

Also by Allie Jean



Legacy of a Dreamer - Chantal Breelan has spent most of her childhood as a ward of the state. She has a mysterious past and the foster system provided her with no answers. At the age of fifteen, she begins to have horrifying dreams: images of violence and death that haunt her during her waking hours. Anxious and afraid, and with no one else to confide in, she finds comfort in her imaginary friend, a shadow in the shape of a man who stands sentinel over her. She tells him of her dreams and her fear of an unknown future.

On her eighteenth birthday, she's forced out of her foster home, but the stress and demands drive her to the edge, making her see things. A boy from her nightmares appears in a subway station, sending her life in twists of truth and lies, and darkness surrounds her from all sides. But is it only evil that hides in the shadows, or are the answers to her past lingering just beyond?

Dreams of the Cursed

Dreamer Series, Book 2

By
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To my children for simply being . . . And to my husband, Bryan,
who, despite everything, has been my rock.

Prologue

A heavy fog weighs her down. The metal digs into her wrists, cold and unyielding, like the stone walls surrounding her. Although the pain is intense, she welcomes it. That's the only thing that keeps her lucid and aware.

The metal chains clank against the wall, the moans of her neighbor moving on her right putting her attention on alert. If the girl wasn't careful, she would awaken their guard, and she's had enough beatings to last a lifetime.

Hope is the only thing she has left to hold on to. She knows someone looks for her, searching amid the grime and filth of this world, but it has been so long. Maybe they've given up the hunt. Maybe she isn't that important after all.

"You're awake." She hears the sinister voice of her most hated captor, and she cowers against the wall in response. This one is cruel and relentless as if it is merely a form of entertainment, and she doesn't think she has the energy to fight him off for very long.

"The prince has ordered you to tell him what you saw," he says, his horrible scent flooding her nose as he closes in.

"I d-didn't dream tonight. I didn't see anything."

"Liar." His hot breath brushes against her face and she turns away to hide as best she can.

"Leave her alone!" her neighbor yells at him. "She's just a girl, you disgusting pig."

"Shut up!" the creature bellows. "You'll get what's coming to you if you're not careful."

"Now." He turns back to his victim chained helpless before him. "What did I hear you say while you slept, my child?"

"I d-don't remember," she says. "I was sleeping, and I don't know what I say when I'm asleep."

“Don’t play coy with me,” he says. “I know you saw something. Now tell me what it was!”

“An island, surrounded by water,” she says hurriedly. “Chantal was sitting on her bed with her father at her side. They were talking, but I couldn’t make it out. The water was too loud.”

“What else!”

“Um, I saw where they scattered C-Conlan’s ashes. He was my friend.”

“Idiot!” The creature screams and slaps her across the face. “Tell me what I want to hear. I know you have more than that.”

“I don’t,” she says. “I swear, I don’t.”

He leaves to grab another woman from her chains, pulling the helpless female in front of her to torture. She is too small and frail for his sadistic mood. In these circumstances, the girl has only one means of escape. Pulling away from herself, she goes into a trancelike state while her mind watches from a distance where she cannot feel her captor’s brutality. Even the emotional burden is somewhat subdued. Here, she is an apathetic spectator. Here is the only place she feels a modicum of safety.

However, this time is different.

As she watches the scene from her place of safety, she sees herself cry and cover her ears. The small body trembles as she tries to get away from the horrible scene before her. Although she feels disconnected from it all, she feels an urgent need to get inside that room to rescue the girl and her fellow prisoner.

“Tell me now!”

“I don’t know.”

“Tell me.”

The girl turns a burning gaze onto the space where her disjointed self watches in avid horror. No, she is not the girl, but some other kind of observer. Has this all been a dream? A vision she should understand?

“Chantie!” the young girl says. “Help me, please.”

“Who are you speaking to?” her guard asks. “Who are you looking at?”

“Find me,” the girl screams. “I’m in a cell surrounded by dirt, way underground. And there are others here with me.” The young one’s eyes pan across the room, and four small, trembling bodies come into view, each one chained in a similar fashion and shaking with fear. “Please, come quick. I don’t think we can hold on much longer.”

She dreams in fitful rest, images of Lydia in shackles keeping her on edge. She is running through a maze of tunnels, following the young girl’s cries, hoping to rescue her. Each turn becomes a solid dead end of rock and dirt. Placing a hand against the wall, the thickness of the hardened earth is solid below her palm with no sign of a way through. Several muffled cries come from behind it and she becomes desperate to find another way in.

She comes to the end of a long corridor, narrow and ominous. At the end of it is a metal door that is slightly ajar. She runs down the hall, hoping she’s found Lydia. Not caring about her own safety, she goes through it.

Dreams of the Cursed

The girl is there, chained to a wall, dirty, and emaciated. The Dreamer falls to her knees before her, a movement mirroring that of a penitent man. She weeps for the child, because Lydia is still, as if in death, her arms held out wide in a Christlike pose.

“Find me,” the girl whispers, though her lips do not move.

Chapter One

The musky air ran rancid through the tunnels, which only added to his agitation. Each breath felt thick and damp in his lungs, making it a discomfort to breathe. The stench permeating the atmosphere was beyond grotesque.

He felt like a rat having to hide underground in filth and decay. He couldn't wait for the day when his kind ran the streets, invading humanity in full force with victory at their fingertips and the Warriors six feet underground where they belonged.

His feet pounded along the gravel. He had to duck his head now and then when the passageway narrowed and grew short. Once again, the feeling of claustrophobia set in, and his anger grew at having to hide and fester like common trash.

He had spent the majority of the year hidden away, keeping his secret hostages safe underground. The women he guarded were his utmost priority. If only he had proper soldiers who could do the job the right way, not tiptoe around things, afraid to get their hands dirty.

It had been drilled into every Kajola soldier that females of his kind should be controlled with a firm hand and a sharp blade. His commanding officer had expressed that they should be under his boot, begging for mercy. And yet, the incompetent morons he led couldn't keep one little brat in line. Six months of questioning that garnered nothing but insolence and stubbornness from the girl left him agitated and more than furious.

Especially since his master's warning had been clear—find where his sister had been hiding the Fire Eater or pay with his own life.

Time was running out, and in order to save his life, he needed to do things his way. Perhaps his training captain had been right; intimidation and brute force was the way to go with this weaker gender consecrated with Heaven's Grace.

That blessing seemed more like a curse to him. He had a small fleet of these *Dreamers* under his hand, and their sole purpose was to give him the

information he needed. It was the new one who seemed to be giving him all the trouble. And he wouldn't hesitate to give the order to silence her for good if she didn't begin to cooperate.

Screams of pain from a female echoed off the stone walls, the sound music to his ears. Finally, he may have his answers.

"Sir, we have her complacent now. But Princess says she sees the Warriors coming for them soon."

He moved through the tunnels, his pace quickening. There was one among the girls who had learned that time here passed so much easier if she complied with his demands. It didn't hurt that Damon had done everything he could to make sure this girl, *his* Princess, remained comfortable, and she seemed to appreciate the consideration.

Without knowing his reasons for desiring the information, she told him what he needed to know, the visions that were pertinent to the finding and imprisonment of more of their kind. She also told him of the Warriors, and their plan to move Chantal from foster care and hide her from his eye. She had been the one to inform the guards that the young girl, Lydia, had been talking to his sister through the dreams, a new and threatening talent that he had to control before the Warriors discovered where he hid his treasures.

Especially Princess . . . she'd become invaluable to him in *many* ways.

Arriving at the cells, Damon wrenched the door open and saw the little girl asleep against the wall. Tattered garments lay limp on her body, and her hair was matted against her skull. Tiny wrists bound in shackles hung three feet above the ground, stretching her thin arms like some macabre marionette doll.

"I told you she could talk with my sister. Don't you morons listen?"

"Sir, she passed out. No matter how much . . . *stimulation* . . . we provided."

"Why didn't you *kill her then?*" he screamed.

"The woman, she went crazy, Sir. By the time we got her quiet, the girl had already fallen into a deep—"

"Oh, shut up!" His words were punctuated by the sound of a blade slicing through the air, and the dull thud of a body hitting the floor. He turned to another minion awaiting his command.

"Well, wake her."

One of his soldiers hovered over the small, unconscious form of a young girl. Beneath his feet, the body of a woman lay still and covered in blood. The soldier landed a kick to the girl's ribs, caused her to wince and wake in terror. The girl met Damon's eyes and a spark of recognition and fear revealed too much—she seemed to know exactly who he was.

"She will not speak, Sir. No matter who we threaten to harm, she remains quiet. And this one passed out from the pain," he said, kicking the larger, yet still fragile body below him.

Damon glared down at the young girl who sat, dirty and lethargic, on the ground in front of him. This one had only been in his possession a short

while, a prize he took directly from the Warriors and in front of his sister, Chantal. Every time he thought of his victory, small though it might have been, it brought a smile to his lips. This one meant something to his dear sister, and for that, she had paid double in pain and torment. To see the look in her eye when he'd disappeared into the Shade with her little friend . . .

Priceless.

He'd give anything to have that moment framed in a picture so that he could look upon it with glee anytime he wanted. And yet, this one girl, his trophy, had also caused him the most alarm.

"Speak," he commanded, making her jump slightly at the anger in his tone.

"I-I don't know what you want me to tell you," she replied in a thick, tear-filled voice. It made him sick to hear such weakness.

"I want to know what you told my sister in your dream. Tell me *now!*"

"I-I didn't s-say anything," the girl cried.

He gnashed his teeth together in frustration at the sound.

"I don't know where I am. How could I tell her anything?"

"Because you can," he said, kicking dirt toward her form. The girl flinched and whimpered like a pathetic animal. "I know you speak to her. Tell me what you told her, damn it!"

"Sir!" An underling called from just outside the cell. Damon spat at the girl, and then turned toward his guard. "The older one says they are coming *now*. They know where we are."

Damon growled in anger and fury. If the Warriors arrived and took his Princess, he'd surely lose the upper hand. It had only been because of her crucial information that he'd earned the right to lead his own men. Although he'd kept her identity from his master, he surely would be in further debt to the Evil One if he lost her. He already owed his master for showing forgiveness in the face of a grave mistake he'd made as a young man. Pledging his fealty would never be enough to repay such a debt.

They had to run.

It was their only option. To fight left too many variables to consider and the last thing he wanted was to relinquish his Oracles, especially his Princess.

"How much time do we have?" Damon asked his guard.

"The girl said they come now, my Lord."

Damon clamped his eyes shut, thinking, strategizing.

"I will take Princess and the other Primes toward the West with Stratus." Damon pointed to his second-in-command and most trusted soldier. "Favian, I want you and Brutus to take these here to the southern barracks and wall them up." He pointed toward Lydia and the body below her. "Keep them hidden at all costs, do you understand? Even if they have to rot within the ground, you keep them out of the Warriors' hands, clear?"

"Yes, Sir!"

Orders were made and followed. His path set before him became certain.

There was only one way those Warriors were going to take Damon's females, and that was by his death, or by rescuing the cold, lifeless bodies from the ground.



“Down here! I think I found it!”

Chantal Breelan jumped off a toppled pillar from a long-forgotten civilization, landing on the ground with a muffled thud. The structure was part of an old, ancient ruin in Paola, Malta—the city where her special brand of foresight had led them. Just below the crumpled piece of architecture, a dark crevice opened into an underground passageway leading to places unknown, and her heartbeat raced with excitement.

The seemingly bottomless piece of jagged earth mirrored the image she'd seen in her dreams for several nights now. Every night, she'd gone to sleep hoping she'd see something that would lead her to this abandoned, forgotten city. For that reason, she'd craved sleep, prayed for her nightly visions, and was eager to learn all that she could.

It had been such a vast contrast to how she'd felt in her youth.

For many years—as long as Chantal could remember, really—she'd experienced hellish dreams that mirrored tales of horror and destruction. She remembered trying to stay awake in order to escape them as best she could, but when the Sandman inevitably lured her eyes shut, the dreams would begin in earnest and bleed into her waking hours, resulting in a stubborn bout of anxiety.

Chantal had grown up thinking that something might be wrong with her. Perhaps she'd experienced something traumatizing as a child that she couldn't remember but had manifested into her dreams. After all, her past had always been so hazy.

It was only when the creatures from her dreams came gunning for her that the facts of her past started to come to the surface. Once her childhood memories had been released from the wards that'd been placed in her mind, Chantal knew with utter certainty of the truth of it all. For the first time, she remembered her father—gray-skinned, unnaturally tall, and extremely mythical looking—who'd read her bedtime stories at night. She remembered her mother, kind and loving. She was haunted by the memory of her sister, Luanne, and her gruesome murder at the hands of her brother, Damon.

The newly discovered puzzle pieces created a picture of death and devastation, and the plot seemed to thicken with every step she took into the unknown.

Her father, Quintus, had been one of the original Fallen Angels who had challenged Heaven in a quest for a power not their own. Although he'd repented for his sins, he still remained cursed, as did the other Conrites. It

didn't stop his will to fight against his former Fallen brothers and take out their taint on humanity.

Dark versus Light, Evil versus Good . . . the war raged on, intense and to the death, hidden away from the wary eyes of humanity. She'd been thrust into the center of it, but the concept seemed so foreign to Chantal. Raised within the cruel, government-driven foster system, she had believed that nothing existed but injustice and cruelty. The reality that there were higher beings out there, watching over mankind, had been hard to believe.

"Where are you, Chantal?" She smiled at the sound of the concerned voice. Her Warrior only knew one way to speak—sharp and direct. Yet, nothing could keep the enthusiasm out of her answer.

"Here!"

She started down into the narrow crevice, adrenaline coursing through her veins. "I think this is it!"

She could hear the others approach from behind her, but she refused to take her eyes off the target.

Finally.

She'd finally found Lydia.

They'd been searching for the little girl for months now. And every day that she'd been missing, Chantal felt like she was responsible for whatever hell her young friend was experiencing at the hands of the enemy—one that was commanded by her brother, Damon.

About six months ago, Damon had taken Lydia. A young Dreamer like herself, the Warriors had kept her hidden, trying to keep them out of the hands of their enemy who wished to exploit their gifts. For whatever reason, it seemed Damon and his soldiers wanted Chantal more desperately than all the others did, and he had taken Lydia as hostage, knowing Chantal would give herself up to save her young friend. Just when she'd been about to do that very thing, her father—an ancient and powerful being—appeared, and then Damon disappeared with Lydia in tow.

Chantal had done everything she could to find her, including speaking to the young girl in her dreams, a skill that not one among their side even thought had been possible.

Unfortunately, her visions were still not specific. All she had to go on were broken images and disjointed clues. It took creative patience for her to try to decipher where her brother had taken Lydia.

"Chantal, where are you?" Mathias's voice was laced with concern this time. She rolled her eyes. He could be so ridiculously overprotective. It was cute, but a bit much at times.

"I'm here."

Clicking on her flashlight, she pointed the bright beam into the dark opening. She tried to see if there was a noticeable safe way down. She stood perched on the very edge, but keeping her footing solid, she leaned over to see a bit better. Two large arms wrapped around her waist and yanked her back.

“Are you crazy, woman? You could’ve fallen in!”

“Relax. I wasn’t that close.”

Mathias stood at her side, flanked by his brother, Titus, and his best friend and comrade, Andreu.

“You think this is it?” Andreu sounded excited.

“I’m sure of it.”

Chantal beamed up at the men with a victorious gleam. A warm, familiar hand slid from its place at her waist and traveled up her spine, coming to rest on her neck with a gentle caress. She melted.

Mathias . . . her Warrior.

For centuries, females of her kind had been hunted and murdered. For this reason, she had been under the protection of the Warriors—males of her lineage who had sworn an oath to their protection.

Mathias had been her guardian and protector when she was a vulnerable youth, watching over her from the shadows, keeping her safe when she’d been ignorant of the danger surrounding her and closing in. He belonged to the crazy world she’d been thrust into recently.

Males of their kind were vicious fighters. Mathias was no exception. Trained to be a leader of his kind alongside his brother, he’d been born to be a valiant protector of the Oracles and had become the champion of her heart. Even now, he kept her in the forefront of his mind. Always watching . . . forever part of her.

The fact she’d been cooped up with a bunch of dogmatic, bigoted men had left her a bit jaded to their charms, even Mathias’s.

The Warriors were raised to revere women and were fiercely loyal. Each of them loved her like a sister, yet they were a bit too serious for her taste. Their sense of humor was stale, something she’d been trying to fix since she joined the group. And the ‘Ye olde English’ most of them spoke had become quite annoying.

“Call the others,” Mathias told his brother, taking a step closer to the opening in the ground. “See if there’s another way in.”

Titus nodded and disappeared to find the other twenty or so Warriors who were searching among the ruins. They’d brought a small army on this hunt for their young friend. Titus wanted to be prepared in case they were trapped by twilight and the encompassing Shade—a one-dimensional realm mirroring the human world but with a flat, lifeless mockery.

Chantal didn’t know exactly how it worked, just that she couldn’t enter the Shade alone. Mathias had mentioned something about the *Grace* her kind had been granted serving as a beacon from the other side. All she knew was that all creatures of darkness seemed to pour from the shadows once the Shade had been opened. It was enough to have Titus come prepared, and a sense of urgency to speed Chantal’s searching.

“Good job,” Mathias whispered against her temple before placing a soft kiss on her skin. She smiled, leaning into his massive chest. She cherished these rare, impious signs of affection from him. Always the proper

gentleman, he never seemed to give in to his more basic needs for physical touch with her. If she had any say, that would be something they would continue to work on in the near future.

“Thanks. I just hope this is it this time.”

“She’s down there. I can feel it,” Andreu said, cupping his large hand against her shoulder, and she glanced up at him. “Now, let’s see if we can widen this entrance. Some of us are a little too big to fit through it.”

The Warriors stood well over six and a half feet tall, each heavily muscled and strikingly handsome. Despite their size, they moved gracefully in a fight. Still, Chantal thought her Warrior’s opinion on the opening to the cave had been accurate.

She smiled when Mathias grabbed the flashlight out of her hand and stepped closer to the opening in the ground. In his other hand, he held an iron pickaxe. With tremendous force, Mathias brought down the sharp metal end of it against the edges of the earth, crumbling the hardened stone even further. The metal of the axe groaned and contorted as he continued, making the opening just large enough for the huge Warriors to enter.

“That should be good,” Mathias said, throwing the now distorted pickaxe onto the stone-covered ground with a loud clatter. Clicking on the flashlight, he threw the glowing torch into the hole. Chantal watched as the light became smaller and smaller, finally disappearing altogether, and then heard a faint clatter.

“Sounds to be at least fifty feet down.” Titus guessed and Mathias nodded. He stood from his crouched position, dusting off the debris from his faded jeans, contemplating his next move. After a moment, he turned toward his brother and gave him a stern expression.

“Watch her,” he said brusquely. Chantal glanced at Titus to see him give a short nod of agreement. She looked back just in time to watch Mathias jump into the dark hole. A large hand clamped down on her shoulder as she stared after her Warrior in horror.

“Stay put,” Titus ordered. Chantal threw his hand off in annoyance. “He’ll be fine, Chantal.”

“Screw you,” she spat in anger.

Andreu laughed.

She glared at him. “And you, too.”

Andreu held up his hands, palms out in a sign of innocence.

“Why’d you let him do that?”

“He’s fine.” Titus tried to placate her just as a loud whistle echoed up from the bowels of the earth. “See?” Titus gestured toward the hole. “He made it down in one piece.”

“Not when I’m through with him,” Chantal muttered angrily, causing Andreu to let out an amused chuckle. Several other Warriors began to filter in from around the ruins, awaiting orders from Titus on how to proceed. After giving a dozen or so men instructions to search for another entrance from which the Kajola might try to flee, Titus returned.

"We're going in," he told her, gesturing toward himself and Andreu. Before he could go any further, Chantal cut in.

"I'm going, too." Titus opened his mouth to argue, but she stood up tall and ignored his intimidating stature. "I have to go down there to tell you where to look. The visions within the barracks were clearer than the location of where to begin the search. And if my dreams are correct, we will need to get to them quickly."

"Them?" Andreu asked, alarmed.

"Yes," she replied soberly. "There is more than one. I don't know how many, exactly, but we will have to hurry."

Chantal knew this knowledge would upset them, which had been the reason she hadn't said anything after the image of the other girls had appeared for the first time last night. Titus and Andreu exchanged a loaded glance, seeming to communicate their next move. Would they ignore Mathias's wish to have Chantal out of the fray, or risk his wrath and potentially rescue more Oracles from the clutches of the enemy? Chantal rolled her eyes, tired of the "boys' club" attitude. She'd have to find these girls just to dilute some of the abundant testosterone, though she understood their overprotective nature.

"You'll have to take her." Andreu sighed.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Chantal said sarcastically. "Means a lot."

Andreu just shrugged.

"You know my brother is going to kill me for taking you down there," Titus said just before he wrapped his large arms around her and, with her held tightly against his massive form, jumped into the hole.

Chantal felt like she'd fallen for several heart-stopping minutes as the rapid movement of air rushed over her body. She held onto Titus so tightly that she felt as if her fingers would go numb from lack of circulation. With a jolt, they came to a sudden stop, so jarring that she thought she was going to be sick. Her ears were ringing and her insides felt like mush. Stumbling toward the floor, Chantal put her head between her knees in an effort to keep her stomach contents from making a reappearance.

"What is she doing here?"

She heard Mathias demand an answer from his brother in a whisper-yell. She wanted to call him out on being a chauvinistic pig, but couldn't find it in her at the moment. Instead, she waved a shaky hand in his direction in an attempt to quiet the hushed arguing.

"You know she wouldn't take no for an answer."

"It's simple, Titus. You. Leave. Her. There."

"And then she finds her own way down? How stupid would that be?"

"Both of you be quiet! I can take care of myself." She tried to stand up and face her Warriors but the action increased her vertigo.

"Are you all right?" Mathias looked worried.

Chantal nodded, one hand clutching her stomach, the other tossing the

braid of her hair over her shoulder to keep it out of the way in case of regurgitation.

“Damn it, brother, you never should’ve brought her down here.”

Chantal glared at him, or in the direction she thought him to be in, at least. Things were a tad blurry at the moment. Mathias crouched down beside her, taking her arm to help steady her. With a resolved motion, Chantal punched him squarely in his ribs.

“That’s for thinking you can leave me behind,” she said, pointing a finger in his face successfully. Mathias rubbed his side, scowling in her direction.

“You’re getting stronger,” he told her in a tone that seemed partly amused, partly shocked at her actions.

“Well, let’s hope she can put that strength to good use,” Titus said, holding out the hilt of a blade to Chantal. He nodded toward a darkened tunnel and the escalating sound of the approaching enemy. “We’ve got company.”

Chapter Two

The Warriors began filtering into the underground barracks, fighting off any Kajola soldiers they came across.

“They’re coming at us from all sides!”

“Keep them occupied!” Chantal told them, maintaining her own weapon tight in her grip. “The girls are in there. I’ve seen this place in my dreams.”

“*Warriors!*”

Mathias bellowed a powerful war cry, and the brethren redoubled their efforts to fight through the Kajola guard. The traitorous bastards seemed to be appearing out of nowhere, and the enemy’s numbers far exceeded their own. Chantal became desperate to make her way through their ranks to find the tiny prison where she knew Lydia would be trapped, along with a small group of young girls.

The utter terror painted on their young, beautiful faces had haunted Chantal. Panic threatened to seize her ability to rationalize, emphasizing the raw fear the girls had been experiencing. She had felt the overwhelming claustrophobia through the eyes of the small girl, and the memory of it fed her now.

“Get me through this!” she called to Mathias, who fought several soldiers with two more Warriors covering each flank. He plunged his blade deep into the gut of an attacking soldier, sending him into a crushing heap on the ground. The soldier tried to fight from this position but Mathias ended his attempt with a swift decapitation. Chantal leaped over the twitching body and threw herself into the fight.

Anger drove her, but fear kept her strikes true. With deadly accuracy, she cut her enemy down, surprising many of the Kajola with her brute force. The Warriors had trained her well.

Chantal was the oldest living Oracle known to the Warriors, and her physical capabilities had grown exponentially since she’d begun training with the brotherhood, honing her skills. Sword fighting seemed to come naturally to her. She’d become a virtual killing machine, although the

strange red haze that had accompanied her surge of power in her first fight back in New York hadn't made a reappearance . . . yet.

The only time she didn't feel conflicted in killing, even to survive, was when she was engulfed in the red haze because of the lack of vivid afterthought. Nothing seemed to connect with her in that moment, only the need to fulfill her duty. To seek vengeance. To kill. Perhaps that was its purpose.

If anything were to trigger that strong, powerful sense of retribution, it would be now while she fought to rescue children from the clutches of an inhumane death. Pushing her way through the fray, Chantal sprinted toward a maze of scattered tunnels, hoping her gut would lead her in the right direction. Of course, she didn't get very far on her own.

"Stay close to my side."

Mathias pulled her behind him with an overly aggressive grip on her wrist. Taking on two opponents with one free hand, her Warrior was too preoccupied to notice her protest, and he refused to let go of her for one minute.

Better to use a leash, she thought in a fleeting snide comment. Although she understood Mathias's need to protect her, she could take care of herself. When would he understand that she was a fighter?

She could barely contain the frustration within her, and she took it out on a Kajola soldier who appeared behind them, attempting to take a swipe on Mathias's blindside. Chantal cast out her blade in a sudden motion, blocking the soldier's attack. The man's eyes widened at the show of strength a woman of her stature shouldn't possess.

"Yeah, I guess we get stronger as we come of age," she told him with a snarky grin. She spun her arm counterclockwise quickly, causing the soldier to lose his balance for a split second. In that instant, Chantal plunged her sword deep into his chest. "Guess you would've seen that coming if you weren't a murdering SOB, right?"

With her right foot planted squarely in his groin, Chantal kicked the man off her blade and onto the floor, where the rattling sound of his gasping breaths disappeared as Mathias tugged her along after him.

"Do you have to be so haughty?"

"Look who's talking." Chantal scoffed as she ran beside him. "And I've told you the word is 'cocky.' It's okay to use slang, you know."

"I'm working on it," Mathias grumbled. "It wouldn't be so hard if the sayings made any sense. I don't get that term. What does a rooster have to do with your arrogance?"

Chantal almost laughed, but it caught in her throat as the pair turned a bend to find their way blocked by several Kajola guards. The men began to chuckle darkly as they took in their opponents—one lonely Warrior and a seemingly small, feeble woman.

"I almost feel bad for him," one of the Kajola laughed, gesturing toward Mathias. "He's going to be easy pickings while he tries to defend his little

duckling.”

Chantal scoffed and quirked her eyebrow at him in challenge.

“Oh, she’s a tiger,” another soldier replied, seeing her defiance. The others chortled in response. “Let’s see if we can tame this wild kitty.”

Mathias exchanged a glance with Chantal and smiled at the wicked grin on her face. Pulling a second blade from the belt on his waist, he handed it to her. Chantal twirled her new weapon in the palm of her hand and flashed an eager grin toward the soldiers.

“This is going to be fun.”

“Just keep it short,” Mathias told her. “We need to get out of here before the Shade falls.”

“Split and dip?”

“Sounds good. Keep your backside clear this time.”

Chantal let out a brief sound of annoyance, remembering the one time she’d battled six Warriors in the training room back in Greece, learning an offensive move she awarded the fitting nickname.

“Let’s clear it out,” Chantal said with a roll of her shoulders.

The men at the end of the tunnel laughed, arming themselves with whatever weapon they had on them and standing in a relaxed, confident stance.

Chantal and Mathias began running at a full sprint toward their enemy, no sign of apprehension evident in their determined expressions. It took a moment for the other men to respond, but when they did, the group let out a bellowed sound of enjoyment as they prepared for their imminent victory.

Her grip tight on the blade, her eyes wide scanning her environment, Chantal sought out the perfect opportunity to strike. The men stood loosely in a group, not one of them preparing to be taken out. Their confidence would be their downfall.

“Split!” Mathias called. Chantal slid to the ground, aligning her body parallel to the soft dirt and sliding between the legs of an unprepared soldier. At the same time, Mathias planted a foot onto the lateral wall and propelled himself off it, sending his body into a flying leap deep into the middle of the grouping. Each of them let their blades swing and fly, felling three of their opponents before any of the soldiers realized what had happened.

Chantal popped to her feet, immediately swinging her blade horizontally across her body, slicing two men through their chests and beheading another where he stood. Mathias put his back to hers, and the pair of them fought as a unit. Mathias used her small stature and light weight as a wrecking ball, picking her up by her arm and flinging her into the enemy. He trusted her to land her blows sure and true, and she didn’t disappoint. After a few short minutes, the enemy lay dead at their feet.

“I don’t remember it being that easy,” Mathias commented as he surveyed the carnage before them.

“Yeah, that’s ’cause you didn’t have me.” Chantal wiped the end of her

blood-soaked blade on the tunic of a mangled man lying at her feet.

“What was the word you used before?” Mathias asked with a glint in his eye.

Chantal gave him a knowing wink and smile. She went to him. The adrenaline from a fight always made her want him closer. Mathias matched her movement, wrapping his arms around her waist. She gave his muscled body a cursory glance.

“We’ll talk about that later.” She gave him a quick peck on his lips. “Let’s go.”



“What is all of this?”

Chantal held a small flashlight in her hand, shining its light onto the smooth walls of the catacombs. Faint outlines of long-forgotten drawings and glyphs adorned both sides of the narrow tunnels.

“Seems like it’s outlining some type of religious ceremony,” Mathias said. “That’s probably why they kept the girls down here.”

“No one could see their Grace from the Shade.” Chantal finished his thought process.

“Exactly.”

“I’ve seen this . . .” Chantal’s whispered words caught Mathias’s attention. She was shining her light on a part of the wall that had a curved arch lined with small stars. “I’ve seen this, Mathias. In my dreams.” She quickly began to shine her light along the wall, trying to pull her vague memory from a vision she’d had many months ago.

“It doesn’t make sense,” she said after a few minutes.

“What’s wrong?” Mathias stood by her, examining the same area that she studied.

“There should be an entrance through here.”

“An entrance to where, Chantal?”

“To where they are. The girls. In my dream, there was a doorway right underneath this one.” She pointed to the star-crested arch drawn on the wall. “I saw the girls chained to the wall just beyond this.”

Mathias assessed the area quickly, trying to find a way in. Seeing none, he took a couple of steps backward and prepared himself.

“Get back!”

Knowing what he was about to do, Chantal tried to stop him.

“Wait! What if you cause a cave-in?”

“Do you have another option?”

Chantal glanced around her quickly. They’d been scouring the catacombs for what seemed like hours as the sounds of the battle began to fade farther and farther away. Comprised of twisting and turning tunnels made of clay, this underground bunker was confusing and damn near impossible to

navigate. The drawings on the wall had been the first thing Chantal had recognized in a while, and she didn't want to turn away when everything in her gut told her this was it.

"I guess we don't have a choice . . ." Before she could comment further, Mathias planted his foot onto the wall just below where she'd indicated, and with the strength of his inherent lineage, crumbled the clay to nothing but dirt.

The crash was deafening as the wall came crumbling down. Her vision obscured by a cloud of falling debris, Chantal covered her face and tried to hold her breath. In the next moment, she felt her Warrior wrap his body around hers, protecting her from anything large enough to cause damage.

"What"—Chantal coughed to clear her airway from dust—"the hell was that?"

"We needed to get through," Mathias replied simply, offering his hand to help her off the ground.

"A little warning next time, babe." She began dusting herself off. Her pants were a mess, and she couldn't even imagine the layer of filth coating her hair.

"I did warn you," her Warrior reminded her. "And what does 'babe' mean? Is that some kind of reference to an infant?"

Chantal looked at him incredulously, one eyebrow raised. Mathias just shrugged in response.

"Mathias! Chantal!"

Titus's voice echoed through the maze of halls.

"Down here!" Mathias answered, and the sound of pounding footsteps thundered their approach.

The two continued to clear the path, making a hole big enough for them to squeeze through. A vast fog, pitch black and dense, stood before her, her flashlight barely able to penetrate its thickness.

"Anything?"

"I can't tell. It's so dark . . ."

As the dust settled, a wall came into view. She could only just make out the outline of something hanging from the wall. Reaching in farther, she tried to figure out what it could be.

"Hello? Anyone here?"

Her voice sounded muffled under the cloud of rubble. Speaking into it filled her mouth with granules, and she coughed and spat onto the ground. Wiping her eyes, she returned to the hole and the spot where she'd seen something.

"Are you two all right?" Titus had arrived, slightly out of breath. "We heard a large crash."

"Chantal thinks the girls might be on the other side of that wall. We only knew one way to get through without wasting more time."

"Cool." Andreu's reply made Chantal smile. Out of all of the Warriors, Andreu seemed to entertain Chantal's desire to update their vocabulary with

a more modern touch.

“What happened with the battle? Did we destroy the Kajola?”

“They retreated,” Titus replied, and his tone indicated that he’d been surprised. “I’ve ordered the others to continue the search while we came after you two. You both left so suddenly, we didn’t know if you were taken.”

“This one had an instinct.”

Mathias’s words made Chantal bite her tongue to keep a sarcastic retort from slipping out. The boys continued their masculine conversation while she slid into the other room. Once stable on two feet, she cast her flashlight to get a better look and immediately froze.

A pair of shackles on chains hung from the wall, covered in a faint color of rust, causing a sinking feeling inside Chantal’s gut.

“In here!”

She rushed to the wall, searching for any evidence of the girls. The sound of rock crumbling indicated the boys’ entrance, but she didn’t turn away from the spot. Touching the hard metal fetters, she paused when another object caught her eye. There, on the ground, lay a small, threadbare shirt surrounded by what appeared to be dried blood. She picked it up and tried to dust off the grime. Tears pooled in her eyes.

“Chantal!”

“They were here!” She cried, bringing the fabric up to her chest. “They were all sitting here, in this room, in my dream.”

The men stood by her side and began illuminating the room with each of their flashlights. With the added light, more of the room came into view. Chantal gasped when she realized they were standing in the middle of a vast prison cell with multiple chains affixed to the walls. Their tenants were missing, but brutal evidence of their containment lay scattered across the rough floor, dried upon the rusty restraints.

“Where are they, Mathias?” Chantal began to panic, stumbling forward. “They have to be here.”

She grasped one of the chains, the harsh clattering reverberating in her ears, and piercing her heart with its cruelty. Sobs ripped from her chest.

“I saw them here. All of them. We saved them, Mathias. What happened?”

She didn’t receive a response. Only discontent and anguish filled her senses. This was where death lay thick and heavy, saturating every pore, every facet of these walls. Those poor babies had been kept here, tortured, terrorized for who knew how long and to what end.

“Mathias . . .”

His name came out as a hoarse cry, ripping at her vocal cords until it felt raw and aching. Still, he did not respond. Chantal turned to see the three Warriors in a semicircle with their heads bowed, each mouthing words as if in prayer.

“No!” Chantal sprung to her feet and barreled into the men at full speed,

shoving against Mathias's vast chest. "No! Don't you dare give up on those girls. They are fighters."

"They're gone, Chantal." It was Titus who spoke, his tone exuding his heartbreak. Mathias refused to meet her eyes. His expression was flat and emotionless, save the trail of salt water falling from his eyes.

"No, they're not. I won't give up hope."

"We've been through this many times before, little one," Andreu told her, cupping her elbow in a sign of comfort. Chantal shrugged him off.

"So that's it? You guys just go home? Better luck next time?"

"This is never easy for us." Mathias snapped at her, his eyes narrowing in her direction. "You think we enjoy losing countless little girls when they are so close to us we can feel them? There have been times when we've rescued an Oracle just to have her die in our arms from loss of blood or starvation or worse. A child, Chantal. A tiny baby."

Chantal swallowed against the lump of vomit wanting to make its way up her throat. She had no appreciation of what her Warriors suffered until that moment, until she could see the vivid agony of it in each of their eyes.

"I can't—she swallowed again—"give up, Mathias. I won't."

"Then you'll be searching these halls for eternity," he said coldly as he approached her, his towering height adding menace to his message. Such a stark contrast to his usual demeanor, it tore at her heart even more to see her Warrior's pain. "There's nothing left to find but a dead body, and that's something you will never be able to get out of your mind. You think you have nightmares now? Continue this hopeless crusade and then you'll know true horror."

"Mathias . . ."

Titus stepped in front of his brother, and the interference broke the searing glare he'd leveled upon her. Chantal gasped for breath between her cries, and she fell to her knees with anguish.

"That's enough," Titus said calmly. "She understands now."

"Hardly." Mathias's tone sounded defeated. It broke her heart to hear it in his words but she held so much anger and disappointment toward him. Was it wrong for her to want to keep looking? Was it wrong to hold on to the hope that the girls could be found if they looked?

She could hear the men conversing in hushed, angry tones, but she didn't pay them any attention. An object by her boot caught her eye, and she reached for it. A teddy bear, no bigger than her fist, lay among the chains, iron and filth. One of the bear's stuffed legs hung loosely at an odd angle, having been ripped from its tattered seams. It was covered in a thick layer of dust and muck, the hair matted. Chantal tried to dust it off, hoping to find some semblance of what it had once been. Perhaps it gave a little one comfort for a short while as she was chained to this horrid wall. More likely, the disgusting excuse for men had used it to mentally torment their inmates.

Chantal closed her eyes against the torrent of tears now pouring down her

cheeks. She refused to cry aloud, not now. Not in this place. It had seen too many screams, produced far too many nightmares to abide another. These girls deserved more than sorrow. They deserved celebration . . . and retribution.

A faint banging noise caught Chantal's attention, and her head popped up in alert.

What was that? Had the Kajola returned?

Again, a soft *thump, thump, thump* came from behind a wall directly in front of her, and Chantal held her breath in order to hear it better. Slowly she made her way over to the wall, her fingers trembling as she touched the solid earth.

"Help!"

She hadn't imagined that.

"Over here! They're here!"

Chapter Three

The sound was faint and distant, but she could hear a small, childlike voice calling from behind the rocks. She began searching the wall, her fingers trying to find a way behind it.

“What are you doing?” Mathias grabbed Chantal’s arm to stop her frantic actions but she pulled away from him and began again. “Chantal, stop!”

“They’re here, Mathias. Listen.”

“No, they’re not, my love. They’re gone. I’m so sorry, but they are gone!”

“Wait!” Andreu came by her side, staring at the wall in front of them. “I can hear it, too. Listen.”

“Help! Can you hear us? We’re here!”

“Behind the wall!” Andreu began to search with Chantal, pounding against the earth when his exploration revealed nothing. The clay cracked and debris began to fall from the ceiling.

“Don’t!” Chantal screamed. “You might hurt them. There has to be another way.”

“Look for a hidden trigger,” Titus ordered. “Spread out! Search everywhere.”

A sense of panic enveloping her, Chantal searched, wide-eyed, along the wall. Examining every nook, every crevice, the four of them looked for a way behind the wall.

“I don’t see anything, Titus!” Mathias said. “There’s nothing here but chains and shackles.”

“There has to be a way,” his brother told him. “Keep looking.”

“Wait! Maybe they know.” Chantal rushed to the wall, pressing her body as close as she could. “Girls, can you hear me?”

“Chantie?”

“Lydia?” Chantal’s voice came out in a shrill sound of utter joy.

“Chantie, it’s me. We’re here. Help us!”

“We’re trying, sweetheart. We are trying to find a way in.”

“It’s on the ground,” another voice replied, this one sounding a bit older

than a child, but feminine all the same. *“It looks like a lump of dirt. You have to step on it to release the lock.”*

“Do you see it?” Andreu asked, shining his flashlight along the ground like a searchlight. “I don’t see anything.”

“There!”

Chantal saw a small mound of dirt piled against the adjacent wall. It was inconspicuous, but out of place considering it laid beneath a pair of restraints that looked unused, the only ones among the many that weren’t soiled or covered in a layer of filth.

Being the closest, Titus placed his boot upon the mound and pressed. With a jarring noise, the wall before them shivered and shook, breaking free from its place. Chantal shone her light inside the room. What she saw made her vision blur, and anger simmer in her belly.

Five young girls sat against the opposite wall, huddled together, covered from head to toe in dirt and dried blood. They held each other desperately, none of them willing to meet their eyes. Thin and filthy, the girls looked to range in age from toddler-sized to adolescent. The older girls had wrapped themselves around the smaller ones, protecting them. Chantal felt as if her heart would break inside her chest.

“It’s okay. I promise we won’t hurt you.”

“Chantie?”

Lydia poked her head out from within the group, dirt mixed with tears streaking down her face. Chantal let out a cry and began to run toward her dear friend, but stopped short when she saw the girls cower in response.

“It’s okay,” Lydia told them. “She’s my friend.”

“No, Lydia,” one of the older girls told her, stalling her attempts to break free from the group. “Don’t trust her. It could be a trap.”

“No, we are here to help.” Chantal tried to keep her tone soothing, and she bent down to be more at their level. “I have three friends with me and none of us will hurt you.”

The girls let out a cry of terror when they saw the three huge men standing in the doorway. None of them dared to enter, and it seemed their instinct to keep away had been right. The oldest of the group spread herself in front of all of them, shielding them like a mama bear would her cubs. She glowered at the men, showing her teeth like a rabid animal.

None of the Warriors had been in that situation before and didn’t know how to respond. They held their hands up, palms forward, as if to say they meant no harm. It did little to calm the group.

“No, it’s okay!” Lydia told them. She tried to reach a hand for the biggest girl in order to reassure her. “I know those guys. They’re my friends, too.”

“They look just like the other ones,” one of the youngest girls cried.

“I know, but they will help us. Remember, I told you about them. They kept me safe for a long time at the church with the nun ladies.”

“Yeah, but they failed, didn’t they?” the oldest one declared without taking her eyes off the men. “Stay back! Don’t come any closer.”

“We will not harm you,” Andreu told the girl, taking one step into the hidden chamber. The older girl hissed in alarm, and the youngest child, maybe around three years old, began wailing. “I promise you by the oath of my brothers that we will keep you safe. See?”

Andreu held out his arm, showing the girls the tattoo-like birthmark on his skin. The older girl, unwilling to break her gaze with him, spat at him in defiance.

“Young one, I am vowed to protect you and your sister-kin. Please, trust my word. Look at my arm.”

After several moments, the girl glanced down only briefly.

“What is that? I can’t see it.”

“It’s my birthmark, my little one,” Andreu replied, trusting another step into the room. The girl bristled but only slightly. “My brotherhood and I, who have sworn to protect our sisters, carry it.”

“The other men didn’t have that,” one of the girls noted.

“These are my friends, Nicole,” Lydia told the girl. “Please.”

The girl did not let her guard down, but she seemed to relax her expression a bit.

“Lydia, if these are your friends, go to them.”

Chantal didn’t like the fact the girl was willing to use Lydia as a pawn, but she didn’t see any other alternative from her standpoint. She could tell that the girl wanted to trust them. She was almost desperate for it because it meant escape and freedom.

Faster than Chantal could imagine, Lydia tore free from the group and came barreling into her arms. If the atmosphere wasn’t so tense and emotionally driven, Chantal might have laughed with glee to have her little friend back in her arms. It wasn’t the time for it, not now. She could feel the racking sobs tear from the little girl’s chest as she held her tightly, clinging on to whatever sense of safety Chantal offered her.

“It’s okay, baby. I have you now.”

The thought of what this little one had endured in Chantal’s stead made the oldest known Oracle seethe in anger, and her heart weep with grief. For the first time in a very long while, the redness of intense rage threatened to overcome Chantal. Taking a couple of deep, cleansing breaths, she kept the overwhelming sense of vengeance at bay.

“It was awful,” Lydia cried. “I tried so hard, Chantie.”

“I know, baby. Shhhh . . . I know. You did good, sweetie.”

Mathias stepped into the room intending to reach the two girls, but Andreu’s steady grip on his forearm stopped him. With a nod of his head, his fellow Warrior gestured toward the group of girls. Nicole stood crouched in front, guarding the girls with intense ferocity. She did not want the men to come any closer just yet.

Chantal watched her with weary eyes. Nothing could ever comfort this young woman or take away the pain she’d endured while under the Kajola’s control, and Chantal would never try to take the badges of honor she’d

earned as survivor of their reign of terror. However, if she could offer her some solace, some peace in her life, then she'd do everything in her power to give that to her.

"Mathias!" Lydia held her arms out to the hulking Warrior, and Chantal could see him melt into a puddle of goo in front of her. He knelt down and held his arms out wide to her, tears gleaming in his eyes.

"My sweet girl."

Chantal let her young friend free to go to her Warrior, and she watched with watery eyes as the two embraced. His massive form enveloped Lydia into a bear hug, and she almost disappeared into his muscled chest.

Chantal sat on the ground, burying her head into her hands and sobbed with pure emotion. Anger, hate, thankfulness, relief . . . so many different feelings were filtering through her heart, zinging along her bloodstream. She hated what these poor girls had endured, hated her brother for being a part of it. Most of all, she wanted revenge. She wanted justice. She wanted retribution.

"What have they done to you, sweet one?" Mathias smoothed the girl's matted hair, whispering into her ear. Lydia shuddered against him, and Chantal couldn't stand it any longer.

"We need to go," Titus told them after a few moments. "The Kajola are still on the grounds and the Shade will fall very soon."

"They're still here?" Nicole's voice wavered only slightly. Chantal admired her bravery.

"Yes, little Warrior," Titus told her in seriousness and held his hand out to her. "We need to hurry. Give me your trust, and you will not regret it."

Slowly, Nicole rose to her feet, but kept the girls behind her. She studied Titus with a keen eye, not giving him her trust but not rebuking his offer.

"Do you have his mark?" she asked Titus, gesturing toward the birthmark on Andreu's arm with a brief glance.

"Yes, I do." Titus pulled up his sleeve and showed her his own heart wrapped in a wreath of thorns. Nicole looked at it more carefully this time and her eyes widened minutely as if she recognized it.

"I've seen that before," she whispered. "I-in a dream, maybe."

"I have, too," another one said, peering over Nicole's arm to take a peek.

"And you?" Nicole looked toward Mathias. He released one arm from around Lydia and showed her his forearm where his mark sat vivid against his golden skin. She nodded, and returned her too-wise-for-her-age stare back to Titus. "We can't leave. Not without her."

The girls behind her nodded in agreement. Several moments of confusion passed while the men exchanged glances.

"Without who?" Chantal asked her.

"Without the older one," Lydia replied. "They took her out of our cell before they walled us up in here, and I'm not leaving without her."

"Who are you talking about, sweetheart?"

Chantal rubbed soothing circles on girl's back, trying to comfort the child

as Lydia tried to calm her hiccupping cries.

“I don’t know her name, but she’s always screaming.” Lydia wiped the tears from her eyes. “They always hurt her to get us to answer their questions. I don’t know why those men were so mean to her.”

“Is she like you?” Titus knelt down to Lydia’s eye level. “Is she a Dreamer?”

“W-we don t know,” Nicole answered for her. “She’s been here a long time, before any of us got here. But she’s always taken the brunt of their torture for each of us, and is quick to take the blame for our mistakes. We won’t leave without her.”

Titus nodded and stood; his expression became determined. He held out a hand to Nicole as a sign of peace and camaraderie.

“Let’s find her then.”

With a resolved glint in her eye and a roll of her shoulders, Nicole took her first step toward Chantal and the Warriors.

Titus and Andreu kept their distance while Nicole shepherded the girls through the hidden doorway and into the next room. Mathias stood, picking up Lydia in his arms, and followed behind. Once inside their prison home, the tension in the air was palpable, and the youngest girls began to cry and huddle against the older girls for security. Titus took control, trying to get this over with as quickly as possible.

“Which way did they take her?”

“Through there,” Nicole answered, pointing to the opposite side of the room. “There’s another door that leads to a bunch of rooms where they kept some other prisoners.”

“Other prisoners?” Andreu’s alarm mirrored Chantal’s response. Were there other girls here, hidden in the caverns within this horrible place?

“Yes. Men . . . I don’t know who they were, but they didn’t look like you or have that mark on their arms.”

Titus frowned and exchanged a loaded glance with Mathias.

“Okay, do you know how to get in?”

“There’s another hidden knob just below it.”

Nicole pointed to the ground, and Andreu hurried over and released the latch. The door rumbled open, revealing a long, dark corridor lined with shadowed chambers on each side.

“Stay here,” Titus told Nicole, and she nodded in agreement. “There’s not much time.”

“I’ll stay with them.” Andreu looked toward Nicole to offer reassurance. “I’ll keep my distance.”

The three of them headed into the newly revealed hallway and began searching every chamber for any sign of the missing girl. Each small room seemed to be six-foot wide by six-foot deep with a single set of metal shackles sitting four feet off the ground, buried into the wall. They were all empty but one toward the end. Inside lay a dead, decaying body that seemed to have been forgotten.

“That’s disgusting.” Chantal covered her mouth and nose to shield her from the toxic fumes emanating from the corpse. “Why would they leave it there?”

“Who knows,” Titus said, shining his light upon the ceiling and walls. “Maybe to scare the other inmates . . .”

“I’m not seeing anything.” Mathias stood in front of the pair and wiped a layer of sweat from his forehead. “I don’t think she’s here.”

“Perhaps the Kajola took her with them when they left,” Titus said, giving the area another quick scan.

“Hey, I’m not giving up,” Chantal told them both sternly. “Remember what happened last time you *machismos* did that?”

“*Machismos?*” Titus looked puzzled.

“Don’t ask,” Mathias told him with a barely perceptible roll of his eyes. Chantal decided to ignore him and continue proving herself right . . . *again*.

“Look, all I’m saying is that I want to be damn sure we comb this place over before we leave. Do you realize that if we hadn’t heard those girls screaming, they would’ve died? Having been buried alive?”

“Buried . . .” Mathias thought aloud, and he turned to face the last chamber at the end of the corridor.

“What is it?” Chantal came to his side and shone her light in the direction in which he stared.

“It’s just . . . some of the earth over there had been shifted,” Mathias told her, pointing toward the chamber. “I thought perhaps there had been another dead body and they’d gotten around to burying that one.”

“Show me,” Chantal told him, and the three of them made their way into the small space.

“There.” Mathias pointed. “In the corner. I almost missed it.”

In a small area on the floor there was a medium-sized square of earth that seemed slightly darker than the rest of the dirt. Chantal examined it closely and frowned.

“I don’t think she’d fit in that,” she said. “Nor would any other body, for that matter.”

“Not an *adult* body, no.” Mathias’s tone was grave, and Chantal shuddered at what his words indicated. Titus approached the spot and knelt down, smoothing some of the dirt in cadence with a whispered prayer as if in tribute. After a moment, he stood.

“I agree. I don’t think she’s under that dirt. Let’s go. The Shade is approaching.”

“What do we tell the girls?”

“We tell them that she died with honor,” Titus replied, giving her a solemn expression. “Better that than to make them believe she still suffers in their tormentors’ grasp.”

“Lie?”

“Do you have another suggestion?”

“Listen, if I’ve learned anything in the past year it’s that the truth hurts

more when it's kept from you."

Titus bristled at her response, having been the very one to hide the truth within her mind for so long at the request of her Fallen father, Quintus.

"I'm not blaming you, Titus. I'm just saying that these girls have suffered through so much. They deserve our respect, and the truth. We Oracles are made of strong stuff, and I believe they've earned it."

"As you wish," Titus replied with a bow of his head. Chantal gave him a small smile, enjoying how he always seemed to be from another time, where knights sat at a round table, and women wore corsets and a dress twice their body weight.

"Thank you," she told him, turning toward the exit. "Now we need to try to—"

Her words caught in her throat as she spotted another drawing above the exit way, this one resembling a crescent moon. A flash of a vision appeared in her mind—a wooden, rectangular box about the size of a dog's crate, and two large hands stuffing her inside. Men were laughing around her, while another one hissed from that very doorway to hurry up. They didn't have much time. The lid closed down on her, and the four walls became constricting and tight. She felt herself being lowered into the ground, and the cracks between the wooden beams darkened as the men threw dirt over her coffin.

Claustrophobia set in and an overwhelming sense of something clogging up her airway caused her mind to spiral into panic.

"Chantal! What's wrong?"

Mathias was at her side in an instant and he helplessly watched her fall to her knees, clawing at her throat to free it from its invisible bond.

"H—"

She tried to speak, but when she did the rancid taste of dirt filled her mouth, and she began to choke. The vision flashed once more into her mind's eye, and she was set apart for the happenings this time, as if she were a fly on the wall.

The men who'd stuffed her in the box walked out of the cell, still chortling.

"Let that be a lesson, bitch! You spit on me, I bury your ass alive."

"Have you had your fun?" The one by the doorway glowered at the two. "An evacuation has been ordered by the boss. It's time to get outta here before the brothers show up."

"Afraid of the Warriors, Merclain?"

"No, you idiot, but I am particularly fond of my head, and the boss will have it if we don't get those girls secured and get out of here!"

The vision wavered as the men exited the cell, and Chantal was left with a solid image of the very chamber in which they stood, the shifted dirt in the corner serving as some poor soul's grave.

"There!"

She rushed toward the dirt and began digging with her hands, not even

giving a moment's notice to the fact she could breathe again. The feeling of suffocating still haunted her, feeding her need to get the poor girl out of the ground.

"Are you sure?"

Titus did not wait for a reply; he could see it in her eyes. He knelt beside her and began digging, with Mathias quick to follow. The men worked faster than she did, so she scrambled to her feet and gave them room to work, their larger hands shifting twice the amount of earth hers had.

"There's a box!"

"Pull it out."

"Can you see the edges?"

"Yes, it's almost free."

Chantal silently wept as the two brothers worked at a rapid pace. Taking deep breaths of stale air, she tried to calm herself down as much as possible. Had that been a dream? Something she'd seen but had forgotten, lost to the waking hours? Stunned, Chantal ran a filthy hand over her face and watched, wide-eyed. With hurried words of alarm, the two ancient Warriors pulled the box out of the ground and set it before them, blocking Chantal's view.

A hacking cough echoed off the walls, and a large body fell out of the box, crumpling onto the ground into a heaving ball.

"Oh my gosh . . ."

Both men, seemingly shocked, stumbled away from the body as it writhed upon the ground. Chantal tried to make out the figure, but it was bent over, gasping for air.

"It can't be . . ."

"What have they done to her?"

"W-what?" Chantal stammered, her hand coming to her mouth to stifle a gasp. "Is she all right?"

Titus reached a hand out toward the girl on the floor, but the action repelled the figure in an instant. The girl slammed her body against the far wall and began hissing at the men in warning.

"It's okay," Titus said in a soothing voice. "We will not harm you."

For the first time, Chantal saw the poor girl.

No, not a girl . . .

A woman . . . appearing to be around her mid-twenties.

She pressed her back against the wall, her posture feral and fierce, baring her teeth at the men. Titus attempted a step toward her but only moved a fraction of an inch before she stopped him with a growl and a swipe at the air. Her untrimmed nails looked razor sharp and deadly. It would have been a terrifying sight had it not been for her physical condition.

The woman's face appeared swollen and disjointed in places, especially her right eye, which was swollen shut and dark purple. Both lips were cracked and bleeding and a huge laceration split the skin on her forehead, raw and inflamed. Her right arm, cradled against her chest, rested at an odd

angle near the forearm. No other injuries were blatantly obvious, but Chantal had a sinking suspicion that a vast amount of wounds lay hidden in other places.

Her one working eye watched the men with keen awareness, the electric blue iris like a piercing laser beam of hate and distrust.

“Chantal, come here.”

Mathias held his hand out to her without taking his eyes off the woman. His tone came with such sharp emotion that she peeled her gaze away from the sight before her to assess if he was all right. Her Warrior stood rod straight, his breaths heaving in his chest. Titus held a similar posture.

“Mathias, are you okay?”

“No.” The simple reply came quick and brusque. Neither man liked what had happened.

Taking a deep breath, Chantal began approaching the woman like one would attempt to meet a wounded tiger. She held her hands up in a sign of peace, and kept her eyes focused and expression calm.

“My name is Chantal. These men will not hurt you.”

The woman’s beady eye flashed between the two men. She didn’t even glance Chantal’s way.

“We came to rescue you all, and there’s not much time. Please, trust me.”

For the briefest of moments the woman’s eye flicked toward her, and in that second she felt the searing intensity of her hatred. Feeling as if a knife had been shoved into her ribcage, Chantal found it hard to breathe. What had this brave woman endured?

“ . . . she’s always taken the brunt of their torture for each of us, and is quick to take the blame for our mistakes.”

Nicole’s words echoed in Chantal’s mind, and she closed her eyes against the images of what this woman had possibly suffered. Nausea broiled inside her stomach and the sting of tears pricked her eyes.

“Titus, go get the older girl. Nicole. She’ll get her to come.”

“Are you certain?” Titus didn’t move. “If she’s an Oracle, Chantal, there’s no telling how old she is or how powerful. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“You shame me, brother,” Mathias replied, still watching the woman like a hawk. “We will be fine. Go.”

Without further argument, Titus backed out of the room and disappeared down the hall. Seeing where he was headed, the woman began breathing rapidly as if in panic. Maybe she thought Titus would hurt the girls.

“It’s okay.” Chantal tried to soothe her. “He’s going to bring Nicole to you, okay?”

“Do you think she understands you?” Mathias asked in a hushed tone. “Perhaps she doesn’t speak English.”

The woman’s eye flashed to Chantal once again, and it gave her the distinct impression that she did understand quite well.

“Yes, I think she does.”

Mathias slowly lifted his arm so he could check out the watch on his

wrist.

“We have less than forty minutes before sundown. This needs to happen very quickly.”

“Never rush a woman,” Chantal told him with the barest curve of her lip. “It won’t earn you any brownie points.”

“Not now,” Mathias barked disapprovingly.

During the whole exchange, the woman’s working eye studied the pair of them, watching their every movement, evaluating their relationship, it seemed. Chantal offered her a warm smile.

She could hear the sound of shuffling footsteps as someone entered the room, but she couldn’t take her eyes off the woman.

“Dear sweet Lord . . .” The sound of Andreu’s deep timbre laced with shock brought another round of tears to sting Chantal’s eyes, and the red rage threatened to take over her once again. The woman glared at the new Warrior, evaluating him as a threat, calculating the danger.

“It’s okay. They won’t hurt you.”

Nicole walked past Chantal and Mathias at a quick clip and approached the woman directly, who did not so much as flinch at her proximity.

“It’s time to go.” Nicole took her hand. “The girls are okay and waiting for you. Do you understand?”

The woman nodded minutely, her eye still watching the three unknowns of the group but settling more on Andreu. Nicole helped her to her feet, and the rest gave both of them a wide berth as they headed out of the small chamber and into the corridor.

“We will run into trouble,” Andreu told Mathias when the others were out of earshot. “The Shade is about to open.”

“I know. Titus sent a message to the brothers who survived the fight to prepare.”

“Our losses?”

“A few.” Andreu sighed. “The fact that the assholes just disappeared is not sitting right with me, or the boss.”

“Speaking of, I’m surprised he let you come down here. He wasn’t too keen on leaving us alone with the woman.”

“Wasn’t his call,” Andreu replied with a shrug. “Seems Nicole trusts me just a tad bit more than him. She wouldn’t go alone without me there.”

“Hmm.”

Mathias stayed silent for a few minutes as they entered the cell. Two of the smaller girls were asleep in the laps of an older pair. Lydia sat perched on Titus’s knee, talking animatedly at a million miles an hour. It did Chantal good to see her young friend in higher spirits, and for a moment, she felt relief. It was short-lived. Once Lydia saw the mystery woman enter, she fell silent and tucked her head against Titus’s shoulder.

“What’s wrong, Lydia?”

“Nothing,” she said in a meek voice. Chantal didn’t like her shy response. “Can we leave now?”

“Yes, little one. Let’s go!”