

## Prologue

Mariel de Sharec was born royal, but she never felt like a real princess. She was born an outcast and a disgrace to society to the king and queen of Natric's only child, Princess Carolina, and Sergeant Darren Haroldsson of the Versati Corps. Her mother was sixteen, her father twenty. They were not in love, nor were they married. It was the biggest scandal to rock the powerful kingdom that anyone could remember and more than six years later it was not entirely forgotten.

Mariel had never been a real princess and she felt even less like one now as she leaned against the rock, her only protection from the terrible wind that screamed across the desolate landscape. Light faded rapidly as dusk settled upon the world. Mariel wished for night to never come. She hated the feeling of being plunged into utter darkness, the chill that crept into her bones, and the fear that kept her mind buzzing, refusing to let her tired mind and body sleep. The fear that *he* would get her.

There was no one here in this high desert to hear her screams as the Brown-Spider-Man found her. Nothing but the tumbleweeds to watch as he bit into her small body with his sharp teeth.

Mariel's pulse quickened. The Brown-Spider-Man strode toward her this very instant, she was sure. Fear paralyzed her tiny body made even smaller by the last two weeks of fleeing, the many days without food. She shut her eyes, not wanting to see the grey and white zebra-like striped hand reach around the jagged rock and latch on to her throat. Mariel choked back a sob and the image of her papa flashed across the back of her eyelids:

*His thick brown hair fell across his face as he shook a finger at her and said, "Master your fear, girl, before it masters you." She stuck out her tongue and he erupted in laughter. "My little fairy, no one'll master you!"* Was he looking for her now? *Yes*, Mariel was sure of that. *But he's the only one.*

With the reassuring thought of her papa, Mariel pushed back the sob and opened her eyes. *Master your fear.* Gathering all her courage and, with every part of her shaking, she slowly peered around her hiding place.

Wind blasted her, making her dark green eyes water, but the land before her was devoid of life, with only harsh brush and rocks and the occasional tumbleweed. No human-like shape walked toward her in the half light. No grey cloak opened in the wind to reveal the fearsome monster that hunted—for that was what he was: the hunter. And she was his prey.

The child ducked down behind the rock again, blocking out some of the wind. She pulled the thin blanket over the bits of cloth she wore. Although the cloth had once been an extravagant dress, looking at it now, no one would guess it had ever been anything more than a rag. Although the blanket did not offer much heat, it reminded her of people: living, breathing people whom she had not seen in three days, although it felt longer than that. That was also the last time she had eaten any sort of food. Stolen of course, just like the blanket.

In every town or village she passed through she begged for help: “I’m Princess Mariel de Sharec, granddaughter of King Vincent and Queen Meredith. Please help me. Mother is dead and a man-eating monster with striped skin is hunting me. Help!”

They had laughed. Every one.

There had been a Natrician soldier who had given her a glimmer of hope. “‘Princess’ ye say?” He had raised a heavy eyebrow at her rag-tag appearance. “Don’t look like no princess. ‘Cept yer eyes. Maybe you is.”

“I am. I am!” Mariel had cried, tears stinging the very eyes he spoke of with the hope that someone finally believed her, would help her.

“Best get ye on a unicorn and send ye on yer royal way, back ta yer grandmamma in the pretty palace.”

The child had collapsed to her knees, sobbing in relief, too young to hear the sarcasm in his voice.

He took her back to the barracks. “Found us a princess, mates.”

They bowed to her, laughing and smiling. She stood proud and relieved, not realizing she was the joke until they sat her at the table and set a bone before her when they promised her a meal. “Here ye go, *Princess*.” The laughter rang in her small ears, making fresh tears come.

One of the soldiers picked her up by her collar and tossed her into the garbage heap.

“Go play with the rats, dog! A princess!”

He had slammed the door and Mariel had curled into a ball, feeling more lost and alone than she had felt since fleeing the beautiful manor on a scared horse that had bucked her off a few days later.

“Run, Mariel! Run!” Those were her mother’s last words before her ear-piercing screams split the air. Mariel had looked back as the horse’s hooves pounded across the cobblestoned courtyard toward the gate. She should not have looked back.

“*No!*” Mariel cried, now huddled behind the rock in the high desert. “Don’t think about it, don’t remember! Forget! Forget!” She pounded her small fists against her bruised and cut head. “Forget!”

She needed to forget her mother’s dying screams, as she, Mariel, fled to safety, although she had yet to reach safety. She had to forget the soldier’s leering, laughing face as he tossed her out the door. She could not think about her papa who was probably desperately looking for her, tracking her, but she could not stop and wait because of the Brown-Spider-Man. Most of all she

had to forget the monster that hunted her and the dark that was inevitably descending upon the land. Instead she focused on the pain in her right shoulder from the shallow stab wound.

The wound kept trying to heal, but all the traveling she did worsened it. She worried it might fester, but only because she had heard people use that word fearfully when talking about wounds and cuts. Every day she inspected her stab wound, hoping it had not festered, but she was not sure what to look for because she did not know exactly what the word meant. She touched her tender forehead, feeling the dried blood where the knife had struck, ripping out the front part of her curly brown hair. Once again memory took her back to that fateful day of her mother's death.

"*No!*" the child cried and slammed her small fist against the rock causing daggers of pain to shoot up her arm, but she was used to pain now and she preferred that to the memories. "Please, Valmir," she prayed to the god of strength and war, the patron god of Natric, "Help me! Please, Narel," she whispered to the goddess of protection, patience, and healing who was the patron goddess of the kingdom. "Keep me safe. I'm scared, I don't wanna die, please," The girl pleaded with the gods, knowing that she had nothing to bargain with, only herself, and that was not much to the great beings who ruled the heavens. She continued to mutter pleading words to those of a higher order, but she was losing faith in them.

Another strong surge of wind blasted by the rock, but a small strand of air reached her nostrils. The child jerked. She barely dared to breathe or move as she watched a small brown spider crawl over the top of the rock as though the wind did not blow fiercely through the high desert. More than ten other spiders followed after it, their legs moving quickly toward her. She screamed and pushed away from the rock. The hem of grey robes entered her vision.

Slowly, she turned her head up. The child's eyes opened in alarm, she wanted to scream, but was too scared as she looked up toward the darkening sky which was blocked by the man

standing over her. But this was no man. It was a creature that looked like a man with chalky skin alternated with stripes of white and light grey skin pigment. He wore a robe of grey with more brown spiders crawling over it. His pale, striped hand hung out of the wide sleeves of his grey robe, revealing fingernails filed to a point. He reeked of rotten corpses and carrion.

This creature had pursued her, appearing periodically. He never seemed angry when she escaped and she wondered if he thought this was a game. The grey robed creature smiled at her with unnaturally sharp teeth. The girl realized the monster was not going to let her escape this time.

In fear, she gripped the thin blanket closer to her. A wild impulse struck her. Mariel kicked out, slamming her feet into the creature's shins and threw the blanket into his face as he fell. The creature cursed in a foreign language as he leapt cat-like to his feet again.

Mariel was already away and running. She tore through the bushes, leaping over some and not caring what others grabbed and tried to hold her. She was stronger than the vegetation and could break away, but she knew she could not break away from the Brown-Spider-Man. This creature had magic, and he wanted her.

The child barely noticed when she entered into rough, sturdy little trees or when the ground became softer and the brush denser. She only subconsciously noticed when the ground began to slant upward. The Brown-Spider-Man was closing the space between them. He was much bigger than the child, but still she ran. Her muscles cried out for her to stop and her breathing tightened, but desperation drove her on. She had not eaten in days and her wounds and constant journeying tugged on the little strength she had.

Mariel pulled back suddenly, making her body stop just before she ran over the edge of a very steep bank and tumbled into the fast flowing river below. She spun as the Brown-Spider-Man

reached out to grab her. Fear froze the child's brain and her automatic response was to move away from the threat. She stepped back, but there was no ground to hold her. Down she went, her whole body tumbling over the edge. The girl's body bounced and rolled down the steep embankment before slamming into the water. The current caught her and kept her under. Blackness captured her as the river swept her away.

## Chapter 1

Mariel moved through the familiar fighting pattern with a stick substituting for her sword, which she had left back in the room she used. Her brown curls had been tamed into a braid. The freckles sprinkling her face and the tanned skin gave proof of long hours spent in the sun. Well-toned muscles flexed as she moved. The exercise only helped to distract her until she finished the pattern and then she was left standing on the bank of the river that slowly meandered through the ancient land south of Natric called Parloipae. It had almost been eleven years since the river had brought her into the world of the zreshlans, but she did not like to remember those early days.

Those were the days she lived without any memory of her past. While most of her memory had eventually returned, there was a gap of several weeks stretching from a night she had fallen asleep in her bed at the manor Remel to the time she awoke in Ambras Añue in Parloipae with the zreshlans. Not that Mariel tried to elicit those memories. The nightmares she had of her memories if she did not take the special dream-banishing potion were enough to drive her into madness and when she came out of the madness she never remembered the dreams. As far as Mariel was concerned, those forgotten memories were better left locked away in a part of her mind she could not consciously reach.

Mariel's body went rigid and all thoughts of her lost past vanished from her mind, replaced instead by heart-pounding fear. She felt it on her right arm: a small creature that barely brushed her skin and she released the stick from her hand. Slowly, she turned her head, tilting it down slightly. There it was, staring back at her with its six eyes. It was small and brownish in color, except for the distinct mark on its head and midregion that looked like a violin. Mariel wanted to scream, but the scream caught in her throat as the monster began to move slowly up her arm with

its eight legs. She shut her eyes, trying to block out the image and relax and think of what to do. But fear of the brown recluse spider refused to give way to calm, collected thinking. Instead of solving the problem, her brain sent her a horrendous image: the spider sinking its fangs into her soft skin, releasing its poison into her body and killing the tissue, and possibly her.

She swept her left hand down her arm toward the spider and jumped sideways to get away from it. Her jump was in the direction of the river and she stumbled as she landed at the edge of the riverbank and tumbled into the water. The mind numbing fear fled instantly as the frigid water consumed her. She quickly twisted her body to find footing on a rock in the riverbed and stood up in the water.

Her body shook from the after effects of the all-consuming fear and the chill of the water. Mariel took deep, calming breaths, trying to collect herself now that the danger had passed. She swallowed and glanced at her arm just to make sure the brown recluse was gone. She almost cried with relief, but then a sound struck her ears, one that made her blood curdle with anger: a musical laugh coming from behind one of the large trees of the forest.

She crawled onto the grassy bank and stood quivering with anger rather than fear, as water dripped off of her. “Anoria, that illusion was not funny.”

From behind the one of the xanlor trees that could only be found in Ambras Añue, the ancient forest of Parloipae, stepped what appeared to be a young woman with a wide grin spread across her striped face. Her black hair shined in the late afternoon light reaching to the ground through the canopy of the large trees.

What marked her as belonging to the people called zreshlans was her skin, which was naturally striped like a tiger’s with tanned skin alternating stripes of darker skin. This adoptive

sister of Mariel's was the one who had plucked the nearly-dead six year old from the river and persuaded her fellow zreshlans of Ambras Añue to permit the human child to remain.

Like Mariel, she spoke in the formal zreshlan language as she said, "It was amusing, Greslina. It is always enjoyable to frighten you, as it is so difficult to do."

Mariel glared at her adoptive sister, anger and humiliation causing her to clench her fists. Mariel was afraid of spiders, and although her rigorous training for her work with the Resistance outside of Parloipae had taught her to control that fear, she was still scared by the creatures, especially the brown recluse breed. She would never admit fear of anything, though. To her, admitting that was a weakness.

Mariel wrung out her braid and zreshlan-style knee-length dress, hoping to retain at least some of her dignity by not dripping water. "The line of work I do does not allow space for fear."

Anoria laughed again and shifted the empty fishing net draped over her shoulder. "Studying?"

Mariel snorted. "Not the zreshlan work, the work I do in the human lands."

The zreshlan's face darkened, although she remained silent. Mariel knew that behind those large brown eyes, Anoria wondered, like other zreshlans did, why Greslina, the human they had raised from the time she was six, was so eager to leave the land of Parloipae and wander into the world of humans. Humans were considered to be beneath zreshlans. Any daring to cross the border into zreshlan land were usually killed on sight.

Mariel had been forced to learn the zreshlan language since most of the people of Parloipae did not know Natrician, even though Natric was Parloipae's northern neighbor. In fact, other than the scholars who dedicated their lives to studying texts, most zreshlans refused to learn human tongues. Anoria was one of the few exceptions, but this resulted from the fact that she

was one of the zreshlans closest to Mariel. Possessing a knack for languages, Mariel had been taught five other languages besides Zreshlan and Natrician by the zreshlan scholars.

Mariel shook her head, causing droplets of water to fly into the air. Anoria screeched and backed away. “I do not wish to be wet.”

“Neither did I. Now help me pick these supplies up.”

It only took a few moments for the two of them to gather the book Mariel had been reading, along with ink, pen, and the paper she had used to write notes. Mariel threw her cloak around her wet shoulders and took one last look at the river. She shivered as the image of a brown recluse spider flashed across her mind and felt a memory start to rise up.

“Are you coming?” Anoria called back and Mariel banished all thoughts of rivers, lost memories, and spiders, and hurried to catch up.

“Did you like the illusion skills?” Mariel shot the zreshlan a scathing look and Anoria smiled slightly. “If you look past the frightening part, would you not say I have improved?”

“It was a little too realistic for me.”

The musical laugh rang in the ancient forest again. “I could teach you to improve the skills you have, which are nothing more than mediocre. I am sure you would excel in *evraïser* if you chose to study it more.”

*Evraïser* was the Zreshlan word for magic. It was in all things, but was especially concentrated in living things and precious stones. The highest concentration of *evraïser* pulsed through the living veins of intelligent creatures, but that *evraïser* was nearly impossible to tap. Any person could access *evraïser*; they only had to know how. It took years of study and hard work to use *evraïser* with skill and it also depended on each person’s own strength. Zreshlans lived and breathed *evraïser* and all studied at least some of it, but most humans did not realize

that magic could be used by anyone and those people who accidentally discovered it were quickly whisked away to the temples dedicated to the gods. Most humans believed those who controlled magic were touched by the gods and were to be revered and feared, without an inkling that anyone could wield the natural power.

“You are thinking deeply,” Anoria accused, cutting into Mariel’s thoughts, “Or are you simply trying to avoid my confrontation about the lack of interest you have of learning evraisér?”

Mariel cocked her head and raised her left eyebrow. “I would never! How could you, dear sister, ever think that I would dare to ignore important words?”

“Will you never take anything seriously?”

Mariel smiled wickedly. “And why would I want to do that? It takes too much fun out of life to be serious. Besides,” she mentally began a spell, gathering some of the magic that resided in the ancient trees around her. She twisted the magic into rope form, so that it was a mere contortion in the air impossible to see unless one expected it. When Anoria took her next step she tripped over the rope of evraisér and sprawled across the ground. The ink she had been carrying for Mariel splattered her. “I think I have a fairly decent grasp of evraisér.”

Anoria glared at her as she rose gracefully. “There is always room for improvement.”

Mariel fluttered her long eyelashes and took on a look on innocence. “But regardless of the time and work I put in I will never be as good as you. I am human remember? You are eighty-nine and considered young for a zreshlan, but I probably will not even live that long.”

Anoria looked horrified. “I did not mean that! Greslina, I loathe the knowledge that the human life you lead will be so short lived. I am truly—”

“Do not worry about it. I was jesting.” Mariel smiled wickedly and picked up her pace toward home, forcing Anoria to trot to catch up.

The xanlor trees, a relative of the mighty sequoia, only grew larger as they walked through the forest. At the very heart of the forest the trees towered four hundred-fifty feet in the air and were as wide as entire human castles. Ambras Añue, the zreshlan city that Mariel called home, was built on branches with rope bridges connecting the trees high above the ground. She and Anoria steadily climbed the circular wooden stairwell built around the girth of one of the massive trees.

The two sisters were greeted by other zreshlans. After reaching the first layer of the city, Anoria gave Mariel her things and hurried off to attend to her duties, as she was assigned cooking for the evening.

Zreshlans had no ruler, although some people's opinions were held in greater respect than others. No words existed in the Zreshlan language for "king" or "leader." Zreshlans shared in the tasks of cooking and cleaning and caring for each other, and to them it was never a job, but a duty that they performed without complaint. They traded off the tasks so that no one was on the same duty more than two days in a row. Each person had a specific job they performed for the community, for Anoria it was fishing, but at any time they could change their job without so much as a complaint from anyone else. It was not a flawless society, there were plenty of problems, but in Mariel's opinion it was much better than any human culture.

When her bare feet finally reached the third level she stepped off the open stairwell and onto the platform. She walked around the tree until she reached the small room she used. The wall across from the door was made of the living xanlor tree and an open-air window faced out to the forest on the same side of the wall that she had entered. Simple wooden furniture filled the room: a desk, a chair, a bookshelf, a small wardrobe, a chest, a nightstand, a washing table, and a small bed.

Mariel's room was plain, the way she liked it. No paintings or tapestries decorated the walls, just an intricate map depicting Parloipae and the human lands surrounding it, including Natric, its northern neighbor. A few carvings were etched into the furniture, but nothing fancy. Unlike when she entered rooms in human lands, she did not bother to observe the room and note if anything had changed. She felt safe in zreshlan lands.

As she set her supplies on her desk, she saw something move on her bed. In a quick, fluid movement, she drew her zreshlan-style sword from its plain scabbard leaning against the desk and spun to see a snake with a cryptic pattern of brown, copper, and gold curled up on her bed. An instant later the serpent was replaced by a young man with olive-colored stripe-less skin. A white shirt with its laces undone at the top revealed well-toned chest muscles as he lay sprawled across her bed with his arms tucked behind a head covered in shoulder-length dark hair.

His amber eyes sparkled with humor as he watched Mariel intently. "Not planning on killing me, are you, Green Eyes?" he said in Natrician, as he rose from the bed.

In a few strides she stood in front of the serpentman with the tip of her sword pressed against his shirt. She was small and the top of her head was not even level with his shoulder, but she could still be dangerous. "Do you have a death wish?" she growled, responding in the same language.

He did not appear concerned as he glanced down at the thin, sharp sword blade pointing to his heart. He looked up at her, grinning. "A feisty one, aren't you?"

"I'll kill you, James Snaketongue."

"You won't," James said boisterously.

Mariel twisted the sword-point against his chest, tearing his shirt, but drawing no blood. "Watch me."

The annoying grin played on his face and his eyes raked across her body in an uncomfortable way. Mariel fought a blush, refusing to give him a reward for his disgusting behavior.

“I’ve always preferred you in the zreshlan dresses.”

Of course he liked her zreshlan clothes. The dresses were short-sleeved and usually only reached to the knees. It was also tight around the chest area. Woman in the human lands wore nothing so revealing. She pressed a little harder and the point of the sword drew blood.

“That hurts,” James said.

“I don’t care.”

She felt victory rise within her as she watched the last traces of his smile vanish.

“All I did was get you arrested. And you must have had fun escaping.”

“I’m tired of your games.”

He looked down at her sword with his blood shimmering on the tip. He appeared to ignore his shallow wound as he looked over the blade.

“*Aracklin*.” He read the name etched into the blade beneath the hilt. “Blood-biter. A good name, I think.” He looked pointedly down to where the sword was pressing into his flesh and then back at the blade. “Made by the skills of zreshlan smiths with all their normal cares and artistry. The metal is *puilion*. Lightweight, but extremely strong, and known only to the zreshlans. It would have been forged with special spells of strength. I can see the single emerald in the pommel, a *lina*. And . . .”

To Mariel’s alarm, James stepped back slightly and flipped the blade over, jerking Mariel’s wrist painfully. She switched hands quickly, keeping the blade pointed at the snake-man.

He did not appear to have noticed her switch of hands, as a smile tugged his lips. “Ah, yes, here it is.” James tapped the metal of the blade just beneath the hilt, the same place the sword’s

name was written in elegant script on the opposite side. On this side were three horizontal wavy lines. “The symbol for a river, a *gres* in Zreshlan.”

James looked up from the sword. “I suppose I said it backwards, huh? *Gres-lina*. River-emerald. The symbol of the river and the emerald in the pommel are to represent your zreshlan name. River because that is how you entered Parloipae when you were six, and emerald because of the color of your eyes. *Greslina*.”

He lifted the edge of Aracklin and stepped away from its dangerous blade catching the afternoon sunlight that filtered through the open window. Mariel was not about to let him escape so easily and she quickly had the sword pressed against his back.

James sighed heavily and turned to face her again. “Don’t be silly, Mariel, you would never kill me.”

He pushed the blade down, until the tip touched the wood floor. Mariel gave no resistance, shamed and angry. He was speaking to her as though she was a child, but he was only three years her senior.

“Would you like to play nice now?”

He touched the tear in his shirt and then examined the bright red blood that stuck to his fingers. He glanced at Mariel, and she felt color heat her cheeks in a humiliating blush. She was ashamed of her behavior. James had meant no harm, not even when he got her arrested the last time she saw him in the City of the Gods. He had gotten her arrested before, and she had returned the favor at least once. Threatening him at sword point was one thing—she did that quite often—but actually drawing blood was something entirely different. She could not meet his gaze and wiped the tip of Aracklin clean on a spare bit of cloth instead.

He looked at the detailed map of the Eastern Lands tacked up on the wall.

“Why are you here, James?” Mariel asked, sheathing Aracklin and setting it against the wall to avoid temptation if he aggravated her again. “Come to gloat over your last success?”

“Can’t a man come visit his friends?” James said, still staring at the map. “The zreshlan are my friends, too. I received my schooling here, just like you did.”

James was serpentramel and not human, so the zreshlan welcomed him to their lands, at least the zreshlan of Ambras Añue. Unfortunately, humans were not so welcoming to serpentramel. Although the Nería royal family who had ruled Natric before the de Sharecs overthrew them had been serpentramel, ever since the coup serpentramels had been hunted. Luckily for most serpentramels, so long as they did not shape shift in front of a human, it was unlikely anyone would discover that they were serpentramel.

“Who sent you?” Mariel demanded. “Who arranged to have the zreshlans tutor you? Who do you work for now?”

“We’ve been over this before. I have my secrets. You have yours. We hand each other information and help each other every once in a while.”

“That’s not fair,” Mariel said, sitting on the edge of the narrow bed. “You know I work for the Resistance. You actually know that the leader of the Resistance is my father. No one who works for the Resistance even knows that, but I know almost nothing about you, except that you are serpentramel and were tutored by the zreshlans.”

James crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall. “The only reason I know that Darren Brightsword is your father is because you and I were with our tutor Quillase on the edge of Parloipae when he stumbled into zreshlan lands. I was there when, after two years of not knowing who you were before you floated down the river into zreshlan lands, you suddenly remembered everything.”

Mariel looked at the floor, not daring to admit to him that she had not remembered *everything*.

He stepped away from the wall and lifted her chin. "I've kept your identity a secret, even from those who I report to. You've not broadcast to the underworld that I'm serpentramel. Even those in the underworld would kill a serpentramel on sight. We're both wanted outlaws, Mariel Quickwit. We're both after the same thing: overthrowing the corrupt de Sharec monarchy. It doesn't matter that we work for different people. It doesn't matter that you don't know who I report to. What matters is that we trust each other."

James only knew that her father was Darren Brightsword, leader of the Resistance, an organization bent on disrupting and eventually destroying the corrupt de Sharec reign. He did not know who she had been before coming to the zreshlan: who her mother was, who her grandparents were.

Mariel shoved his hand away and stood. "I don't trust you, I tolerate you."

James sighed in an exaggerated manner, as Mariel pushed passed him. "Pity, I had some pretty good intelligence for you, but now . . ." he shrugged.

Mariel turned, "What's the intelligence?"

James shook his head. "You nearly skewer me with your sword and now you think I'll just hand over the information?"

"You owe me. You got me arrested."

"And you got out before they managed to lock you up." He touched his fingers to his ripped shirtfront, where the blood had already dried. "You drew blood. Now you owe me."

Mariel scowled, weighing her options. James had never given her false information before or lied about having it. What information he had provided her in the past had always been worthwhile. "What do you want?"

Much to her annoyance, the young man grinned, revealing his straight, white teeth. “Give me a kiss and I’ll tell you.”

“No. What’s the information?”

“You’re wet.”

“Is that your idea of ‘good’ intelligence?”

“No. You aren’t complying with my offer, so I’m changing the subject. What did you do? Fall in the river?”

“What’s the information?”

“I want my kiss first.”

Mariel hated this game. He had been doing this to her recently: sometimes he would not pass her the information until she gave him a peck on the cheek. She glanced at the smiling James again and briefly considered beating the information out of him, but his well-defined muscles made her think twice about it, along with the knowledge of what the zreshlans would think of such behavior. All zreshlans were trained fighters, but they only believed in using violence to defend their homeland from humans.

Mariel’s curiosity won out. She braced herself and leaned up toward James, aiming for his cheek. He turned his head and met her lips with his own. Shock swept through her body, but before she could fight him, he stopped and backed away smiling even wider than before. The kiss had been short, but it felt longer to her. The fear vanished, replaced entirely by anger. She launched herself at him and slapped him across the jaw. A satisfying sound went with the smack and she was about to strike again when James held up his hands in defense and said, “Want the information?”

Mariel backed off with her hands clenched into fists at her side. To her fury, James straightened himself with his annoying smile plastered to his face. “Want to give me another kiss first?”

Mariel picked up her sword and shifted into the ready-stance with the point facing toward James’s chest. “Give me the information.”

The aggravating smile did not fade from his face, although Mariel noted with satisfaction that James moved back, out of lunging range. He bowed mockingly to her, “Forgive me, Your Royal Highness, I meant no harm by a single kiss.”

Mariel faltered, shocked by what he had called her. *Highness*. James did not know she was the granddaughter of Natric’s monarchs. He did not know that she was princess by blood, but not by recognition. She had never told him and although many of the zreshlans in Ambras Añue knew, it was not their habit to tell other people’s secrets. Did James know? How could he have found out?

“Why did you call me that?” she asked softly.

James rose from his bow. The smile vanished as he stared at her with a bewildered expression. “It was a joke.”

“Oh.” She felt no relief in his innocent reply, her mind had already traveled to the past where she skipped around in rich fabrics doing anything she pleased with her mother running just behind, laughing.

“Mariel, are you okay?”

She shook her head to clear it of the memories and lifted her sword toward the young man again. “Tell me the information.” she spoke the words in Zreshlan, just to remind herself where and who she was now. The past was dead and buried.

The playful smile did not return to James's face, replaced instead by confusion and possibly a bit of concern, but Mariel could not be sure because he was difficult to read. He replied in Natrician: "The de Sharecs have found their heir."

Mariel stared at him in disbelief and then glowered. "You made me kiss you for false information?"

"It's not false."

"There's no male left with enough de Sharec blood to be named heir without causing a civil war. They've been searching for an heir ever since the queen grew too old to bear children."

"I know all that."

"Then someone passed you false information. There is no heir. The de Sharec monarchy is going to die when the greedy, fat, old king keels over."

"The information is valid."

"How can you be sure?"

"I'm sure. I know you don't trust me, but you have to trust me on this."

"Do you know who it is?"

"No. All I know is Natric's famous archmagician is personally on the move."

"Is there no stopping Dreyfuss?"

"Not if we don't know who the heir is."

Mariel spun Aracklin around in her hand, debating what to do next. She could tell her papa, but she did not have enough information to be of much use. She sheathed her sword and started packing, shoving human clothes and her knives into a rucksack.

"Where are you going?" James asked.

"To the City of the Gods. I want to try to dig up more information before I pass it along."

“I’m going to the capital. If the information about the identity of the new heir is anywhere, it’s there. We’d have more chance of finding out if we work together.”

Mariel paused in her packing and held the potion that suppressed the nightmares that led to madness. Fintel, the capital of Natric, was the one place in the kingdom she had never been allowed to go. When she had first convinced her papa to let her join the Resistance seven years before, she had been forced to promise never to go there. Regardless of circumstances, Mariel had no intention of breaking that promise. She put the dream-suppressing potion in the rucksack and said, “I know the City of the Gods better. That’s where all my contacts are. You said that Dreyfuss is the one searching for the heir. He spends part of his time at the Citadel in the City. I’ll ruffle through his papers, ask around, see what I can find.”

James walked to the open doorway and turned. “May the *seÿas* be favorable,” he said the traditional zreshlan farewell. The *seÿas* meant “stars” or “gods,” since in Zreshlan the words were interchangeable

Mariel looked up and returned the farewell. She finished packing not long after he left. With the rucksack thrown over her shoulder and Aracklin strapped to her waist, she headed for the zreshlan kitchens to stock up on food for her journey. With that done, she began a calling spell for her loyal friend, Iyela, as she walked through the forest. She felt a tug at the other end and knew that her friend would arrive shortly. A white blur in the trees caught Mariel’s attention and she stopped to wait. The white unicorn approached and Mariel told her what was going on.

Unicorns were one of the five intelligent beings that lived in the Eastern Lands, along with humans, serpentramels, zreshlans, and ogres. Like serpentramels, unicorns were hunted by humans. Iyela was a female, so she had no horn and could pass for a horse. Mariel had rescued her from a mud-hole when she was a foal and Iyela had offered her services to Mariel ever since.

Mariel twined her fingers into her friend's mane and jumped, swinging her leg over the white back. Her young friend picked up the pace and Mariel pressed her legs tightly to her steed's sides and clung to the mane. The giant xanlor trees became blurs as the young female unicorn almost flew through them. They ran like that for hours, the strength and endurance of the unicorn never wavering for an instant. Unlike horses, unicorns had remarkable stamina and could run faster than any living creature.

At the edge of Parloipae, Mariel would change into human clothes and saddle Iyela, so that they would not draw too much attention, but for now the two friends could race through the forest together, uninhibited by human restraints.