’t he?”

Bennett didn’t bother asking who she meant or denying the charge. He headed for the stairs, with Thalia at his heels. “I’m a better shot than you,” she protested, following. They reached the sixth floor. Sounds of battle drew closer as the bandits continued to fire on the mercenaries, while the enemies fired back. A man screamed.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Bennett threw over his shoulder.

“I’m not. But be reasonable.”

Bennett barked out a laugh. “There’s nothing reasonable about the way your captain feels about you. Get back to the top of the tower, Thalia.” Fifth, then fourth floors.

“But—”

Shouts and yells interrupted her, louder than the terrible and typical noise of warfare. Thalia and Bennett raced to the window on the fourth floor of the pagoda to see what caused the uproar. Shocked at what she saw, Thalia gripped Bennett’s arm without knowing that she did so.

“Sweet sinners,” Bennett muttered. “The bastard did it.”

As tall as two men and entirely the same reddish hue as the Gobi soil. A giant. At Edgeworth’s command, the creature moved slowly, lumbering steadily toward the monastery’s outer wall. Mercenaries, hardened men frightened of nothing, scattered in the giant’s oncoming path. The creature moved like an automaton, without thought, but direct and awful in its progress. Bullets pierced its clay flesh, yet had no effect on the giant, and it took no notice of them. It continued forward, nearing the front gate. Thalia shuddered at the sight.

“A golem,” Bennett snarled. He turned and began racing back up the stairs, with Thalia shortly behind. “From Jewish folklore. A man, made of earth, enchanted and unstoppable.”

“What if we killed Edgeworth?” Thalia panted. “That might halt it.”

Bennett shook his head. They took up their original positions on the top floor of the pagoda. From there, they watched as the golem shambled toward the front gate. With enormous fists the size of cannonballs, the golem pounded on the gate, shaking the huge wooden structure as if it were pasteboard. Monks and bandits gathered on the other side of the gate, bracing themselves against it, trying to keep the gate standing. Each pound of the golem’s fists nearly threw the defenders backward.

“Only way to stop a golem is to remove the Star of David amulet on its chest,” Bennett said. “Which means someone has to get close enough to that thing to grab the amulet.”

_Slam, slam, slam._ Thalia watched with an awful sense of inevitability as the golem continued its relentless
assault on the front gate. There was nothing she nor Bennett could do to stop it. An enormous, awful splintering rent the air. The gate flew apart into kindling, monks and bandits flying through the air, as insubstantial as dandelions. As soon as the gate was breached, the invaders flooded inside, shouting for blood. And that’s when the battle truly began.
Chapter 19
The Walls Are Breached

The entire monastery shook. Gabriel knew the gate had been breached. But by what? No trees to use for battering rams. Maybe the Heirs had their own explosive devices. Didn’t matter how the gate had fallen. He had to check and make sure Thalia was unharmed.

He ran through the central courtyard, shoving his way through the thickly clotting mercenaries as they fought with the monks and the few steppe tribesmen. Everywhere was a jumble of yellow robes and the dark clothing of the Heirs’ hired muscle. Bodies already littered the ground. Gabriel ducked as a mercenary’s fist flew in his direction. He slammed the butt of his rifle into the man’s face and sped on, not noticing or caring when the attacker crumpled to the ground.

Men screamed, and several monks and a few brigands flew up and over Gabriel’s head. He didn’t wonder long what had caused them to be thrown into the air. A clay giant steadily and ruthlessly plowed through the monastery’s defenders, knocking men aside as if they were ninepins. There wasn’t any time to goggle at the sight. Gabriel fired at the thing, but, even though he shot it straight between the eyes, the giant didn’t stop or even slow. Bloody Christ, he had known the Heirs wouldn’t play fair, but he had had no idea to what lengths they would go.

Gabriel looked and saw that the pagoda was not only still standing, but that Thalia and Bennett had now trained their rifles away from the outer wall and into the center of the monastery, where they were effectively picking away at the invading mercenaries. He allowed himself only a moment’s relief at her safety before turning and heading back toward the temple. Lan Shun and the kettle needed safeguarding, and the clay giant was clearing a path for the mercenaries.

Gabriel burst through the temple entrance and slammed it shut behind him, ignoring the brigands who had jumped to attention, guns ready. “We’re moving you someplace safer,” he said, whirling around. Lan Shun wouldn’t understand the words themselves, but he could figure out their meaning.

Instead of heeding Gabriel’s command, the head monk was bent over a small lit stove, on top of which was the kettle. He sprinkled several handfuls of dried roots into the kettle, continuously chanting. But the clay giant lumbered closer.

“No time for that now!” Gabriel shouted, but Lan Shun paid him no mind.

Gabriel started forward, then stopped. A heavy smoke poured from the kettle, even more impenetrable than the smoke that had revealed the kettle’s history. Dense white clouds swirled and snaked up to the tall roof of the temple, forming a heavy serpentine shape. The brigands shouted, and retreated against the temple walls. Lan Shun continued to chant.

Smoke congealed, took shape, and danced through the air. A roar came from its huge jaws while its claws scratched at the temple floor. White eyes burned and scales gleamed. Gabriel could scarcely believe it. A dragon. A real, live dragon, made of smoke and cloud, but real, nonetheless. The beast swam through the air and pressed its nose against the cowering brigands before turning its attention to Gabriel.

As the dragon advanced, Gabriel forced himself to stand and face it. Its head was enormous, the size of a wagon, with a mouth that could swallow three men whole. Hot breath puffed from its nose and mouth, smelling of water and herbs, enveloping Gabriel. The dragon shoved its face against Gabriel, nearly toppling him over, but the moment its nose touched the plant necklace at his throat, it moved on. Gabriel let out the breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding. If he had not been so battle-trained, he would have pissed himself for certain.

One of the monks attending Lan Shun hurried to the temple door and flung it open. The Smoke Dragon roared again before swimming through the door. Outside, the same pattern repeated itself. The dragon would check each man for the protection of the seed necklace, but if it didn’t find that protection, God help the unfortunate soul. Claws tore, the jaw snapped, and gurgling screams ripped from the throats of the mercenaries.

Over a dozen men met their deaths swiftly from the clean savagery of the dragon. Other men scattered, trying to avoid similar fates. Within moments, the clay giant and the Smoke Dragon faced each other in the cleared space. The dragon didn’t bother checking for the seed at the giant’s throat, recognizing threatening magic immediately. The dragon circled the giant once before descending. They tore into one another, crashing into walls and buildings, sending timber and stone flying. It was something out of a myth, to see such enormous monsters battle, with chaos
and death all around. Myth or no, Gabriel could not stand and marvel at it. He turned to Altan, who had run into the temple. “I’ll lead some skirmishers. Can you guard Lan Shun and the kettle?”

“Rather watch the teapot than face that beast,” the bandit chief said.

Wasting no more time, Gabriel gathered a group of brigands and took them out into the seething courtyard in front of the temple. Scores of attackers faced off against monks, and while the holy men’s use of fist and foot was powerful, both throwing foes and spitting them with spears, the mercenaries had firepower. Chi couldn’t stop a bullet. Gabriel rumbled his way through the mercenaries. His rifle did him no good in close combat, so he sheathed it and pulled his revolver and knife. Then he plunged into battle.

His movements were practiced, familiar. He knew how to fight, and even months away from his last such combat, his skills did not fail him. When a mercenary’s blade cut across his face, he didn’t feel it. He punched the sword from the man’s hand, sunk his own knife into the mercenary’s chest, then pulled out the blade and moved on. Beside him, three monks went down in a heap of gold cloth and crimson blood as a mercenary shot them at close range. Gabriel ducked a flying fist then brought his attacker down quickly. He fired and reloaded without breaking stride. More mercenaries crumpled.

A loud whooshing, followed by more men’s shouts of pain, made him look up, then shake his head in amused disbelief. Standing on the roof of the blacksmith’s shop were Graves and Hsiung Ming, putting to use another of Graves’s diabolical devices. The mechanical genius held a crimped shotgun barrel, pointing it toward the invaders below, while Hsiung Ming poured a basin of spirits into the rifle’s breach. A lit fuse attached at the opening of the barrel and ignited the liquid as it shot through the rifle, sending out jets of flame. Burning mercenaries howled as they ran in circles, trying in vain to douse the fires on their clothing. The air, rent by the roars of the Smoke Dragon, smelled of smoke, gunpowder, and charred flesh.

Gabriel slammed into the ground as a large mercenary plowed into him. They wrestled, vying for control of Gabriel’s revolver. Pinned to the ground on his back, he tried to lodge a foot in the man’s stomach and shove him off, but the bugger was too heavy and strong. Gabriel gritted his teeth as he attempted to pry the mercenary’s fingers from the gun’s handle. The man reared up, pulling on Gabriel’s arms and his muscles screamed in protest.

Suddenly, the mercenary stiffened as a bullet neatly pierced his chest, and he pitched forward. Gabriel managed to roll out of the way before fifteen stone of dead mercenary collapsed onto him. Getting to his feet, Gabriel followed the trajectory of the bullet and traced it to the pagoda. Thalia nodded at him briefly from a window before returning to her sniping. Pride and gratitude swelled in his chest. Jesus, he loved that woman.

But his admiration turned to horror as the pagoda began to shake and list. Thalia disappeared from the window, knocked to the floor by the quaking. The Smoke Dragon, sensing that the kettle was threatened, had abandoned its attack on the giant and now circled the temple, snatching up in its jaws any mercenaries that neared the temple. With the dragon’s focus diverted, the clay giant, directed by an unseen hand, had turned its attention to the snipers and was trying to topple the pagoda, shoving against its base. Stones from the tower’s circular walls began to fall. The giant would destroy the tower in moments.

“The hell it will,” Gabriel snarled to himself. Even if he couldn’t shoot and kill the creature, he’d draw it away from Thalia.

Gabriel started toward the tottering pagoda. And barreled right into the massive chest of Tsend. Around his neck, the Mongol wore a seed necklace, clearly taken from a monk. The Smoke Dragon tore through the unfortunate monk just behind Tsend before moving on to more mercenaries. No divine intervention would come to Gabriel’s aid. It was might against might.

Thalia crawled to the window. She could just make out Gabriel, Tsend looming over him. She tried to aim for the enormous Mongol, but the shaking of the tower made it impossible. Walls buckled around her, and beams collapsed from the ceiling. The golem did not cease its attack below. And the dragon’s interest lay in guarding the Source.

“You have to get out!” Bennett shouted at her.

“The only exit is down,” she yelled back.

He looked pointedly at the window.

“We can’t jump seven stories, Bennett!”

“It’s not jumping, it’s climbing. And we aren’t. You are.”

“I bloody well won’t without you!”

Bennett sent her a grin. “Captain Huntley has had a disastrous effect on your vocabulary, my dear. Better get out and lend him a hand.” With a wink, he disappeared down the stairs, heading straight for the golem.
Thalia made to follow him and provide what assistance she could, but a beam tumbled from the ceiling, blocking the stairs. She had no choice. Shouldering her rifle, Thalia took a breath and straddled the window. The ground looked impossibly far down. She couldn’t tell if her head spun or the pagoda was collapsing. Casting a quick look toward the courtyard, Thalia saw Gabriel grappling with Tsend, the two of them locked in desperate combat. She had to help him however possible.

She gripped the windowsill, then began to lower herself down the side of the pagoda. She found footing, then slipped as the tower shook. Her palms grew damp. Concentrate, she told herself. Slowly, painfully, Thalia worked her way down, a story at a time. She prayed no one on the ground paid her any mind. She made a perfect target, clambering down the tottering pagoda like an awkward spider.

More than halfway there. Thalia risked a glance over her shoulder, but Gabriel and Tsend had disappeared. Damn. She returned her focus to her climb, but then the pagoda leaned sharply, and she lost her grip. The thick air swirled around her as she fell.

Clawing at Tsend’s bruising fingers around his throat, Gabriel watched Thalia tumble from the sky like a fallen angel. Hot ice flooded him. Nearly two stories up. Could she survive that fall? His body shook with rage and fear. It was no use. He couldn’t pretend that she was just another soldier, and he prayed he hadn’t squandered their last moments together with his protective impulses. He had to get to her.

Tsend followed Gabriel’s gaze and laughed. “I hope there’s enough of her left for Lamb. He is not too particular, though.” He released Gabriel’s throat long enough to punch him hard in the ribs. Something cracked. “I will enjoy killing you.”

Burning with fury, Gabriel ignored the pain and wrested himself free of the enormous Mongol. He unslung his rifle and smashed it into Tsend’s grinning face. Blood shot from the Mongol’s nose and gathered in the corners of his mouth. “Now you’re as ugly as your mother,” Gabriel snarled.

Tsend wiped at his face with his sleeve, scowling. Seeing his own blood infuriated him, and he lurched forward. Gabriel leapt out of the way and kicked the small of Tsend’s back. The Mongol shouted in pain and stumbled around. Rage made Tsend clumsy as he swung at Gabriel. But Gabriel’s own wrath and fear for Thalia sharpened him, made him as precise as a blade. He had to beat the Mongol to reach Thalia.

His fists plowed into Tsend, his aim direct. A jab to the throat cut off the Mongol’s breathing. Another blow to his gut bent Tsend over, retching. Gabriel went for his revolver, but Tsend recovered just enough to kick at Gabriel’s leg, causing him to stagger. From his belt, Tsend pulled a long, wicked knife and swung at Gabriel. Gabriel blocked with his own blade. Metal against metal hissed and screeched. Gabriel shoved hard, then lost his balance as a running mercenary knocked into him. Tsend seized the momentary advantage and threw Gabriel to the earth, then ground the heel of his boot into Gabriel’s hand, forcing the hilt of his knife from his fingers. Tsend laughed again and lunged with his own blade, aiming for Gabriel’s eye.

A shot from Gabriel’s trusty revolver stopped the Mongol in his attack. For a moment, Tsend seemed puzzled, as if he couldn’t quite understand how a bullet came to be lodged in his chest. A second shot struck him in the center of his forehead. Then his eyes glazed, his expression slackened, and he fell to earth.

Gabriel did not waste a minute gloating over his kill. He leapt to his feet and headed toward Thalia, praying he wasn’t too late.

For several moments, Thalia could only lie on the ground, staring at the sky, and struggle to regain her breath. She’d tried to take the fall well, rolling as she did when thrown from a horse. But horses weren’t two stories high. Still, she needed to get up quickly and find Gabriel.

A dark shape hovered over her, blocking her view of the sky. “Already on your back for me,” Lamb drawled. “Thank you for saving me time.”

“You’re not welcome,” Thalia growled, pushing to her feet and facing her enemy.

Henry Lamb, slightly dirty and bruised, his fair hair mussed and far from a barber’s attentions, grinned at her. “I don’t mind if you put up a little fight. Makes my job so much more enjoyable.” In his elegant, refined hand, he brandished a knife that glinted in the morning light.

Bitter disgust flooded Thalia’s mouth. “I won’t let you touch me, bastard.”

“Charming. But that decision isn’t up to you.” He surged toward her.

Thalia danced away, but Lamb grabbed her hair and roughly tugged her back. Pain exploded in her eyes as her hand automatically came up, trying to loosen his hold. Lamb gripped her waist, pulling her against him. She almost gagged when she felt his erection pressing into her from behind. He held the knife to her throat while his other hand gripped her breast. As she struggled, the edge of the knife cut into the tender skin. Wetness trickled down her neck.
“This really is marvelous, Thalia,” Lamb panted in her ear. “Exactly what I’d hoped for. I can take my pleasure with you while that dragon exhausts its magic protecting the Source.”

Thalia kicked out behind her, trying to land a blow to his groin. He anticipated this, however, and turned just enough so that her heel only caught on his hip. Then she yelped as the knife cut deeper. She stilled, not wanting to slit her own throat.

“Yes,” Lamb hissed. “A fight is good, but I don’t want to kill you, Thalia. Not for a while. I have such plans for you.”

She made herself go slack against Lamb. He ground into her. The hand on her breast moved, and she felt him reaching for the buttons on his trousers. With his attention diverted, the blade of the knife moved slightly away from her neck.

Thalia reached up and grabbed the blade with her bare hand. She bit down her scream as the knife cut deeply into her palm, and pushed the weapon away. Lamb cursed in his genteel accent, calling her a bitch and a whore, as Thalia twisted backward, staring at the hilt as it pointed up from Lamb’s chest, scarlet staining his expensive waistcoat.

He lay there, pinned and choking, while his hands clawed at the hilt. Blood seeped from his aristocratic mouth. He tried to speak, gasping out unintelligible curses, but then a paroxysm hit him. He gurgled, then fell still, eyes open and staring at the blue Gobi sky. Thalia watched this, her gaze dispassionate, as her own wounds bled into the dust.

A mercenary saw Lamb’s body and shouted. “He’s dead! The English chief is dead!” Other nearby mercenaries turned at this. They met each other’s eyes. No leader meant no payment. There wasn’t a reason to risk their lives any further. Like bleating, terrified sheep, the men pivoted and ran. It wasn’t long before the monastery was emptying out as mercenaries fled in panic.

“Thalia!” She turned at Gabriel’s voice, and there he was, living and whole, racing toward her. Stunned, Thalia let his strong arms enfold her, and she realized with dim shock that Lamb was dead, and she had killed him. Even more surprising, she was glad.

Then she clapsed Gabriel tightly. Lamb was dead, but Gabriel was alive. Wetness coursed down her cheeks. “I tried to get to you,” she whispered. “I saw Tsend attack you, but I couldn’t get to you.”

“He’s as dead as Lamb,” Gabriel said, holding her close, cradling her head.

“What about Edgeworth?”

“Gone,” Catullus said. He and Hsiung Ming, both bloodied but largely unhurt, strode toward them. “I saw him sprinkling some dried flowers into a fire, then he dove in and disappeared. Some means of transportation, I believe. But I don’t know exactly where he went.”

“Let him go to the devil,” Gabriel said. She felt him shaking, and held him tighter. She wanted to crawl inside of him just to assure herself that he was real and unharmed. They were all here, all safe, except—

“Oh, God,” Thalia cried. She looked toward the pagoda, which, miraculously, still stood. “Bennett!”

The man in question appeared at the doorway of the now barely standing pagoda, covered in red dust. Slapping at his sleeves and wiping at his face, he walked out, limping a little.

“If any of you ever want to wrestle a golem,” he coughed, “I highly discourage you from doing so. More trouble than a pack of nuns.” Bennett held up the Star of David in his battered hand. “This needs to be returned to whomever it was stolen from, I believe.”

Thalia glanced up at Gabriel and saw him regarding Bennett with a new respect. Yes, Bennett was an incorrigible flirt, but he was a fighter, too. All of them—Gabriel, the Blades, the monks, the bandits, even the tribesmen—were fighters. Including herself. And soon, she would have the scars to prove it.

It was a bloody mess. The monastery courtyard filled with the wounded and monks attending to them, the destroyed buildings, camels and horses wandering around. Altan oversaw the tending of his men as his own wounds were bound. Not much different from the aftermaths of countless battles, but different for so many reasons. Gabriel had never witnessed a Smoke Dragon being corralled back into a tea kettle until this very day. It was a bit trickier than one would have first supposed. He’d seen things he would never have believed just a month ago. A giant of
clay. A rifle that could shoot flame.

The woman he wanted to marry having her wounds dressed after she’d fought to the death with a black-hearted son of a bitch.

Thalia submitted patiently and without complaint as Lan Shun applied poultices to the cut on her throat and the deep gash across her palm. Gabriel could barely bring himself to look at her injuries. Every time he saw them, the crusts of her blood on her skin, he wanted to bring Lamb back to life so he could eviscerate that highborn maggot. But Thalia, bless her fierce heart, had already done the job of killing Lamb. Gabriel contented himself with holding Thalia’s uninjured hand as they sat on the floor of the temple. He had no plans to release her any time soon. Like, say, for the next century.

“Will Edgeworth come back with more Heirs?” Thalia asked Graves, who stood nearby, critically examining the crooked earpiece of his spectacles.

“Doubtful. He already knows that the Source won’t be taken without a messy fight; it already cost the life of one Heir. And if he does,” Graves continued, straightening the earpiece, “we know we can best them.”

“The Blades will come back, if they are needed,” Day said to Lan Shun.

The head monk nodded.

“What will happen to the kettle now?” asked Altan.

Lan Shun, finishing dressing Thalia’s wounds, gathered up the kettle and wrapped it in yellow silk. “We shall keep it, as it had been kept for generations, before the khan came.”

“But will it be safe?” Gabriel demanded. He hadn’t risked Thalia’s neck and his own just to have a Source left unguarded for some other greedy fool to stumble across and covet.

“Our lesson was learned the first time it was stolen,” Lan Shun said with a half smile. “Trust me, there will be no breaking the charm we set over our treasure.” He bustled from the temple, with several monks serving as guards for the kettle.

Gabriel muttered to himself, but he had to believe the head monk. It had to be maddening, being a Blade of the Rose, knowing that all over the world were unprotected Sources and being unable to safeguard them all. But how much worse was it, loving a Blade, understanding that he or she would constantly have his or her life in jeopardy.

He glanced over at Thalia, who was contemplating a statue of an equally thoughtful Buddha. She’d grown quiet since the battle, drawn into herself. He tried not to worry overmuch about this. She was exhausted, and had just undergone the nasty experience of warfare, had killed several men that day. It was bound to leave her not quite her usual self. He wasn’t entirely certain, though, why she wouldn’t meet his eyes. Left him more than a little edgy.

The close council of the Blades didn’t sit any easier with him. Graves, Day, and Hsiung Ming were gathered in a corner of the temple, talking lowly amongst themselves and looking at Thalia. When the three men nodded and then began walking toward her, Gabriel got to his feet, placing himself in front of her.

“What the hell are you planning?” he growled at the Blades. He didn’t like the serious looks on their faces one bit. It meant trouble.

None of the men seemed offended by Gabriel’s brazen question. Day actually looked at him with a touch of fondness. “It’s time,” he said simply.

“For what?”

“For what I’ve been waiting for,” Thalia said, standing up and placing herself at Gabriel’s side. “To finally become a Blade of the Rose.” Her bright green eyes glistened, and her pale cheeks flushed. She removed the Compass from her pocket. “To make this mine in truth.”

“You’ve wanted this your whole life,” Gabriel said softly.

She nodded. “Ever since I learned about the Blades. But, Gabriel,” she said, turning to him, “you understand what that means.”

The burning in his throat told him everything he needed to know. “It means that you can be called at any time. Every day brings you close to danger.”

“Not unlike being a soldier, I imagine.” She smiled, bittersweet.

“I’m not a soldier anymore.” His gaze burned down at her. “Something you want to ask me, Thalia?”

She glanced over at Graves, Day, and Hsiung Ming, all of whom promptly began examining the walls of the temple as if they’d never seen something as miraculous as walls before. In Thalia and Gabriel’s small, illusory bubble of privacy, she turned back to him. “Are you going to make me choose? Between the Blades and you?”

It took him a minute before he could speak. “Jesus, Thalia,” Gabriel swore, stunned and a trace angry. “I’m not so small a man that I’d do that. You can’t think I would.”

Relief shone in her eyes. “I did not think so, but I wanted to be sure. There are so many risks.”

“Sweetheart,” he said firmly, taking her chin in his hand, “don’t doubt me. I’ve run all over hell and back, seen things and faced things I never would’ve believed, including the kind of fear I’d never felt before. And I did all of
that because I love you. That’s not going to change no matter what you do, whether you’re a Blade or not.”

She blinked, droplets shining in her eyelashes. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” Releasing her, Gabriel stalked over to the Blades. Despite the fact that they were supposedly spellbound by the temple’s walls, each man smiled, the eavesdropping buggers. “Me, too,” Gabriel said.

“You, what?” Graves asked.

“I want to become a Blade too. Think I’ve earned it.”

Surprised, Thalia flinched behind him, while Graves, Day, and Hsiung Ming exchanged glances. “Be sure,” Day said, serious. “This isn’t a momentary fancy, Huntley. It’s a lifetime’s responsibility.”

“Don’t lecture me about responsibility, lad,” Gabriel growled. “I know where my priorities lie. With Thalia. Her cause is mine. And I’ll fight for her until there’s not a damned breath left in my body.”

“If you’re certain, then,” Graves said after a moment.

Gritting his teeth, Gabriel said, “I can’t get any more certain. You want me to bleed, I’ll do it.” He pulled the knife from his belt, put it to his forearm, and moved to cut himself as Thalia yelped in alarm.

Day’s hand on the hilt of the knife stopped Gabriel. “Not necessary. Blades don’t require blood oaths.”

“Thank God,” Thalia said, coming forward and wrapping her arm around Gabriel’s waist. She smiled up at him, and in her face he saw everything he ever wanted in life, and more. So much more. “I think we’ve seen enough blood for one day.”

“If you will give us a few minutes,” Hsiung Ming said, “we will prepare for the initiation.” He and the two other Blades quietly excused themselves and slipped away.

Once they had gone, Thalia and Gabriel left the temple. Neither of them asked where they were going. They knew, without speaking, their destination. Together, hands interlaced, they climbed the stairs that led to the parapet. From their vantage, Gabriel and Thalia could see the whole of the monastery, damaged from the siege. The gate had been shattered, the pagoda would need to be demolished and rebuilt, and several other buildings sported cracks in the walls and chips in the masonry. The monastery would be restored and serve to guard the Source for centuries more. But the battle site didn’t hold their attention for long.

They looked out over the Gobi. Afternoon sunlight blazed across the desert, and the sky was a cold blue fire above. With Thalia warm at his side, Gabriel closed his eyes and felt the dry wind sweep over his face, smelled the hard-baked earth. Beneath it all, he could feel, like a pulse, the magic of the Source, not only here, at the monastery, but everywhere in the world. He’d never noticed such things before. It had taken Thalia to open him.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “I will marry you.”

He chuckled as he felt a happiness he’d never believed he could experience. Opening his eyes, he brought the back of her hand to his lips. “It was a good wind that blew me to your door,” he said.

“Do you think it was magic that brought us together?” she asked him, leaning her head against his shoulder. He smelled smoke in her hair and, underneath, the sweetness of her skin.

“Warriors such as us don’t need magic,” he said. He turned and clasped her in his arms, looked down into her dusty, tired face, so lovely he ached. “We make our own.”
Epilogue

Winter’s Benefit

The bullet whizzed past Thalia’s ear and plunged into the snow behind her, sending up a spray of ice. She crouched behind the fence of the sheep enclosure, then, when the Russians’ shots momentarily stopped, she rose up slightly, took aim and fired. Someone cursed in Russian, and she smiled to herself.

“Get him in the hand?” Gabriel asked, hunkered beside her. At her nod, he grinned. “There’s a lass.”

“Last I checked, I was your wife, not a lass.”

He leaned forward and kissed her. “You’re both.” Another round of shots rang out, splintering the wood at the top of the fence. Fortunately, the sheep inside the pen crowded together, bleating in annoyance, far away from the threat. While Thalia reloaded, Gabriel fired on the band of five Russians who’d come for the ruby. A yelp sounded.

“Shoulder?” Thalia asked when Gabriel bent back down to load more ammunition. When he nodded, they shared a smile. Fighting with her husband by her side under the icy azure sky, in the diamond snow—she loved her life. She loved him. More each day.

She made herself ignore the sharp winds that tried their best to find some bit of unprotected skin. Her fur-lined del and thick woolen hat ensured that she stayed relatively insulated, but gave her enough freedom of movement so that when fools like these Russians came around, seeking the tribe’s ruby, she had no trouble defending the gem. Treasure hunters were infrequent, but showed up often enough so that she and Gabriel stayed busy.

“I forgot to ask,” Gabriel said, between salvos. “Everything all right with Oyuun?”

“She’s convinced that her niece is going to enter the nadaam next year. Thank you,” she added, when he fired on an advancing Russian, who then had the good sense to run back to his companions as they huddled behind an empty ger.

Gabriel’s mouth quirked in amusement. “Will she?”

“If she does, she won’t be the only female in the tournament. I’ve heard from three others that girls from surrounding tribes are already training.”

“The nadaam is in October,” he pointed out.

More shots. She rolled her eyes. “This is growing tiresome, and I’m getting cold.”

“Ready, then.” Gabriel counted to three, and they charged the Russians. Not expecting a frontal attack, the would-be thieves were unprepared. Thalia, using some of the Shaolin kung fu taught to her by Lan Shun, kicked one man in the chest and struck another with a blow to the stomach. They both collapsed into the snow, groaning.

Gabriel took a more traditional approach with his fists, sending them crashing into jaws and ribcages. “You sure none of these sods is Sergei?” he panted as he easily avoided one of the Russian’s punches.

She glanced around quickly. “Sorry. He’s not here.”

Gathering up a fistful of one man’s coat, Gabriel slammed a punch into the Russian’s face and the man groaned before lapsing into unconsciousness. “Damn.”

“Enough! Enough!” the Russians shouted in terror. “We yield!” They covered themselves with their arms for protection.

“Leave, then,” Gabriel said, using the small amount of Russian he’d learned from Thalia.

“And tell no one about the ruby,” Thalia added, “or they’ll suffer a similar fate.”

With whimpers and moans, the Russians agreed, then stumbled toward their horses, dragging their insensate comrade, before clumsily getting back into the saddles. Thalia and Gabriel held hands as they watched the Russians ride away. Once the thwarted thieves disappeared over the horizon, Gabriel turned to her. She caught her breath at the sight of him. How he permeated the space of the steppe with his bold presence, and how she marveled every time she saw him in all his golden masculinity. With his broad shoulders filling his del, his fair hair now a bit longer, and carnal smile meant for Thalia alone, her husband was a vision of rugged virility that never ceased to stir her.

“Let’s get you inside and warm,” he rumbled.

They walked back to their ger. She smiled to herself when she saw sturdy horses grazing on the crimson flowers that poked through their frozen blanket. The kettle had long since been returned to China, but its magic still flowed strong in the people who had kept it for centuries.

A cheerful column of smoke rose up from their ger. They entered the tent and shut the door fast behind them.
took Thalia’s eyes a moment to adjust to the soft light inside the tent after the dazzling brightness of outside. While she waited for her eyes to acclimate, she felt her heavy del removed by unseen hands, her hat plucked from her head. And a warm kiss on the tip of her chilled nose.

“Go warm up,” Gabriel instructed her. Thalia nodded and moved to the stove that blazed at the center of the ger. She sighed when the fire’s heat began to thaw her numb fingers.

“They do hold the nadaam in October,” she said, continuing their earlier conversation, as if the fight with the Russians had been a minor interruption. “Which means we’ll be with the tribe, guarding the ruby, for months more.”

“Your father said we might be called back to England before then.”

She nodded with a concerned frown. “Something is brewing. The Heirs now have the Primal Source, but no one knows how or when they will use it, so we must be ready. But, until then, we must stay with the tribe. Are you content with that?”

“Hm, let’s see,” Gabriel mused. He began leading her toward their sleeping pallet. “Months of endless, freezing cold. Nothing but mutton and dried cheese to eat. Cantankerous horses and grumpy sheep. Oh, and fighting off any idiot who wants the ruby for himself. Does that content me?”

They reached the sleeping pallet, and Gabriel sank down, drawing Thalia with him. He pulled off her boots and then his own, then started to work at the fastenings of her tunic. Just the brushing of his fingers over her covered skin sent Thalia’s pulse speeding, more so than the skirmish minutes earlier.

Although she was desperate for his touch, she covered his hand with her own, stilling him. “Does it?” she asked, looking into his topaz eyes, seeing her world and her heart reflected there. “I don’t want you to have regrets.”

He did not hesitate in his reply. “None. I’m never so happy as I am when we’re out on the steppe together, battling side by side. Although,” he added, that wicked smile curving his delicious mouth just before he brought it down onto her own lips, “this cold weather makes me damned fond of keeping warm with you.”

His hand stroked down her neck, grazing the chain and locket she wore at her throat. It had been a gift from her father on her wedding day. Thalia knew, without even looking, that if she were to open the locket she would see the magical representations of those she loved most. Her father. Batu. And especially Gabriel. Forever close to her heart.
Don’t miss the rest of
The Blades of the Rose series,
coming this fall!
In October, let SCOUNDREL whisk you away to the shores of Greece…

*The Blades of the Rose are sworn to protect the Sources of magic in the world. But the work is dangerous—and they can’t always protect their own…*

**READY FOR ACTION**

London Harcourt’s father is bent on subjugating the world’s magic to British rule. But since London is a mere female, he hasn’t bothered to tell her so. He’s said only that he’s leading a voyage to the Greek Isles. No matter, after a smothering marriage and three years of straitlaced widowhood, London jumps at the opportunity—unfortunately, right into the arms of Bennett Day…

**RISKING IT ALL**

Bennett is a ladies’ man, when he’s not dodging lethal attacks to protect the powers of the ancients from men like London’s father. Sometimes, he’s a ladies’ man even when he is dodging them. But the minute he sees London he knows she will require his full attention. The woman is lovely, brilliant, and the only known speaker of a dialect of ancient Greek that holds the key to calling down the wrath of the gods. Bennett will be risking his life again—but around London, what really worries him is the danger to his heart…
“Save those slurs for your grandmother,” said a deep, masculine voice to the vendor. He spoke Greek with an English accent.

London turned to the voice. And nearly lost her own.

She knew she was still, in many ways, a sheltered woman. Her society in England was limited to a select few families and assorted hangers-on, her father’s business associates, their retainers and servants. At events and parties, she often saw the same people again and again. And yet, she knew with absolute clarity, that men who looked like the one standing beside her were a rare and altogether miraculous phenomenon.

There were taller men, to be sure, but it was difficult to consider this a flaw when presented with this man’s lean musculature. He wonderfully filled out the shoulders of his English coat, not bulky, but definitively capable. She understood at once that his arms, his long legs, held a leashed strength that even his negligent pose could not disguise. He called to mind the boxers that her brother, Jonas, had admired in his youth. The stranger was bareheaded, which was odd in this heat, but it allowed her to see that his hair was dark with just the faintest curl, ever so slightly mussed, as if he’d recently come from bed. She suddenly imagined herself tangling her fingers in his hair, pulling him closer.

And if that thought didn’t make her blush all the harder, then his face was the coup de grace. What wicked promises must he have made, and made good on, with such a face. A sharp, clean jaw, a mouth of impossible sensuality. A naughty, muscularly smile tugged at the corners of that mouth. Crystalline eyes full of intelligent humor, the color intensely blue. Even the small bump on the bridge of his nose—had it been broken?—merely added to the overall impression of profound male beauty. He was clean-shaven, too, so that there could be no mistaking how outrageously handsome this stranger was.

She may as well get on the boat back to England immediately. Surely nothing she could ever see in Greece could eclipse the marvel of this man.

“Who are you?” the vendor shouted in Greek to the newcomer. “You defend this woman and her lies?”

“I don’t care what she said,” the Englishman answered calmly, also in Greek. “Keep insulting her and I’ll jam my fist into your throat.” The vendor goggled at him, but wisely kept silent. Whoever this man was, he certainly looked capable of throwing a good punch.

Yet gently, he put a hand on London’s waist and began to guide her away. Stunned by the strange turn of events, she let him steer her from the booth.

“All right?” he asked her in English. A concerned, warm smile gilded his features. “That apoplectic huckster didn’t hurt you, did he?”

London shook her head, still somewhat dazed by what had just happened, but more so by the attractiveness of the man walking at her side. She felt the warmth of his hand at her back and knew it was improper, but she couldn’t move away or even regret the impertinence. “His insults weren’t very creative.”

He chuckled at this and the sound curled like fragrant smoke low in her belly. “I’ll go back and show him how it’s done.”

“Oh, no,” she answered at once. “I think you educated him enough for one day.”

Even as he smiled at her, he sent hard warning glances at whomever stared at her. “So what had his fez in a pinch?”

She held up and unfolded her hand, which still held the shard of pottery. “We were disputing this, but, gracious, I forgot I still had it. Maybe I should give it back.”

He plucked the piece of pottery from her hand. As he did this, the tips of his fingers brushed her bare palm. A hot current sparked to life where he touched. She could not prevent the shiver of awareness that ran through her body. She met his gaze, and sank into their cool aquatic depths as he stared back. This felt stronger than attraction. Something that resounded through the innermost recesses of herself, in deep, liquid notes, like a melody or song one might sing to bring the world into being. And it seemed he felt it, too, in the slight breath he drew in, the straightening of his posture. Breaking away from his gaze, London snatched her glove from Sally, who trailed behind them with a look of severe disapproval. London tugged on the glove.

He cleared his throat, then gave her back the pottery. “Keep it. Consider it his tribute.”

She put it into her reticule, though it felt strange to take something she did not pay for.
“Thank you for coming to my aid,” she said as they continued to walk. “I admit that getting into arguments with vendors in Monastiraki wasn’t at the top of my list of Greek adventures.”

“The best part about adventures is that you can’t plan them.”
She laughed. “Spoken like a true adventurer.”

“Done my share.” He grinned. “Ambushing bandits by the Khaznah temple in the cliffs of Petra. Climbing volcanoes in the steam-shrouded interior of Iceland.”

“Sounds wonderful,” admitted London with a candor that surprised herself. She felt, oddly, that she could trust this English stranger with her most prized secrets. “Even what happened back there at that booth was marvelous, in its way. I don’t want to get into a fight, but it’s such a delight to finally be out here, in the world, truly experiencing things.”

“Including hot, dusty, crowded Athens.”

“Especially hot, dusty, crowded Athens.”

“My, my,” he murmured, looking down at her with approval. “A swashbuckling lady. Such a rare treasure.”
Wryly, she asked, “Treasure, or aberration?”

He stopped walking and gazed at her with an intensity that caught in her chest. “Treasure. Most definitely.”

Again, he left her stunned. She was nearly certain that any man would find a woman’s desire for experience and adventure to be at best ridiculous, at worst, offensive. Yet here was this stranger who not only didn’t dismiss her feelings, but actually approved and, yes, admired them. What a city of wonders was this Athens! Although, London suspected, it was not the city so much as the man standing in front of her that proved wondrous.


A glint of wariness cooled his eyes. “I don’t see why it matters.”
Strange, the abrupt change in him. “I thought that’s what one did when meeting a fellow countryman abroad,” she said. “Find out where they come from. If you know the same people.” When he continued to look at her guardedly, she demonstrated, “‘Oh, you’re from Manchester? Do you know Jane?’”

The chill in his blue eyes thawed, and he smiled. “Of course, Jane! Makes the worst meat pies. Dresses like an Anglican bishop.”

“So you do know her!”

They shared a laugh, two English strangers in the chaos of an Athenian market, and London felt within her a swell of happiness rising like a spring tide. As if in silent agreement, they continued to stroll together in a companionable silence. With a long-limbed, loose stride, he walked beside her. He hooked his thumbs into the pockets of his simple, well-cut waistcoat, the picture of a healthy young man completely comfortable with himself. And why shouldn’t he be? No man had been so favored by Nature’s hand. She realized that he hadn’t told her where he was from, but she wouldn’t press the issue, enjoying the glamour of the unknown.

His presence beside her was tangible, a continuous pulse of uncivilized living energy, as though being escorted by a large and untamed mountain cat that vacillated between eating her and dragging her off to its lair.
In November, get lost
in the Canadian wilderness with REBEL…

*On the Canadian frontier in 1875, nature is a harsh
mistress. But the supernatural can really do you in…*

**A LONE WOLF**

Nathan Lesperance is used to being different. He’s the first Native attorney in Vancouver, and welcome neither with white society nor his sometime tribe. Not to mention the powerful wildness he’s always felt inside him, too dangerous to set free. Then he met Astrid Bramfield and saw his like within her piercing eyes. Now, unless she helps him through the harsh terrain and the harsher unknowns of his true abilities, it could very well get him killed…

**AND THE WOMAN WHO LEFT THE PACK**

Astrid has traveled this path before. Once she was a Blade of the Rose, protecting the world’s magic from unscrupulous men, with her husband by her side. But she’s loved and lost, and as a world-class frontierswoman, she knows all about survival. Nathan’s searing gaze and long, lean muscles mean nothing but trouble. Yet something has ignited a forgotten flame inside her: a burning need for adventure, for life—and perhaps even for love…
He had looked into her. Not merely seen her hunger for living, but felt it, too. She saw that at once. He recognized it in her. Two creatures, meeting by chance, staring at one another warily. And with reluctant longing.

Yet it wasn’t only that immediate connection she had felt when meeting Lesperance. There was magic surrounding him.

Astrid wondered if Lesperance even knew how magic hovered over him, how it surrounded him like a lover, leaving patterns of nearly visible energy in his wake. She didn’t think he was conscious of it. Nothing in his manner suggested anything of the sort. Nathan Lesperance, incredibly, was utterly unaware that he was a magical being. Not metaphorical magic, but true magic.

She knew, however. Astrid had spent more than ten years surrounded by magic of almost every form. Some of it benevolent, like the Healing Mists of Ho Hsien-Ku, some of it dark, such as the Javanese serpent king Naga Pahoda, though most magic was neither good nor evil. It simply was. And Astrid recognized it, particularly when sharing a very small space, as the Mounties’ office had been.

If Nathan Lesperance’s fierce attractiveness and unwanted understanding did not drive Astrid from the trading post, back to the shelter of her solitary homestead, then the magic enveloping him certainly would. She wanted nothing more to do with magic. It had cost her love once before, and she would not allow it to hurt her again.

But something had changed. She’d felt it, not so long ago. Magic existed like a shining web over the world, binding it together with filaments of energy. Being near magic for many years made her especially sensitive to it. When she returned from Africa, that sensitivity had grown even more acute. She tried to block it out, especially when she left England, but it never truly went away.

Only a few weeks earlier, Astrid had been out tending to her horse when a deep, rending sensation tore through her, sending her to her knees. She’d knelt in the dirt, choking, shaking, until she’d gained her strength again and tottered inside. Eventually, the pain subsided, but not the sense of looming catastrophe. Something had shaken and split the magical web. A force greater than anyone had ever known. And to release it meant doom.

What was it? The Blades had to know how to avert the disaster. They would fight against it, as they always did. But without her.

A memory flitted through her mind. Months earlier, she’d had a dream and it had stayed with her vividly. She dreamt of her Compass, of the Blades, and heard someone calling her, calling her home. Astrid had dismissed the dream as a vestige of homesickness, which reared up now and again, especially after she’d been alone for so long.

The jingle of her horse’s bridle snapped her attention back to the present. She cursed herself for drifting. A moment’s distraction could easily lead to death out here. Stumbling between a bear sow and her cub. Crossing paths with vicious whiskey runners. A thousand ways to die. So when her awareness suddenly prickled once again, Astrid did not dismiss it.

A rustle, and movement behind her. Astrid swung her horse around, taking up her rifle, to confront who or whatever was there.

She blinked, hardly believing what she saw. A man walked through tall grasses lining the pass trail. He walked with steady but dazed steps, hardly aware of his surroundings. He was completely naked.

“Lesperance?”

Astrid turned her horse on the trail and urged it closer. Dear God, it was Lesperance. She decocked her rifle and slung it back over her shoulder.

He didn’t seem to hear her, so she said again, coming nearer, “Mr. Lesperance?” She could see now, only ten feet away, that cuts, scrapes, and bruises covered his body. His very nude, extremely well-formed body. She snapped her eyes to his face before they could trail lower than his navel. “What happened to you?”

His gaze, dark and blank, regarded her with a removed curiosity, as if she was a little bird perched on a windowsill. He stopped walking and stared at her.

Astrid dismounted at once, pulling a blanket from her pack. Within moments, she wrapped it around his waist, took his large hand in hers, and coaxed his fingers to hold the blanket closed. Then she pulled off her coat and draped it over his shoulders. Despite the fact that the coat was quite large on Astrid, it barely covered his shoulders, and the sleeves stuck out like wings. In other circumstances, he would have looked comical. But there was nothing faintly amusing about this situation.
Magic still buzzed around him, though somewhat dimmer than before.
“Where are your clothes? How did you get here? Are you badly hurt?”
None of her questions penetrated the fog enveloping him. She bent closer to examine his wounds. Some of the
cuts were deep, as though made by knives, and rope abrasions circled his wrists. Bruises shadowed his knees and
knuckles. Blood had dried in the corners of his mouth. Nothing looked serious, but out in the wilderness, even the
most minor injury held the potential for disaster. And, without clothing, not even a Native inured to the changeable
weather could survive. He was in shock, just beginning to shake.
“Lesperance,” she said, taking hold of his wide shoulders and staring into his eyes intently, “listen to me. I need
to see your wounds. We’re going to have to ride back to my cabin.”
“Astrid…” he murmured with a slow blink, then his nostrils flared like a beast scenting its mate. A hungry look
crossed his face. “Astrid.”
It was unexpected, given the circumstances, yet seeing that look of need, hearing him say her name, filled her
with a responding desire. “Mrs. Bramfield,” she reminded him. And herself. They were polite strangers.
“Astrid,” he said, more insistent. He reached up to touch her face.
She grabbed his hand, pulling it away from her face. At least she wore gloves, so she didn’t have to touch his
bare skin. “Come on.” Astrid gently tugged him towards her horse. Once beside the animal, she swung up into the
saddle, put her rifle across her lap, and held a hand out to him. He stared at it with a frown, as though unfamiliar
with the phenomenon of hands.
“We have to go now, Lesperance,” Astrid said firmly. “Those wounds of yours need attention, and whatever or
whoever did this to you is probably still out there.”
He cast a look around, seeming to find a shred of clarity in the hazy morass of his addled brain. Something dark
and angry crossed his face. He took a step away, as if he meant to go after whoever had hurt him. His hands curled
into fists. Insanity. He was unarmed, naked, wounded.
“Now,” Astrid repeated.
Somehow, she got through to him. He took her hand and, with a dexterity that surprised her, given his
condition, mounted up behind her.
God, she didn’t want to do this. But there was no other choice. “Put your arms around my waist,” she said
through gritted teeth. When he did so, she added, “Hold tightly to me. Not that tight,” she gasped as his grip turned
to bands of steel. He loosened his hold slightly. “Good. Do not let go. Do you understand?”
He nodded, then winced as if the movement gave him pain. “Can’t stay up.”
“Lean against me if you have to.” She mentally groaned when he did just that, and she felt him, even through
her bulky knitted vest, shirt, and sturdy trousers. Heavy and hard and solid with muscle. Everywhere. His arms, his
chest, his thighs, pressed against hers. Astrid closed her eyes for a moment as she felt his warm breath along the
nape of her neck.
“All set?” she asked, barely able to form the words around her clenched jaw.
He tried to nod again but the effort made him moan. The plaintive sound, coming from such a strong, potent
man, pulled tight on feelings Astrid didn’t want to have.
“Thank…you,” he said faintly.
She didn’t answer him. Instead, she kicked her horse into a gallop, knowing deep in her heart that she was
making a terrible mistake.
And in December, STRANGER
brings the adventure back to London…

*He protects the world’s magic—with his science.*
*But even the best scientists can
fall prey to the right chemistry…*

**LOOKING FOR TROUBLE**

Gemma Murphy has a nose for a story—even if the boys in Chicago’s newsrooms would rather focus on her chest. So when she runs into a handsome man of mystery discussing how to save the world from fancy-pants Brit conspirators, she’s sensing a scoop. Especially when he mentions there’s magic involved. Of course, getting him on the record would be easier if he hadn’t caught her eavesdropping…

**LIGHTING HIS FUSE**

Catullus Graves knows what it’s like to be shut out: his ancestors were slaves. And he’s a genius inventor with appropriately eccentric habits, so even people who love him find him a little odd. But after meeting a certain redhead scribbler, he’s thinking of other types of science. Inconvenient, given that he needs to focus on preventing the end of the world as we know it. But with Gemma’s insatiable curiosity sparking Catullus’s inventive impulses, they might set off something explosive anyway…
Now was her chance to do some investigating. Surely she’d find something of note in his cabin. A fast glance up and down the passageway ensured she was entirely alone.

Gemma opened the cabin door.
And found herself staring at a drawn gun.

Damn. He was in. Working silently at a table by the light of one small lamp. At her entrance, he was out of his chair and drawing a revolver in one smooth motion.

She drew her Derringer.

They stared at each other.

In the small cabin, Catullus Graves’s head nearly brushed the ceiling as he faced her. Her reporter’s eye quickly took in the details of his appearance. Even though he was the only black passenger on the ship, more than just his skin color made him stand out. His scholar’s face, carved by an artist’s hand, drew one’s gaze. Arresting in both its elegant beauty and keen perception. A neatly trimmed goatee framed his sensuous mouth. The long, lean lines of his body—the breadth of his shoulders, the length of his legs—revealed a man comfortable with action as well as thought. Though, until now, Gemma had not been aware how comfortable. Until she saw the revolver held easily, familiarly in his large hand. A revolver trained on her. She’d have to do something about that.

“Mr. Graves,” she murmured, shutting the door behind her.

Behind his spectacles, Catullus Graves’s dark eyes widened. “Miss Murphy?”

Despite the fact that she was in danger of being shot, it wasn’t until Graves spoke to Gemma that her heart began to pound. And she was absurdly glad he did remember her, for she certainly hadn’t forgotten him. They’d met but briefly. Spoke together only once. Yet the impression of him remained, and not merely because she had an excellent memory.

“I thought you were out,” she said. As if that excused her behavior.

“Wanted to get a barometric reading.” Catullus Graves frowned. “How did you get in?”

“I opened the door,” she answered. Which was only a part of the truth. She wasn’t certain he would believe her if she told him everything.

“That’s not possible. I put an unbreakable lock on it. Nothing can open it without a special key that I made.” He sounded genuinely baffled, convinced of the security of his invention. Gemma glanced around the cabin. Covering all available surfaces, including the table where he had been working moments earlier, were small brass tools of every sort and several mechanical objects in different states of assembly. Graves was an inventor, she realized. She knew her way around a workshop, but the complex devices Graves worked on left her mystified.

She also realized—the same time he did—that they were alone in his cabin. His small, intimate cabin. She tried, without much success, not to look at the bed, just as she tried and failed not to picture him stripping out of his clothes before getting into that bed for the night. She barely knew this man! Why in the name of the saints did her mind lead her exactly where she did not want it to go?

The awareness of intimacy came over them both like an exotic perfume. He glanced down and saw that he was in his shirtsleeves, and made a cough of startled chagrin. He reached for his coat draped over the back of a chair.
One hand still training his gun on her, he used the other to don his coat.

“Strange to see such modesty on the other end of a Webley,” Gemma said.

“I don’t believe this situation is covered in many etiquette manuals,” he answered. “What are you doing here?”

One hand gripping her Derringer, Gemma reached into her pocket with the other. “Easy,” she said, when he tensed. “I’m just getting this.” She produced a small notebook, which she flipped open with a practiced one-handed gesture.

“Pardon—I’ll have a look at that,” Graves said. Polite, but wary. He stepped forward, one broad-palmed hand out.

A warring impulse flared within Gemma. She wanted to press herself back against the door, as if some part of herself needed protecting from him. Not from the gun in his other hand, but him, his tall, lean presence that fairly radiated with intelligence and energy. Keep impartial, she reminded herself. That was her job. Report the facts. Don’t let emotion, especially female emotion, cloud her judgment.

And yet that damned traitorous female part of her responded at once to Catullus Graves’s nearness. Wanted to
be closer, drawn in by the warmth of his eyes and body. An immaculately dressed body. As he crossed the cabin
with only a few strides, Gemma undertook a quick perusal. Despite being pulled on hastily, his dark green coat
perfectly fit the breadth of his shoulders. She knew that beneath the coat was a pristine white shirt. His tweed
trousers outlined the length of his legs, tucked into gleaming brown boots. His burgundy silk cravat showed off the
clean lines of his jaw. And his waistcoat. Good gravy. It was a minor work of art, superbly fitted, the color of claret,
and worked all over with golden embroidery that, upon closer inspection, revealed itself to be an intricate lattice of
vines and flowers. Golden silk-covered buttons ran down its front, and a gold watch chain hung between a pocket
and one of the buttons. Hanging from the chain, a tiny fob in the shape of a knife glinted in the lamplight.

On any other man, such a waistcoat would be dandyish. Ridiculous, even. But not on Catullus Graves. On him,
the garment was a masterpiece, and perfectly masculine, highlighting his natural grace and the shape of his well-
formed torso. She knew about fashion, having been forced to write more articles than she wanted on the subject.
And this man not only defined style, he surpassed it.

But she was through with writing about fashion. That was precisely why she was on this steamship in the
middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

With this in mind, Gemma tore her gaze from this vision to find him watching her. A look of faint perplexity
crossed his face. Almost bashfulness at her interest.

She let him take the notebook from her, and their fingertips accidentally brushed.

He almost dropped the notebook, and she felt heat shoot into her cheeks. She had the bright ginger hair and
pale, freckled skin of her Irish father, which meant that, even in low lamplight, when Gemma blushed, only a blind
imbecile could miss it.

Catullus Graves was not a blind imbecile. His reaction to her blush was to flush, himself, a deeper mahogany
staining his coffee-colored face.

A knock on the door behind her had Gemma edging quickly away, breaking the spell. She backed up until she
pressed against a bulkhead.

“Catullus?” asked a female voice on the other side of the door. The woman from earlier.

Graves and Gemma held each other’s gaze, weapons still drawn and trained on each other.

“Yes,” he answered.

“Is everything all right?” the woman outside pressed. “Can we come in?”

Continuing to hold Gemma’s stare, Graves reached over and opened the door.

Immediately, the fair-haired woman and her male companion entered.

“Thought it was nothing,” the man said, grim. “But I know I’ve caught that scent before, and—” He stopped,
tensing. He swung around to face Gemma, who was plastered against the bulkhead with her little pistol drawn.

Both he and the woman had their own revolvers out before one could blink.

And now Gemma had not one but three guns aimed at her.