

PROLOGUE



MIRA

“*Y*our Highness, quickly, there is not much time.” This was directed at the young woman ahead of me swallowed from head to toe in a dark brown cloak. There were a handful of loyal guards at our front and back as we hurried down the narrow path clinging to the mountainside. I swallowed hard and I tried not to glance over the edge at the sheer drop. Slowly, we edged our way down through the swirling mist, each step surreal as I placed one foot in front of the other. This wasn’t happening, my body was calm and composed as I screamed within my skin and my fires spiraled inward. I could barely breathe.

There was so much blood.

Shock, I realized inanely, the shock I’d read about ladies suffering on occasion. I never imagined I would be so lacking in character to experience it. Bits of rock crumbled beneath our feet and echoed solemnly as they bounced down into the abyss. My eyes fixed firmly on the brown cloak in front, focusing on the simple

task of keeping the bland patch of color in front of me. The cloak grunted and stumbled. A steady, bronzed hand was there to catch her.

“Watch your step, Empress,” Thallenth cautioned as my cousin, Xhara straightened. Her head held at an unnaturally high angle and fixed straight ahead in a painful, unseeing stare. Tension stretched over our protector’s familiar features, the slight lines in his brow emphasized. “We must hurry,” Thallenth’s hushed tones urged. We picked up the pace ignoring the peril of the cliff, fearing what was behind us more than the long drop beneath.

“Horses are waiting at the bottom, all of them fast and fleet,” Thallenth continued. “You will go to the south through the jungles with me and my best men, we will guard you with our lives.”

The new empress drew her hood back revealing a shock of vibrant red hair and rubbed her glazed eyes. “What about my cousin?”

“She will go north and then west over the wastelands.” He answered curtly, his gaze flickering away in discomfort. Xhara stopped dead in her tracks and I almost ran into the back of her.

“The wastelands are a death trap and they won’t think to follow,” she rushed out, an edge of hysteria to her voice until she took a steadying breath and reined it in. “I should take the northlands,” she finished, regaining her layer of composure.

“No!” Thallenth said emphatically. “You are too valuable to our people to risk.”

It went unsaid that I wasn’t too valuable. Although it had been drilled into me that I was the weak link in the chain, it still stung to hear it from Thallenth’s lips, a man I’d known for years. “Nymira and two others will leave a clear trail and carry the sword.”

Xhara’s head snapped around, hissing. “I am not separating from the sacred sword.”

But she would separate from me.

“The sword and heir must be separated until you can produce the white flame and lead our people. We need to divide their forces.

If they know that both the empress and the sword have gone south they will concentrate their forces and there will be little chance of escape for you.”

Xhara’s dark eyes flashed gold. “With my cousin as the bait,” she spat in a harsh tone, nostrils beginning to flare. All the signs that she was preparing for an argument.

Thallenth’s face became unyielding granite and, in that instant, looked every inch the veteran soldier. “Decisions must be made with logic not emotions, this is war and sacrifices must be made.”

As long as the heir was safe there was no need for a spare. I glanced furtively over my shoulder, the fine hairs on the back of my neck starting to prickle.

The shrill screams of the dying vibrated within me.

We didn’t have time. If we were to leave, we had to leave *now*. Striding forward I crouched at my cousin’s feet in a gesture of respect and subservience—oh, how that action grated against my prideful nature.

“Empress, I will go north and carry the symbol of our people.”

I raised my gaze, my eyes holding a silent entreaty with my hands clenched tight to my sides, stopping them from shaking. “I swear I will guard the sword with my life and wait for your return to bring it to you. I am strong enough for this, cousin. If sacrifices must be made, I will make them.” Taking me by the shoulders she forced me to my feet and embraced me. Gripping me tight like she might never let go or like she might never see me again, and she might not...

Still, she hesitated.

“We don’t have time to argue, Highness, we *must go*.”

Tears gathered behind my eyes and I saw my own watery reflection in my cousin’s eyes as we accepted our fate to be parted, the decision hanging like a weight around her neck.

Desperate, I reached out and clasped her wrist. “Live free,” she whispered.

“Until the day...” I replied, forcing the words past the aching

ball in my throat. I couldn't say 'we meet again', I didn't think that was part of my destiny.

We were torn from each other and I was thrown upon the back of a horse. Tears blurring my vision, the last two descendants of the Throne of Flames riding hard in opposite directions. Only the goddess Khatri knew what fate awaited me.