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Prologue

Queen Chiora of Moniah leaned back on her throne, her gaze steady on the traitor, Maligon. The sight of her once truest friend tightened the knot in her stomach. The gathered nobles hushed as he strode past them, head held high, escorted by two women of the queen's Watchers. The heat in the air lay thick as a blanket. The silence matched it. Chiora resisted the urge to shift in her seat as sweat pooled inside her uniform, the leathers chosen over ceremonial dress to remind him she was a soldier, not just a figurehead.

Sunlight poured into the open courtyard and radiated across the landowners' formal robes of glimmer cloth, creating a rainbow of iridescent color around them. Normally, she enjoyed the play of the sunlight on their clothing, but today she couldn't. Today, they waited to witness the sentencing of the man who dared bring destruction to the kingdoms.

The Watchers and Maligon came to a stop below Chiora's Seat of Authority. He wore the plain clothes of a prisoner but still stood tall and well-muscled, his dark hair tied back in a fighter's tail. His black eyes once caressed her in love, but now they radiated hatred so pure it shimmered in the air.

"Maligon," Queen Chiora spoke, her voice firm and strong, "you betrayed me. And so you betrayed us all. And for what? Power you didn't need."

Maligon's black eyes didn't blink. He sneered at her. His injured hand twitched. She watched it with dispassionate interest. He'd never wield a sword again, a satisfying bit of knowledge even if he was about to die.

She took a focused breath, centering her mind and soul. "I sentence you to wear the oxen head into the desert."

A low murmur of approval hummed through the onlookers.

Maligon continued to stare venom at her as she gestured to the Watchers. "Take him from my sight."

The two Watchers, dressed in the tanned leather tunics and leggings of Chiora's all-female guard, escorted Maligon from the hall. He walked between the tall soldiers, head still held high.

Chiora drew a deep breath, the tension in her muscles easing as the air spread into her chest and throughout her body. She took another breath, and another. With each controlled inhalation, she drew her focus inward, preparing to bear witness as her soldiers carried out Maligon's sentence outside the walls of her fortress. The sentence would finish him. The heat, even this far from the desert bordering her lands, baked the air.

As her breathing settled into a steady rhythm, she sent a tendril of thought into the telepathic link with Ju'latti, her royal giraffe. Tension slid from her neck and shoulders as the noble beast embraced the connection. Through this link, Chiora looked through the animal's eyes and saw a

throng of tribal villagers gathered outside the walls of the fortress. They stood near the horses where the soldiers led Maligon, but not too close. She couldn't blame them after the devastation the traitor and his followers wreaked on their lands.

Two Watchers lashed Maligon to the back of a donkey, securing the bindings so neither traitor nor beast could dislodge the man. Then they handed a large skin bucket to a squad of First Soldiers, the male branch of Moniah's military. At the edge of the desert, the soldiers would remove a water-soaked oxen head from the bucket and secure it over Maligon's.

Chiora squinted at the sky. The sun, now a short distance above the horizon, promised a scorching day. Just before it reached its pinnacle, the First Soldiers would place the suffocating weight of the oxen head over Maligon's. A few hours later, the soldiers would stab the donkey's rump, driving it farther into the desert. In the heat, the wet oxen head would dry and conform to Maligon. Suffocation would kill him long before the donkey collapsed from exhaustion.

And if he survived? Chiora shook her head. No one had survived this sentence in hundreds of years.

The thought of this torturous death repulsed her, but Maligon made his choice when he defied Moniah and her allied kingdoms of Elwar, Belwyn, and Teletia. He didn't deserve the pity that rose in her throat.

As the soldiers and Maligon disappeared beyond the fortress walls, Chiora released the remaining tension in her shoulders and let the giraffe's gentling influence wash over her. Only Ju'latti truly knew her thoughts and feelings on this ominous day, and in the way of their long relationship, the animal sought to comfort her by cutting off the sharing of sight and focusing on the soothing sounds of the large, life-giving fountains in the Great Hall.

The queen focused on the gentle bubbling and ignored the stream of sweat trickling between her shoulder blades. "Send in the champions."

The assemblage shouted their approval as two foreigners walked forward to accept the accolades they deserved. The men's lighter coloring no longer startled Chiora unlike the day she and a squad of Watchers found them at the bottom of a muddy cliff. The man on the right, Micah, saved her life during the war with Maligon. Her gaze ran over his tall, lithe build in appreciation. Light hair, bleached white from the sun, glowed against his Monian-kissed suntan like bones on the prairie. Clear blue eyes gazed at her with startling familiarity, stuttering the pulse in her neck.

She drew another calming breath as his companion knelt before her. Unlike Micah, this man's fair skin had blistered and burned in the harsh sun of their land, a point that favored the reward she would grant him.

Micah maintained his focus on her and nodded in acknowledgement before kneeling. Chiora breathed deeper to suppress the shiver of excitement prompted by his forthright behavior.

"Our dear champions." Her low-pitched voice echoed throughout the huge open hall. She thanked the Creator that it came out strong and clear, with no hint of the emotions tumbling her soul. "Your journey from beyond the northern mountains came at a fortuitous time. Your courage in the face of our recent struggles brought peace to our lands. As reward, the kingdoms have decided to grant you titles and property." She turned to Micah's companion. "Donel, you will be known as Sir Donel and receive land as a vassal to Queen Roassa of Elwar."

A glimmer of a smile ghosted his face. She suspected his pleasure stemmed from admiration for Roassa rather than the title and cooler climate. Her sister queen shared this interest and had suggested his placement in Elwar rather than Moniah.

Whereas, Chiora could not stop thinking about the other man before her. Micah.

She stood and approached him, placing her hand on his shoulder in the formal greeting reserved for one of her subjects. “As for you, Micah—”

As her fingers settled on his rough, leather vest, the bond with Ju’latti surged into her mind in a flash of light. She gasped, closing her eyes. An image appeared. Micah stood by her side. Between them stood a young girl, her skin a blending of Chiora’s amber-colored skin and Micah’s pale complexion. The child’s hair was twisted into a Watcher’s braid the shades of a lion’s mane. In the image, the girl walked away from her parents. With each step, they faded from view, first Chiora, and then Micah. The girl continued to walk forward, alone.

The landscape around the child changed, first the flat plains of Moniah, then the mountains and forests of Elwar. With each step, the girl matured. She halted at the top of a hill, now a young woman dressed in leathers, a quiver of arrows strung over her back, a sword at her side. The shadow of a man emerged from the forests and stood beside her. A divided path lay before them, one route blocked by a monstrous blazing fire, the other by a wall taller than the eye could see. The young woman raised her head, blue eyes blazing, and stepped forward, aiming for the point where the two paths merged together in a wall of conflagration. The man’s shadow followed.

Chiora bent over, gasping for air, as the vision faded. Two Teachers of the Faith rushed to her side, their green robes swaying in their urgency to support their queen, but Chiora remained upright, her fingers digging into Micah’s shoulder. He rose to steady her, a look of concern in his eyes. She gazed back at him, the warmth of his touch flooding her veins.

The Creator had not only sent her a champion to help defeat Maligon, he had sent her a partner. They would make a strong child together, an heir to Moniah’s Seat of Authority. A child who would face insurmountable struggles.

* * * * *

Part I

Chapter 1

Moniah, 20 Years Later

Adana believed deep within her soul that her actions today could save her mother. The familiarity of the dirt-packed ground of the archery arena and the blazing Monian sun beating down on her did little to distract her from the haze of incense hovering over the fortress. Incense that proclaimed the illness of her mother, Queen Chiora of Moniah.

Tiny rivulets of sweat trickled down the contour of Adana's back. She focused on the damp track as it ran beneath her leathers. Anything to pull her mind from the weight of grief hanging over her and the kingdom.

She couldn't lose her mother. Not yet. Not when she still needed her guidance, teaching, and even scolding when she forgot her training as a soldier and acted like a princess.

The work of a soldier came first. Not the princess. And definitely not her future as the queen. Even the laws of the land knew this. Three years until she could rule at eighteen. Too soon.

She glanced at Montee, the Watcher assigned to work with her today. Montee hadn't moved, standing still, arms hanging by her side, attention focused on the young princess. Adana expected her to say something. She had taken too long to make this shot, but Montee waited.

As did everyone, today. Waited for their queen to die.

If she met this challenge, passed this test, would the Creator reward her and heal her mother? Give her back the time she needed, the parent she craved?

She drew an arrow and nocked it to her bow.

Nine arrows in a straight line pierced the scarred target wall in the distance. A significant feat and cause for jubilation for most trainees, but she didn't rejoice. Not yet. Not until she fired this last shaft. Sent true to its mark, she prayed it would prove her worth to the Creator and save her mother. She didn't care about the promotion in the ranks of the Watchers, the fact that no fifteen-year-old had ever passed this test. She only needed to please the Creator.

She inhaled. The noxious fumes of the incense, thick and cloying, settled around her. She wanted to run, to shake her head, to escape the reminder, but instead she raised her bow.

A nudge at her mind disturbed her focus. Am'broasia, her royal giraffe, offering assistance with this last shot. The animal had hovered in the background of her thoughts all morning, seeking to connect, to comfort Adana, but she'd closed her internal eye and ignored the contact, unwilling to risk the joining of their vision. Afraid Am'broasia might show her the reality of her mother's illness.

Focus.

She set her stance.

The white sun beat down. Beads of sweat pooled beneath her Watcher's braid. Adana inhaled and closed her eyes, seeking a center within her breathing, extending her mind and ability. Each inhalation spread through her chest, down her arms and legs, giving life to her focus. She breathed again. Again. Again.

Heat, sweat, and incense faded from existence. Adana envisioned the target.

She let loose the arrow.

Thunk.

The shot penetrated the wall at a perfect interval from the other nine arrows. Most Watchers released their control and shouted with joy after succeeding in this trial, but Adana dropped to her knees in thanks.

Heart pounding, she fought the urge to weep in relief. The Creator would save her mother. Save them all. And save her from this grief.

Montee studied the target, her green eyes squinting in the bright sun, then turned toward Adana. "Good," she said. That brief word rarely crossed Montee's lips.

With the heightened awareness brought on by her focused breathing, Adana found her gaze drawn to the deep lines etched within the golden skin around Montee's eyes. The premature wrinkles combined with a warrior's height and hard, muscular stature, proclaimed the Watcher as a member of the elite female branch of Moniah's military. Some day this soldier, and all the women honored to be trained as Watchers, would serve Adana. Not today, she reminded herself as she rose to her feet, waiting for further instruction. They still served her mother, as it should be.

"Aim for the spot between the fifth and sixth arrow," Montee said.

Adana nodded but wondered at the new challenge. Did Montee think she could do it? Or did she seek to remind her of the humble nature of her position?

No matter. She would succeed. A year of practice, that's what it took to pass the straight line of arrows test, but she could do anything now that the Creator would heal her mother.

Heart racing in anticipation, she set her stance.

"But first connect to Am'brosia."

Adana faltered at Montee's words. Dread ran down her spine like cold water. Lowering her bow, she stared at Montee.

What if Am'brosia chose to show her what she'd avoided all morning, Ju'latti, her mother's giraffe, suffering from the same illness? Clear proof of how deep the connection between the royal and giraffe went.

Doubt crept into her mind. What if the Creator wasn't pleased? What if he demanded more?

"Please, not today..."

Montee narrowed her gaze, silencing Adana's objection.

Adana faced the target, took a breath, and drew an arrow. She took another breath and raised her bow. Only royals sensed the presence of the bond. If she appeared to connect, Montee wouldn't know she hadn't.

"Adana." Montee's warning tone invaded her thoughts. "You will be the only one linked to a giraffe in battle. You must master this."

What small motion gave her away, hinted at her disobedience? With another Watcher, her defiance might have worked. But not with an attentive and experienced Watcher like Montee.

She whispered a brief prayer, "Please Creator, heal Mammetta." Then she inhaled. As she exhaled, she sent a tendril of thought toward the giraffe and gasped at the strength Am'brosia used as she seized the connection. Not the gentle embrace Adana had grown accustomed to.

Please don't show me Ju'latti.

The pressure along their tie relaxed, cradling her, giving Adana time to settle her breathing and accept the link, but, after a few moments, Am'brosia tightened the hold and expanded their view. A distant image of the paddock appeared in Adana's mind. The scene becoming clearer, more troubling.

Adana closed her eyes but couldn't avoid what the giraffe chose to reveal.

Ju'latti, lay on the ground. The animal labored with each breath just as Adana's mother did in her chambers.

The Creator hadn't healed them.

Nearby, a bull giraffe hovered—Va'lent, the one bonded to her father.

Adana fought tears and attempted to release the connection. It held tight.

In the year since their bonding, Am'brosia had never forced the union. Neither of them had. Her parents never told her what to do in this case. Wasn't Am'brosia supposed to cooperate?

A sharp burst of mirth streamed down the tie.

Let go, Am'brosia.

The tie between them remained, strengthened.

Frantic, she envisioned a knife and pictured herself severing the invisible line of force between them. Would it work? Am'brosia kicked the knife away.

Eyes wide, Adana fought back, shoving her view of the archery grounds and the sky, bleached white from the sun, into her mind's eye.

Am'brosia tossed her large head, their vision bouncing around the paddock. The sudden movement rocked Adana, and she braced her feet. The scene in her mind moved over the paddock grounds toward the sheer cliff beyond the southern wall of the fortress. Adana's stomach lurched as they plummeted over the cliff. They raced toward the ground. She braced for impact. What would happen if they hit?

But they didn't. Moments before the expected blow, their sight leveled out. Am'brosia turned their gaze across the barren plains.

A Watcher ran toward them, her leathers blended with the tans and browns of her surroundings. She wore a red stretch of glimmer cloth tied across her forehead. Red for danger. Forgetting who controlled their sight, Adana turned to check the signal tower, to see if the guards saw the warning. Her view did not change. Am'brosia still controlled the direction of their joined sight.

Instead their gaze raced toward and past the approaching soldier. Dust and dirt swirled around them as they traveled farther into the plains. She tried to identify the running Watcher, but the soldier sped past too quickly for her to gain more than the awareness of serious intent on the woman's face.

Adana cried out in shock as they collided with a giraffe in a herd facing south.

Am'brosia stop this. Please. I don't feel well.

For a moment, everything before her wavered, and she hoped Am'brosia would release her. Then, the scene cleared. They were looking through the other animal's eyes. Then the sight jumped. Adana's stomach churned as they sprang to the mind of another giraffe, and another, and another. She lost track as they traveled far to the south.

Finally, they stopped, looking through the eyes of an old male. A village stood a short distance away. Fire raged from thatched roofs of several huts and the people ran, their mouths open in unheard screams.

Where are we?

Horror coiled in her belly as soldiers swarmed the village brandishing axes and swords. The farmers fought but fell before their attackers. Bile rose in her throat. Why would men do this? She sucked in air through her mouth, trying to ease the shock.

With an unsettling sweep of his head, the giraffe they inhabited turned his gaze toward a lone man astride a horse. This man watched the village's destruction from a distance, a ferocious smile on his face. Am'brosia drew Adana's attention to his hand, its deformity suggesting an impossible name.

Maligon.

As if he heard her thoughts, the man's head jerked up. He squinted at them then shouted an order, pointing at Adana.

"Turn," Adana shouted, unsure how to direct this distant beast. She pictured herself turning her head to the right. "Turn."

The giraffe's head swung in an arc to the right. A man ran toward them, closing the distance. He stopped and drew an arrow. Alarm skittered through Adana's brain. She raised her own bow and shot just as the giraffe wheeled to the left and ran.

A sense of shock and pain reeled through her.

The bond snapped.

Adana tumbled to the ground.

Her stomach heaved. Everything spun when she tried to lift her head.

"Adana." The pounding of running feet approached her.

She shuddered and shrank from the sound.

Montee's shadow fell over her. "My lady? What happened?"

Adana struggled to raise her head and choked out one word, "Maligon."

"What?" The woman squatted beside Adana, her shadow providing some shade from the unbearable heat. Adana swayed as her stomach gave up its fight. She hadn't eaten that morning. Little came up. A cool hand drew the braid back from her neck as she continued to heave.

When the spasms stopped, Montee offered her a water skin. "Don't swallow, just spit."

The water was warm, but she welcomed it, rinsing the sour taste of acid from her mouth.

She upended the rest of it over her head, the water washing away the frantic energy of what she'd experienced. "Thank you."

Taking the water skin back, Montee frowned at her with concern. "My lady, this is why I suggested you not attempt this trial today. You're under too much strain worrying about the queen."

Adana shook her head and moaned as it throbbed. "No. Something else." She struggled to stand, but weakness flooded her legs.

Montee rose and reached out a hand to help Adana rise.

She accepted the assistance and stood but stayed bent over, hands on her legs, taking in deep breaths. The pain and weakness subsided some. How to explain?

Had Am'brosia really carried her beyond their own sight? Outside the fortress? To the edge of Moniah? It might be a prophecy of warning. It looked so real. Real enough for her to shoot at someone leagues from here.

She drew a breath and tried to focus on one point. "I saw Maligon."

"Maligon?" Montee wrinkled her forehead. "He died twenty years ago."

Adana shook her head. "I saw a man with a mangled hand."

Everyone knew how her father injured the traitor, left his hand crippled. That her mother sentenced Maligon to his death in the desert.

"But—"

"It was him. I know it. Don't ask me how. I just do."

"Is that why you shot an arrow?"

Adana looked down at her bow and back up, the motion making her head throb again.

The soldier following Maligon's command had shot at them. Giraffes were sacred. To harm one meant death. "He ordered a man to shoot at the giraffe. I was there."

She wasn't making any sense.

At that moment, the warning bell on the south tower clanged. A shout interrupted them. "Red from the south."

The Watcher they'd passed on the plains.

It was real. Am'brosia had taken her somewhere. Struggling with this realization, Adana glanced at her mentor, tried to form the words, but the Watcher's attention was on the guard tower. Montee's high rank required her to respond. The warning bell continued to clang, and the guard continued to shout the warning.

"Go, I will be fine," Adana said.

Despite the urgent summons, Montee studied Adana closely. "Are you sure? You're still unsteady."

"I'm fine. Go."

The older warrior motioned to Suru, a lower-ranked Watcher who waited on the far side of the field. The woman trotted over and bobbed her head toward Adana. "My lady."

"Please escort the princess to her chambers. Make sure she's safe, then summon the apothecary. The princess became overheated and needs water and rest."

Without a backward glance, Montee hurried toward the south tower.

Suru turned toward the fortress, took a step, and turned back when the princess didn't join her.

Adana straightened and pushed her shoulders back, years of deep-rooted training helping her hide any weakness. "Not yet."

She needed answers and going to her chambers wouldn't provide them. The ease at which Adana re-opened the bond with Am'brosia told her the giraffe had anticipated her return.

Show me the red Watcher.

* * * * *