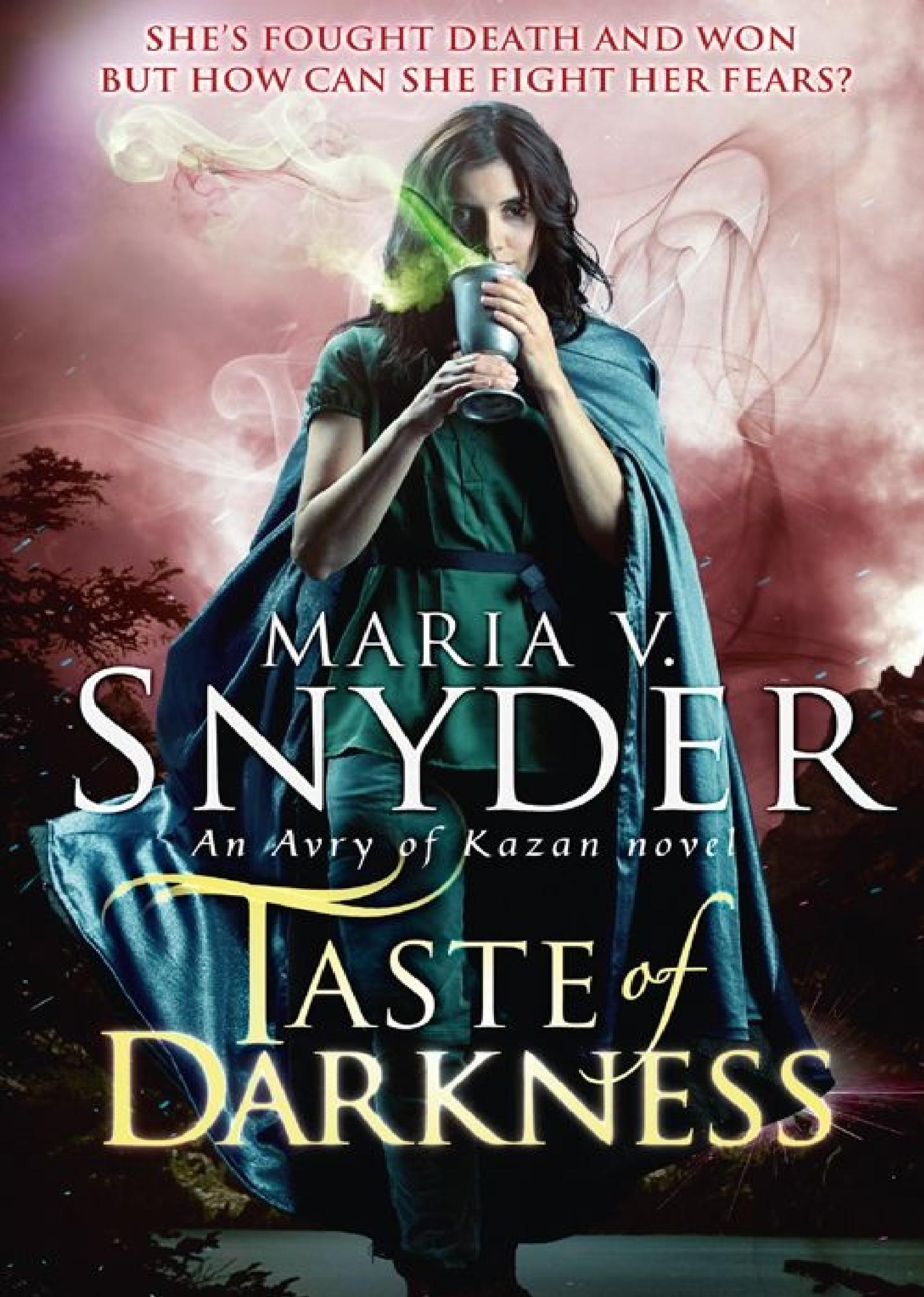


SHE'S FOUGHT DEATH AND WON
BUT HOW CAN SHE FIGHT HER FEARS?



MARIA V.
SNYDER

An Avry of Kazan novel

TASTE *of*
DARKNESS

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For my father—a perpetual tinkerer, who showed me the benefits of hard work and persistence. It took me a while to catch on, but I eventually “got” it. Thanks, Pop!

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CHAPTER 1

Cold air caressed my back. I rolled over, muttering at Kerrick for hogging the blanket, but stopped. Something felt...odd, wrong, missing. Opening my eyes, I confirmed the emptiness next to me. Kerrick was gone.

For a moment, I stared at the dent in the pillow. Had yesterday been a dream? Had I imagined Wynn's betrayal, Tohon trapped in a magical stasis, Kerrick's miraculous arrival, and the rest of the insanity?

No. The events replayed in my head with vivid details. The blood, the overpowering reek of dead ufas, and Wynn's poisoned knife striking Kerrick's arm. Poisoned with Death Lily toxin. I'd thought I'd sucked all the deadly poison from Kerrick's wound...but what if I hadn't?

Icy fingers of fear wrapped around my heart. I shot to my feet and dressed in record time. Kerrick's shirt, boots, and sword lay in a heap by the dying fire. Not good.

Out in the large main cavern, the rest of the infirmary staff stirred. I scanned the patients' cots on the off chance Kerrick had collapsed into one. He hadn't.

Loren added wood to the cooking hearth, poking it into a bright blaze.

I rushed over to him. "Have you seen Kerrick?"

"Nope, and we figured we wouldn't see either of you until..." His smirk faded. "Maybe he went outside for some fresh air." This in a hopeful tone.

"Without his shirt?"

"Well, when nature calls..."

"Or his sword?"

Loren jumped up. "Let's not panic, Avry."

Too late.

"Have you searched the other caverns?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Okay, then you look for him inside, and I'll go outside. If he's not nearby, I'll ask the guards if they saw him last night. All right?"

I nodded, but dread clawed up my throat. Kerrick wouldn't be in another cavern unless he'd been too sick to find his way back to me. Gulping down the tight knot, I grabbed a lantern and checked all the other sleeping areas.

A few people grumbled after I swept the light over them, but I didn't care.

Odd squinted in the brightness, but sat up as if he'd been awake. "What's wrong?" I explained.

He cursed. "Not only did Wynn stab us in the back, she's twisted the blade, too."

"While I'd love to plot revenge with you—"

"Yeah, go. I'll be right out."

The other caverns yielded the same results. Even the one reserved for the privy. A detached part of my mind noted the buckets needed to be dumped. However my heart kept its frantic rhythm. That was the last place inside. Perhaps...

Running back to the main cavern, I spotted Loren and Odd talking to a soldier.

"...sometime after midnight," the man said. "Don't recall if he came back or not."

Loren rounded on him. “Don’t recall! You’re *supposed* to be guarding us. What if the enemy grabbed him? If someone goes into the woods and doesn’t come back, that’s a big red flag, you idiot!”

Odd touched Loren’s shoulder and tilted his head toward me. “Not helping right now.”

“He was outside?” I asked.

The guard had seen him leave. I dashed out into the cold morning air. The fresh scent of moist earth reminded me of Kerrick. Without hesitating, I embraced the closest bit of foliage, seeking the vibrations of Kerrick’s forest magic.

Nothing. I drew a shaky breath. Don’t jump to conclusions. He could be unconscious. Odd and Loren had followed me out. Six inches shorter than Odd, Loren ran a hand over his buzzed black hair. More silver sprinkled his hair despite only being thirty-five. Odd on the other hand had let his hair grow since Tohon’s surprise attack. Although saying it had grown was being generous. His dark brown locks remained close to his scalp in a fine fuzz.

“We need to search the area. Wake the others,” I ordered.

They hastened inside and soon Flea, Quain, and most of the soldiers had assembled by the cave’s entrance. Using one of Ryne’s military maps, Loren divided the surrounding area into quadrants. The infirmary cave was located in Pomyt Realm, northeast of Zabin and east of the ruins of the Healer’s Guild.

Quain growled at everyone, but he appeared healthy despite being frozen in Sepp’s magical stasis only yesterday. But Flea’s face remained pale and he seemed unsteady on his feet. The discovery of his ability to break Sepp’s stasis had taken a toll on him.

I moved closer to him. “Flea, stay here, you’re in no condition—”

“No. I’m going.” Despite being sixteen, he sounded much older. And his firm gaze meant I’d have an easier time convincing fire not to burn.

Before assigning quadrants to the teams, Loren pulled me aside. “Hate to bring this up, but if he’s... If we find...”

“A dead body?” Not like I hadn’t thought of it a million times since I’d woken up.

“Yeah.”

“Tell them to find me as fast as possible. I have the Lily map—we’ll head to the closest Peace Lily and hope for the best.” I glanced at Flea. A Peace Lily had saved his life and mine; it might save Kerrick’s.

The strain on Loren’s face eased just a bit. “Right.” He shouted orders and the teams of four headed into the woods, fanning out to their assigned areas.

No surprise that Loren, Quain, and Flea joined me. I trailed my fingers along the greenery, hoping to detect Kerrick’s magic. At this point, I’d pray to Estrid’s creator if I thought it would help.

As a group, we moved in silent mode. Despite Tohon’s current condition—frozen in stasis, because if he weren’t, he’d die from the deep stab wound in his chest, a little gift from me—his army still advanced from the south. Cellina had taken over command. Just as ruthless as he was, at least she couldn’t create more dead soldiers. And we’d discovered how to stop the ones in existence. So it was only a matter of time until we neutralized them all.

What if we didn’t find Kerrick in time? The Peace Lilys were picky. From the little I’d learned, the person in question either needed to be a magician or have the potential

to be one, and the body had to be fresh. Flea'd been dead a few hours and I had died inside the Lily.

Well, actually, the Lily hadn't brought us back to life. It'd preserved our bodies until another person touched us. I'd awoken Flea and Kerrick had saved me.

Kerrick, why didn't you wake me? Why didn't you tell me you felt sick?

What if the Peace Lily rejected him? Like it refused Ursan and Noelle? Although Ursan had been a magic sniffer, he'd been dead too long, and my sister, Noelle, hadn't been gifted with magic. I was the only one in my family who'd developed powers. Healing powers, not that it helped with either of them. Or Kerrick. I couldn't cure those poisoned by Death Lily toxin or infected with the plague.

The plague had killed two-thirds of the population of the Fifteen Realms. At least there hadn't been a new case in almost three years. But during its prime, over six million people had died.

Gee, not like I wasn't depressed enough. I focused my energies on the search. How far could one sick man go anyway?

The day dragged on. We made sweeping arcs through our area, but only managed to scare a few rabbits, which Loren shot with his bow. Sunlight streamed through the gaps in the trees, heating the air to a comfortable level—summer's last gasp. Fall started in eleven days.

Memories of last fall came unbidden. Around midseason Kerrick and the guys had rescued me from the guillotine. Because of his forest magic, his eyes had matched the color of the forest with warm browns, gold, and amber flecks. I huffed. His personality hadn't coordinated at all. He'd been cold, mean, and only cared about healing Prince Ryne, which had been why he'd freed me from jail.

Loren raised his hand in a stopping motion. We froze, listening. Hope surged, but died just as quick. The noise of the other searchers' passage had carried. They weren't as skilled in moving through the forest. Instead of their movements blending in with the forest's song, it stood out like an out-of-tune violin in a string quartet.

My emotions had been on an endless seesaw over the past month. First Tohon's vast army had surrounded Estrid's and he'd demanded unconditional surrender. Cellina had acted as his liaison and Kerrick's sword had hung from her belt. She'd claimed Kerrick had been torn apart by her pack of dead ufas. He hadn't. But then Ryne had sent Kerrick north to fight the invading tribes and a messenger had reported he'd died in the attempt. He hadn't.

So this was just another false alarm. Right? Kerrick was like a cat with nine lives. Three down, five left. I clung to that thin thread of hope because... Well, if I didn't, I'd shatter.

We searched all day.

When the sun hovered over the horizon, Loren called it off. "We can resume in the morning."

"You can go back," I said, "but I'm staying."

"We need to regroup and see if anyone has seen anything."

"I agree, but you don't need me for that."

Loren exchanged a glance with Quain. Close to my age of twenty-one, Quain had teamed up with Loren before joining Kerrick. Their antics had earned them the nickname the monkeys. I'd once quipped Quain was the bald monkey since no hair

grew on his head.

“Avry, you haven’t eaten all day,” Quain said.

“Really, Quain? Is that all you got? Do you think I have an *appetite* right now?” I regretted my harsh sarcasm immediately. It wasn’t Quain’s fault.

He stepped closer to me. His voice dipped low. “You’re not the only one hurting here.”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

Quain paused at that, blinking at me as if no one had ever apologized to him before. “Do you think you’ll be able to help Kerrick if you’re passed out from exhaustion?”

“I know my limits, Quain.”

“And how effective can one person be stumbling around in the dark?”

I drew breath to blast him again, but Flea said, “I’ll stay with Avry.”

Flea’s face had paled to bone white. The only color was the dark smudges underneath his eyes. He swayed on his feet. Talk about passing out... If I stayed, Flea would insist on staying, as well.

Sighing, I said, “You’re right. I’d be useless.”

Quain showed an amazing amount of restraint in not gloating over my comment. Loren raised his eyebrows, but kept quiet.

As we headed back, I walked next to Flea and took his hand. He squeezed my fingers in silent support. However, I had another purpose for linking hands. I sent him a subtle flow of magical energy. Since I’d awoken him, we had a bond. He sensed when I was in trouble, and we could share strength.

Once we found Kerrick, we’d have to figure out the extent of Flea’s new magic. Was he now a death magician or a hybrid magician who didn’t fit in one of the eleven categories of magic? The fact that he could break Sepp’s stasis made for another weapon in our growing arsenal against Cellina’s army. Funny to think of the thousands of soldiers as Cellina’s now.

I slowed as Flea grew stronger.

“Hey! Stop that.” He let go, shaking me off.

“Stop what?” I acted confused.

“Don’t pull that on me. I didn’t ask for help.”

“Yes, you did. You just didn’t know it.” And before Flea could protest, I added, “Healer. Remember? It’s what I do.”

“But what if we find Kerrick?”

What if? Those two words had haunted me all day. And just like with Flea, Kerrick and I shared a bond. I reached for the bushes, touching the leaves. Still no ripple of magic. Yet a tightness deep down inside me wouldn’t let me despair. It clung to the notion I’d been wrong about his death before. In fact, it reasoned that until I had proof to the contrary, I should assume he was alive.

“*When* we find Kerrick, I’ll have plenty of energy,” I said.

Back at the cave entrance, the other teams milled about, talking in low voices. From their universal serious expressions, I guessed they’d been unsuccessful.

“I’m sorry, Avry, but there’s been no sign of him,” Odd said, joining us. “A few of the teams covered their entire areas. Are you sure he’s sick? I hate to be gross...but we didn’t find any vomit. And it’s hard to imagine him traveling farther if he wasn’t feeling good.”

“Kerrick can be stubborn,” I said, hoping that annoying trait had saved him.

“He had to be sick. Why else would he be out without his shirt or sword?” Loren asked.

“All right. So he goes outside thinking he’s going to throw up...then what?” Odd asked.

We’d all assumed he collapsed, but... What if he’d realized he was dying? I imagined his thoughts and feelings at that moment, putting myself in his place. He’d promised me he wouldn’t die. But it was inevitable. Yet Kerrick didn’t give up easily.

I gasped. “He headed to a Peace Lily!”

CHAPTER 2

“Of course,” Flea said. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

And I wished I’d figured it out sooner. Sick and dying, Kerrick must have done the only thing he could—head to a Peace Lily. He’d been there when the Lily had saved my life and he’d recently learned about Flea’s survival. A surge of energy coursed through me.

“Could he find a Lily at night?” Odd asked.

“Yeah, he’s a forest mage,” Flea said.

“Loren, where’s the map you used for the search areas?” I pulled out my Lily map, but the sunlight was all but gone.

“I left it with the captain of the watch in case anyone returned and needed to find us,” Loren said.

“Go get it and ask the search teams how much of their areas were covered today. Oh, and see if they encountered any Lilys and where.”

“Got it.” Loren dashed off.

Quain, Flea, and Odd followed me inside the infirmary cave. I knelt next to the fire and spread my map out. The locations of the clusters of Lilys had been marked on it.

Handy, except the markings didn’t indicate if they were Death or Peace Lilys. For once it didn’t matter, because Kerrick also couldn’t tell the difference. He’d head for the closest cluster since the odds were in his favor. A hundred Peace Lilys grew for every Death Lily. However, I still needed to know if the teams had found any Lilys. Since I’d been using the map, I’d discovered it wasn’t 100 percent accurate.

I paused, letting the irony sink in. Death Lily toxin killed my sister and might take Kerrick, but it stopped Tohon’s dead soldiers, and had given me my healing magic. Ironic or warped? Or twisted? How about plain old sad?

Loren arrived with the information I’d requested. We consulted and pinpointed the closest Lily cluster. Half a day southwest. I remembered that group of six Lilys. One had been a Death Lily, and I’d harvested its toxin sacks. More important, five were Peace Lilys.

Standing, I said, “Let’s go.”

Quain exchanged a look with Loren, doing their silent monkey communication that Belen liked to tease them about. Belen. I bit my lip. No. I wasn’t going to think about him right now. If I did, I’d dissolve into a little puddle of goo. And time was too critical right now.

Pushing past Quain, I fetched my knapsack from my sleeping cavern. Kerrick’s clothes remained where I’d tossed them last night. I shoved them into my pack along with his boots. He’d need them; the air turned cold at nights. I wrapped my cloak around my shoulders.

When I returned, Loren and Quain waited for me with their packs. Flea sat by the fire. Two bright red patches spread on his cheeks, and his lips were pressed into a hard line. Odd stood behind him with his arms crossed. Their body language said it all.

“Here.” Loren handed me a few sticks of beef jerky. “You can eat it on the way.”

“Thanks.” I bit into one as we left the cave. A half-moon lit the sky, giving off just enough light for us to see the trail, but not enough to see well. We traveled slower than normal to avoid tripping. Plus we kept searching for Kerrick. He might have collapsed on his way to the Lilys. I touched the greenery from time to time, seeking his magic. My heart, though, wanted action and it raced regardless of our pace.

“I’d rather you had a hot meal before we left, but I rarely get my way,” Loren said.

“You stopped Flea from coming along.”

“Only because Odd threatened to sit on him. Flea said he wasn’t going to speak to me ever again.” Loren shook his head. “I’ve been waiting for Quain to say that for years.”

“Hey!”

I cut in before they could launch into a verbal battle. “You did the right thing, Loren. He needs to rest after yesterday.”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t like to miss out. And I’m with him on this one. I wouldn’t want to be left behind, either.”

“Why is he so tired?” Quain asked in concern. “Is it because of...me?”

“I don’t remember him saving anyone else’s life yesterday,” Loren said.

“I know I owe him one. But what did he do to break the spell? I wasn’t dead. I was just...” Quain glanced at me. “What was I? I didn’t feel anything.”

“You were paused. Neither living nor dead, just suspended. Sepp once explained it as a fake death.”

“And now Tohon’s trapped in this fake death?” Quain asked.

“Yes. And according to Sepp, Belen is, as well. He used that information to try to stop Kerrick from killing him,” I said. Tohon had told me he’d turned Belen into one of his dead soldiers. I didn’t know who to believe, but I knew who I desperately wanted to believe. Either way, Belen had been missing for over a month.

“Estrid and her top staff are also frozen,” Loren added.

“Yeah, but it didn’t matter. No offense, Quain, but Tohon had to be stopped,” I said. “By taking out Sepp, no one would have been able to awaken him, or so we thought at the time. Cellina can’t create more dead soldiers. In the end, by killing Sepp we’d have saved thousands of lives.”

Except Wynn had hit Kerrick with her knife before he could finish Sepp off. Eventually Sepp, Wynn, and Cellina had escaped and Flea had awoken Quain.

“If it makes you feel any better, it was a very painful decision,” I said.

Loren put his hand on his stomach. “Like a bad bout of indigestion.”

“Thanks, I feel all warm inside.” He bumped Loren with his shoulder. “So now that Sepp’s still alive, what does that mean?”

Loren met my gaze. What indeed?

“It depends on Cellina,” I said. “If she likes being in charge, she’ll leave Tohon frozen. If she truly loves him...”

“She’ll come after Avry,” Loren said. “She’s the only one who can heal Tohon.”

Not exactly. Danny’s healing magic had awoken during his adventure with Kerrick in the north. But not many people knew about him. Yet another worry flared. Had Tohon told Cellina about his experiments with the Death Lily toxin? The people who survived being poisoned with the toxin all developed healing powers. Tohon had been injecting it into children, hoping to make healers. Danny and Zila had lived through it,

but I'd rescued them. If Tohon had kept it secret, all should be well.

If not... I considered. Danny remained with the northern tribes and Zila stayed with Kerrick's brother, Izak. Both were in Alga Realm, safe on the other side of the Nine Mountains for now.

"But Avry won't heal Tohon," Quain said. "Right? You agreed with Kerrick's decision to kill Sepp."

"Right. I won't."

"And we all know you can't be threatened, bullied, coerced, or bribed to heal someone you don't want to." Loren smiled.

Quain rubbed his neck. "Yeah, we learned *that* lesson the hard way."

"I'd say Kerrick had the most learning to do. Fun times."

I wouldn't go so far as to call them fun. However, those days when we'd been all together had been...nice, despite the danger. And now... Grief and sadness filled me. Would I lose everyone I loved before this war ended?

We lapsed into silence. The farther we moved away from the infirmary cave, the greater the chance of encountering an enemy patrol. The night insects buzzed and chirped.

When the sun rose, we stopped for a quick breakfast and continued. In the daylight, the monkeys searched for any signs that Kerrick had passed this way.

"Would he even leave a trail?" I asked.

"If he was too sick to do his tree mojo, he might have broken some branches," Quain said.

And I still hadn't felt a ripple of his magic. Which meant he was either unconscious, already inside a Lily, or dead. I leaned against a tree's trunk for a moment as a wave of misery swept through me. No. Not until I had proof.

Pushing away those dire thoughts, I straightened. "I'll meet you guys there. You're slowing me down." I sprinted down the trail.

They picked up their pace and we reached the Lily cluster a few hours after dawn.

"There's no sign Kerrick came this way," Quain said, examining the ground.

I shot him a nasty look.

Loren punched him in the arm. Hard.

"What?"

Ignoring them, I pulled off my cloak and knapsack, setting them down. I moved closer and studied the six Lilys. The cluster grew among the trees. Giant white man-size flowers topped thick green stalks. Thorny vines jumbled below and the scent of honey and lemons filled the air. Get too close to a Death Lily and either the petals snatched you or the vines ensnared you and pulled you in. Once trapped, you couldn't escape even if armed with a sharp knife. The thick and fibrous petals and leaves resisted punctures and tears.

Death Lilys moved fast for a plant, hissing a warning a second before they grabbed their victims. Once you were caught, it pricked you with two barbs and injected its toxin. One of three things happened next. You die, and it feeds off your flesh, spitting your bones out when it's finished. Or you don't die, it spits you out, and you suffer horribly, dying later. Then there are the very few who don't die at all and become healers. Like me.

On the opposite side, Peace Lilys wouldn't capture a person or bother anyone. As

far as I know, Flea and I were the only people they'd taken. And here was another irony—Tohon used Peace Lily serum to create his dead soldiers. The serum preserved the dead body in a fake life so they didn't decompose. His magic did the rest, but I still hadn't figured out how.

"Stay away from that one." I pointed to the Lily farthest southwest. "That's the Death Lily."

"How can you tell?" Quain asked. "They all look the same."

"Death Lilys have a faint odor of anise when you get closer, and Peace Lilys smell like vanilla. If you smell anise, then you're within range of its vines."

"Oh, so anise will be the last thing you smell before you're plant food. Good to know." Quain backed up a step.

"Now what?" Loren asked.

"I'll see if any will open for me." When I had returned to the Peace Lily that held Flea's body, it had bent down and deposited him onto the ground. Perhaps one of these would drop Kerrick. Every fiber of my being hoped so.

Please be here.

I approached the closest and waited. *Please be here.*

Nothing happened. Not a twitch of a vine nor a rustle of a petal.

After a few minutes, I moved to the next. *Please be here.*

And the next. *Please.*

And the next. *Be.*

And the last. *Here!*

The Peace Lilys ignored me. "Please?" I said to it, hoping it would take me and explain as one had after it had refused my sister. I'd gotten the impression that the Peace Lilys were all one being with each flower an extension of it, like fingers. Same with the Death Lilys, but with another being at its core.

Still nothing.

Loren gestured to the flowers. "What's going on?"

Crushing disappointment and grief, but no need to state the obvious. "I'll see if I can find out." I walked over to the Death Lily.

"Uh, Avry," Quain said. "Are you sure that's a good—"

A loud hissing drowned out the rest of his words. In a flash, white petals surrounded me, blocking all light and noise. In the darkness, two barbs pricked my upper arms and the toxin flowed into me like a soothing elixir. Escaping my pain-filled body, my consciousness floated free and I connected with the thoughts and contented feelings of the Lily.

Welcome back. A surge of pride. *More?* Thinking I wanted its toxin sacks, it showed me a mental picture of another cluster of Lilys nearby.

No, thank you. I formed a picture of Kerrick in my mind. *Seen him?*

A flood of images hit me. Kerrick running through the woods, hunting, walking with Belen, Flea, and the monkeys, holding me in his lap, blending into the woods, using his magic. They tumbled one right after the other, threatening to drown me.

Stop, please! I concentrated on how he'd looked that night without his shirt, feeling sick. *Did he come here?*

He stopped. Sorrow flowed.

Stopped where? If I could just find his body, I might—

Gone into the green.

Where?

A vision of the entire forest filled my mind. It was empty. However, I refused to believe it. The barbs pulled away and the Death Lily set me on the ground. I huddled there in utter misery for a moment, then gathered every bit of strength I had left.

I still had no proof. *Gone* in Death Lily speak could mean he left the forest or was in a cave. It didn't have to mean he... No. Not going to go there. Not yet.

Quain and Loren hovered as close as they dared, their expressions hopeful.

"He didn't come here," I said, standing.

I glanced away. Bad enough to feel the grief burning inside me, I didn't need to witness that same pain reflected in my friends' eyes.

"What now?" Quain asked in a quiet voice.

"We go back to the infirmary cave. I've patients to check on."

"And Kerrick?" Loren touched my shoulder.

"We keep searching."

Taking another route back, we reached the cave after sunset. Ryne had arrived. He sat by the fire intently listening to Flea and Odd. I exchanged a glance with the monkeys.

"Did you send a messenger?" I asked Loren.

"Kerrick did when we returned from our...uh, encounter with Tohon and the others. Thought Ryne should know what happened, especially about Cellina's takeover."

It made sense. Prince Ryne led our ragtag army. He had the military savvy and strategic acumen to counter Tohon. However, he was the last person I wanted to see right now. His genius tactics had caused me quite a bit of pain and suffering over the past few months.

Before Ryne noticed me, I sent the monkeys over to the fire. "Talk to him."

"What about you?" Quain asked.

"I need to check on my patients. It's been—" my sluggish thoughts refused to add the hours "—too long."

Concentrating on the injured soldiers, I moved from cot to cot, talking to the men and women. No new casualties had arrived since yesterday. The caregivers had done a fine job of keeping everyone comfortable and the bandages had all been changed. I consulted with the head caregiver, Ginger. Her capable and no-nonsense attitude was perfect for this type of work.

The floor wobbled under my feet, and I stumbled. I stared at the ground, trying and failing to understand how it had moved. Then the room spun. Ah. Exhaustion had finally caught up to me. "Wake me if you need me," I said to Ginger.

Keeping to the shadows, I slipped into my cavern. Still empty. The guys had moved out the night before last to give Kerrick and me privacy. It was just as well. I didn't want company. Before lying down, I pulled Kerrick's shirt from my knapsack. I pressed it to my face and breathed in his unmistakable scent—spring sunshine and living green.

Tears pushed and my nose filled, but I wouldn't cry. Not yet. Not until I had proof. I fell asleep clutching his shirt tight.

* * *

“Avry.” A voice shattered my dream.

With effort, I opened one eye. Ryne knelt next to me.

“Go away,” I mumbled, rolling over.

“Avry, we need to talk.”

“I don’t want to talk to you. Go away.”

“You can’t avoid me.”

True. I sighed. “We’ll chat in the morning, before the search parties go out. Okay?”

“I’ve called off the search.”

I sat up, turning. “What? Why?” Fury blew away the sleep fog.

He reached for my hand, but I jerked back. Ryne settled back on his heels. “He’s gone, Avry.”

“No. You’re wrong.”

“I wish I was, really I do.” Ryne pushed a lock of his brown hair from his tired hazel eyes. Worry lines creased his face and he appeared much older than twenty-seven—the same age as Kerrick. “Remember that book on magicians I have?”

“Couldn’t forget that.” I didn’t bother softening my sarcasm. His school textbook on magicians and their powers had led to Ryne leaving me behind to be caught in Tohon’s nasty trap. I shuddered at the memory.

He ignored my tone. “It reports that forest mages go into the woods when they die. And their bodies disappear.”

“No. Not buying it. What if they’re in a city?”

“Avry, it fits. You know it. Death Lily toxin is lethal. He died in the woods and the living green reclaimed its gift to him.”

“No.”

“Then why can’t we find his body? And if he didn’t die, why isn’t he here? You know Kerrick, he would never just leave you.”

“No. No. No. No!” I screamed the last one. And with that one word, all the emotions I’d been suppressing burst from my core. I collapsed as great gasping sobs pounded my body.