

Chapter Twenty Four

“The Council will decide that,” an ominous voice said behind me, the words echoing off the very stone of the mountainside. I turned and took an involuntary step backwards, shocked by the group of stern faces staring at us. Sam put his arm around my waist, pulling me against him, steadying me.

“Father,” Sam said solemnly, bowing his head to the ancient man who stood in the middle of the group.

Sam’s father was tall like his son, and held himself with a grand demeanour, despite his great age. His white hair was closely cropped, as was his snowy beard. He wore a simple white robe, with a belt of gold that hung to the hem. His eyes were piercing and icy blue like the sky overhead.

“Adrin. Davan.” Sam greeted the two other ancient males in the group formally.

The similarity to Sam’s father was unmistakable. Three brothers of equal might, their faces severe. I looked at Davan. I could see no empathy in his grey eyes. Had Leiana been wrong? Would he not support us, after all?

Adrin's eyes bored into mine when I dared glance at him. His face was very stern. His eyes grew colder when he looked at his nephew.

"Tiana. Arailla. Reina," Sam greeted each of the older women.

Tiana was tall, with long raven black hair threaded with silver. She studied me closely, her eyes the deepest grey. Arailla was her opposite, small with colourless blonde hair and pale, pale blue eyes. Her face held neither disapproval nor acceptance.

I noticed Sam's voice had grown cool when he spoke Reina's name. She had titian red hair and milky white skin. She might have been beautiful if her face was not so hard. She didn't even bother to look at me, reserving her cold green stare for Sam.

"Jorin. Mirin. Rion. Neia. Leiana." Sam greeted each of the younger members of his family in turn. The one called Jorin positively grinned at Sam. Neia smiled warmly at me, I saw she was holding Leiana's hand. Mirin and Rion, both tall and athletic, looked at me with interest and smiled shyly.

There was a silence following the ritual greeting. Twelve immortals. Once supreme. They were all looking at me.

“Child,” Sam’s father said, holding out his hands to me.

Sam dropped his arm from my waist. I looked up at him, my heart pounding. I was sure they could all hear it. Sam’s eyes reassured me but it still took all my courage to step away from him to walk across the courtyard.

“I am Aian. Welcome to my house,” he said as I took his hands. He looked into my very soul. I felt his strength, his ancient wisdom, his might flowing into me. He then leaned down and kissed my forehead.

“And to our family,” he added.

I heard a sharp hiss from one of the ancient women. “Be still, Reina,” he said without bothering to look over his shoulder.

“Come, Samian,” his father said, beckoning him. Samian. Sam’s full name. They grasped each other’s hands in greeting then Aian kissed his son’s forehead before dropping his hands to his sides.

“Your recklessness and impertinence bring us to Council, yet again, my son,” Aian told him as Sam stepped back but I fancied I saw fondness mixed in with the exasperation on his face.

“We have heard your discourse. We have witnessed your actions. My brother has spoken his

knowledge,” and he inclined his head to Davan. “We have yet to understand your motive to intervene with fate and alter the natural course of events of this child’s life, again,” he continued.

“We have yet to determine the threat of exposing our identities,” his voice grew colder. “We have yet to reconcile your presumption to give the child immortality. It is not our way, Samian!” he reproved harshly.

There was a very long silence. I looked at Sam and he held my gaze, his eyes blazing with the absolute conviction of our destiny before he looked back to his father.

“Tessa is my destiny, Father. Twice I have been tested, twice I have known my path,” Sam told him. “And she chose, of her own free will, to join her path to mine. The truth of the destiny has been proven.”

Finally, I understood what my choice meant. If I had chosen a path without Sam, his conviction would have been without foundation.

“Immortality was my choice. I wanted for her what you would not give my mother.” Sam’s voice held an ancient hurt.

They all gasped but Reina’s hiss was louder, her face angry, her dark eyes flashing at Sam.

The silence that followed was terrible.

“I *loved* your mother,” Aian retorted, his face severe at his son’s reproach. “Is this the reason you renounce our laws? To defy *me*?”

“No, Father, I did not act in defiance. I acted in conviction. When fate snipped the threads, making her life forfeit when she was but a child, I willingly changed the course of events, knowing *she* is my destiny for eternity. As surely as my mother, was yours. Giving her immortality was confirmation of that conviction.”

“Like the prodigal son he returns to the heart of his family but instead of seeking mercy for his arrogant folly, he reviles his father!” Reina jeered, her dark eyes piercing in their intensity.

Sam’s back grew rigid, his eyes black, as he stared at his stepmother. Tears rolled down Leiana’s beautiful face.

“Silence!” Aian roared and the words boomed off the rocks of the mountainside. The only sound was the waterfall splashing into the pond. And my thudding heart.

“Regret I live with eternally,” Aian finally said, his eyes growing bleak.

Reina stamped her foot in rage, her face a mask of humiliation. She turned and swept away, the Youngers hastily making a path for her.

The silence grew strained. Everyone looked at Aian and the scowl on his face made me hold my breath. What did Sam hope to achieve by antagonising his father, upsetting his stepmother?

“Samian, you will go to your mother’s island. You will stay there until I summon you. Rion and Mirin will accompany you. Neia, I place the child in your care. Brothers, Sisters, come, we will decide this,” Aian said curtly.

The Ancients turned to follow him.

Panic rushed through me.

“Wait!” I called. “I want to be bound to your son, Aian.”

“His path is mine,” I called louder when they did not stop.

I glanced at Sam and saw his eyes had widened with surprise at my knowledge of such things. He looked at Leiana. She held his eyes steadily then turned and smiled at me. She had given me the knowledge, knowing I would make this choice.

“Tessa,” Sam said quietly to me, “a binding is for eternity, in all things. I must suffer the consequences

alone for my actions. If it is the worst judgement possible, our destiny will always make you a part of me, yet leave you free. I will not have it any other way.”

“No, Sam. I don’t want to be free from you, ever, unless that is your wish.” The uncertainty that crept into my voice made his eyes blaze.

Aian had turned to look at me. I swallowed and it took all my courage to hold his stern, icy blue gaze.

“You would bind yourself to my son?” Aian asked, coming back to where we stood. For a moment, I saw something in his eyes, and I had a sudden, very clear understanding that he had expected me to make the request.

I looked from father to son. “Yes,” I said.

“You would bind yourself in return?” he asked Sam.

Sam looked at me, hesitating for just a few seconds, then inclined his head. “Yes.”

Aian shared a long look with his brothers and sisters. In unison, they inclined their heads, as if to an unspoken question. “It shall be so,” Aian said and beckoned his sister, Tiana, to his side.

The dark-haired Tiana reached into the folds of her swirling white skirt, and draw out a silk purse. She took

two gold circlets from it and held them on her palm. Unbidden the family stepped closer, forming a circle about us. I looked at Leiana and she smiled at me. I looked to Davan, he was watching me very solemnly.

I looked at Sam. His hesitation was gone.

Aian took my right hand and placed it over Sam's. "Time without end," he said.

He took one of the gold circlets from Tiana, sliding it over my left hand until it sat upon my wrist. He pressed his fingers around the gold, closing his eyes. When he lifted his fingers, the gold was a perfect, flattened band, snugly fitting my wrist. He did the same with the second circlet to Sam's wrist.

Then each of the family stepped closer to lay their hands over ours, the Youngers and then the Ancients, Aian last.

"Time without end," he said again.

The family stepped back and they finally relaxed, smiling at each other, and at Sam and me. Several even laughed with delight at the unexpected ceremony.

Sam smiled down at me. The love in his eyes made me shiver as he lifted my hand to kiss my fingers.

Aian gave us a few moments before he said, "Samian, go to your mother's island. Child you will abide here. Brothers, Sisters, come, let's go to Council." The circle opened to let him pass, his brothers and sisters following him through the arch.

I looked at Sam, suddenly afraid. "I'm coming with you," I said flatly. "I won't stay here without you, Sam. We are *bound* and I am *not* a child!"

"We are also bound by my father's decrees, Tessa." He took my hands, holding them against his chest. "Neia and Leiana will look after you. There is nothing to be afraid of. No harm will come to you," he murmured as his cousins started to walk towards us.

"What if I never see you again?" I was very afraid. Would Aian banish him without him returning first?

"You *are* my destiny, Tessa," he said fiercely. He kissed my forehead before turning and striding across the courtyard, leaving his cousins to hurry and catch up with him.

Leiana put her arm about my waist and led me over to a bench near the water pond. Neia, whose care I had been placed into, came with us. She smiled when I finally looked at her.

"Welcome, Tessa," she said, taking my hands in formal greeting. I saw her eyes were silver grey. She

was incredibly beautiful. I tried to smile but my face was stiff with tension.

“What will happen to Sam?” I whispered.

I encircled the gold band about my wrist with my thumb and middle finger, seeking comfort.

“We don’t know but he will be summoned back here, Tessa. Of that I am sure,” Leiana said. She glanced at Neia who nodded. “I agree, Cousin. You are bound to him, and he to you, a binding is irrevocable. Even the Ancients cannot hinder a binding,” Neia said.

I breathed a little easier.

“Where is your mother’s island, Leiana? Why there?”

“It is in the Arabian Sea, a tiny island. It is the one place my father knows Sam will endure the wait. It is a kindness, really. He will take comfort being in the presence of our mother’s memories.”

“And Reina? Why does she hate Sam so much?”

I remembered the malicious spite on the face of the ancient woman whenever she looked at Sam. I realised she had been absent from the binding ceremony. Would she be more upset that she had not been included?

“It is complicated, Tessa. Reina was always destined to be my father’s partner, but it was also his destiny to fall in love with my mother, a mortal. Reina was humiliated, knowing my father gave his true love to another,” Leiana told me.

“They were never bound but their love was eternal, nevertheless. If Reina could have had children, it might have been different but fate did not bless her, instead bestowing my mother with twins!

“Sam would not accept Reina after our mother died, and he rebelled at every opportunity, but he was my father’s favourite and always forgiven. It is an ancient grudge.” She sighed.

The young immortal, Jorin came to join us. He had a small wiry build but handsome to a fault, with dark hair falling across his forehead and bright shiny eyes that seemed to be perpetually filled with laughter. He came bearing a silver jug and four chalices.

“Greetings, Tessa,” he said casually and put the tray down so he could take my hands. “I have waited too long to meet the one who would tame my cousin!” He kissed my forehead then grinned at me.

“Jorin!” Neia reproved him. “I’m sure Samian would want you to show Tessa every respect.”

“I’m sure Tessa doesn’t object to me being less stuffy!”

I didn’t mind at all.

“Samian?” I said to Leiana. She smiled, a little wryly.

“He prefers Sam,” she assured me.

“A cup of my best Mead,” Jorin said, “to celebrate Tessa joining our little soiree, and your binding! Our family has become quite boring of late, don’t you think, Sister?” he asked Neia. “Especially since you, my darling Leiana, are still enchanted with being a shop assistant!” he said, offering me a chalice after filling it from the jug.

“I’m not a shop assistant, Jorin! I run a very respectable gallery. People come from all over to see Sam’s work. It gives me great delight in talking to people who really appreciate it,” Leiana objected primly.

Jorin shrugged. “Shop assistant in pretty words,” but his grin said he was teasing.

Neia and Leiana took a chalice each from him. I looked questioningly at the contents of the cup he’d given me.

Jorin smiled. “Wine of the Gods,” he said with a wink.

I took a sip. I could taste honey and it was familiar.
“Did I have this to drink at your place, Leiana?”

“Jorin always brings a few bottles of Mead for me,” she said.

The aromatic spices filled my senses and I breathed it in. It reminded me of Sam. Jorin smiled at me. He seemed to know my thoughts. I smiled back. I liked Jorin.

“Do you live here?” I asked. He looked aghast.

“Oh, dear girl, I would die of boredom, if I could die that is, if I had to live here! Music and parties are my passions. I go where the music is the best and the party’s are the longest.”

“And you, Neia?” I asked a little shyly. Neia was very reserved in comparison to her brother.

“I visit regularly to see my mother, Tiana. But I like to shop,” she added with a rueful smile. “And there are so many shops!” Leiana and Jorin laughed at the flush of excitement that filled her face. She and Natalie would get along well, I thought.

“Leiana told me you are a teacher,” Neia said, when she’d recovered her reserve.

“Yes.” I had to concentrate. It felt like a distant dream being in my classroom. I looked at the empty chalice in my hand. How much alcohol was in Mead, I

wondered. Honey and water didn't sound very alcoholic.

Neia sighed softly. "Children. They are so innocent and inquisitive."

"Are there no children in your family?" I asked and Neia shook her head sadly.

"It is not our way to make mortals immortal," Neia said. "The loss of a partner, even at full mankind age, is very painful."

I frowned. "Why don't you fall in love with other immortals?"

Jorin laughed, though kindly, at my ignorance. "There are twelve in our family, Tessa. Six Ancients and six Youngers. There are no immortals for us to fall in love with. We can only find love with mortals and we are reluctant to give our hearts, knowing our time together will be spent watching them age and die."

An eternal life of loss and loneliness. I felt an ache of sadness for them.

"Sam's absolute belief that you are his destiny is a revelation to us. Perhaps you can understand why the Ancients are so perplexed. Yet, amidst, the tribulation of your immortality, and Sam breaking our laws to make it so, we have the hope that you and Sam will

bring children into our lives, Tessa, immortal children,” Leiana told me, tears shone in her beautiful eyes.

“Sam said he fears the worst,” I whispered.

Leiana and Jorin both looked at Neia. I looked to her too, what did she know?

“Samian is certain your path is united,” was all Neia would say.

Jorin filled our chalices again. “Let’s drink to that,” he said.

As the conversation drifted, I found myself looking at a shadow cast from the overhead tree. It fell on a joint in the granite. It hadn’t moved. I looked at my watch. It had stopped. Strangely, I was not aware of time passing. There was still no change to the shadow.

“What time is it?” I suddenly asked. “How long have we been sitting here? How long is it since Sam left?” They all looked at me. There was panic in my voice.

“How long?” I insisted.

“A couple of hours, Tessa, by human measure, I’d guess,” Leiana said calmly, putting her hand on my arm.

“But the shadows have not moved!” I pointed out.

Neia smiled at me. “Here, time is measureless,” she said. “Time is not important when you are immortal. It has no meaning.”

I must have shown my shock because Jorin said, “It’s not all that bad, Tessa. One benefit is having a very long youth!”

It was very hard to comprehend. The fabric of time, Sam had called it.

“I asked Sam once how old he was but he didn’t tell me. May I ask how old are you, Leiana?”

“In mankind’s count, about twenty five. I’m not going to tell you in *my* years, it sounds really old!”

“Is that why your father calls me ‘child’?” I asked.

Jorin laughed. “Compared to us you are a babe-in-arms!”

He filled our chalices once again.