

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

Champion of the Goddess

Book Two of The Tainted Forest

by John Dylena

Wyrnwood Publishing and Editing

Copyright © 2021 by John Dylena

a **Pink Skirt Press** story

All rights reserved.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Disclaimer:

This story contains adult material and was not suitable for readers under the age of 18. It also contains strong language and sexual situations. Most are of erotic nature and contain graphic and detailed descriptions of sex and/or masturbation.

If you, the reader, are of legal age (18+) and are fine with the previously mentioned themed story, then continue.

Enjoy.

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

Chapter 12: *The Big Picture*

Alcohol flowed like a river as the citizens of the lakeside town of Braedon were getting very, very drunk. They had an exceptionally good reason to celebrate; for over a year, Jororyn—a powerful incubus—had held their town hostage, along with his demonic minions. Trade had slowed to a near-standstill, and many of the locals who could leave had. Those who remained had nowhere else to turn.

Then a strange woman had shown up. She'd bought some high-quality armor, gone out into the woods, and wasn't heard from for several days.

Rumors circulated that she'd come back to town naked and possessed, and that she'd started an orgy in the tavern where the menfolk were. Those who claimed to have been there during this carnal incident remembered very little. What they all could agree upon was that there was a woman at the center of it all, though they could not reach a consensus as to who she was or what she'd looked like.

The citizens of Braedon were celebrating tonight because that same strange woman had, in fact, returned covered in demon blood and had claimed the incubus was dead. Once again, the townspeople were free.

Only the heroine known as Laylana wasn't down in the tavern getting shitfaced with the rest of the townsfolk. She was upstairs in one of the inn's rooms, and she wasn't alone.

"Is that really necessary?" Saeryia folded her arms and scowled as Laylana causally leveled her sword at the succubus. Saeryia shifted forms, her human visage disappearing as if it was a piece of flash paper. "I even brought you some gifts."

Laylana squinted. "It's been a really shitty couple of days. I was raped by that cocksucking demon Jororyn, who then infected me and turned me into some sort of sex-crazed zombie. After sexually satisfying maybe all of the men in this town at once, I wandered back into the forest looking for even more sex!"

Saeryia cocked an eyebrow. Laylana paced back and forth, waving her sword in the air as she vented like some recently rejected teenager.

"Then by some fucking miracle, I found a lake. I then waded into the lake and promptly vomited up gallons of cum, thanks to the bitter-cold water. As if that wasn't enough, I sank deeper into the cold, black waters and had a crazy fucking vision where a glowing woman was telling me to fight the corruption and shit. Then I woke up on the shore, naked, shivering, but cured of whatever it was that fucker pumped me full of."

Saeryia raised her hands defensively as Laylana pointed her sword at her again. "Hey now, that wasn't me. But I am curious about this vision of yours."

Laylana lowered her sword. "It was a woman; she was floating above me, all mystical and shit. I think it was the princess."

"What did she look like?"

"Long blonde hair, wore this necklace."

Saeryia's eyes widened. "That was no ordinary woman. You were visited by the goddess herself!"

"Who?"

The succubus rubbed her face with her hands. "Were you born yesterday?"

Laylana looked away sheepishly and rubbed her neck.

Saeryia sighed and flicked her wrist. A chair moved across the room, stopping next to Laylana. The succubus gestured for her to sit, and as she did, stood. Saeryia closed her eyes, took a deep, centering breath, and began.

"Her name is Myrithania, and she was this world's most powerful deity. She stood for all that was good and just, and was the most beautiful woman anyone could ever lay their eyes on. I say was because twelve years ago, she was imprisoned. The Demon King—a real charmer by the name of Kal-Thegra—enlisted the help of the cultists from the Laekerah Desert and somehow managed to imprison the goddess in a mortal body. Kal-Thegra then usurped the throne of Trison, killed the king, and so on and so forth. The princess' whereabouts are unknown, but Kal-Thegra claims she died the same day as her father. For all we know, she really could be dead now, as no one has seen her since."

Now it was Saeryia's turn to pace about the bedroom. The muffled sounds from the tavern below reached a crescendo as the locals began to sing in chorus. She rolled her eyes and continued.

"Rumor has it that before the spell was finished and Myrithania was made human, she bound her essence to a necklace and three other items, which were placed in her shines throughout the land. That whoever manages to gather the items will be able to slay the Kal-Thegra and free the goddess from her prison. The princess was

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

supposedly on her way into the old forest to find the necklace when she went missing.”

The succubus let out an exhausted sigh and sat down on Laylana’s bed. “Seems the rumors were true after all.” She looked over at Laylana. “Who are you really? Are you some orphan who grew up under a rock?”

Laylana looked away. “Yes, I uh... lived in the forest with my family... isolated from the outside world.”

Saeryia stood and sauntered toward Laylana, eyes narrowed. “No, it’s something different. I saw something back when we were together. Glimpses of a world I didn’t recognize.”

“That’s enough.” Laylana raised her sword, the tip a few inches from the succubus’ throat.

Saeryia put a finger on the top of the sword and gently pushed it aside. “Now, now, there’s no need for that. I come in peace. I only want to give you information.” She winked. “Unless you want something... more?”

“Just the information is fine.”

Saeryia frowned.

“Speaking of which, why are you telling me all this?”

The succubus shrugged. “Well, we’re a very fickle bunch; loyalty isn’t really a thing among my species. If you’re strong, you get followers. Show weakness, those followers leave, or worse: mutiny. I’ve told you before I have no desire for any of that, but I’d find it very amusing to see Kal-Thegra ripped from the throne. Sure, his reign was fun in the beginning, but it’s grown stale. Plus there’s been a steady rise in so-called demonslayers, and I do hate hiding in the shadows like some kind of rat.”

“If that was the case, why did you even say here? I was told a lot of the townsfolk did leave.”

Saeryia returned to Laylana’s bed and sprawled out, looking up at the ceiling. “It was only a year. My kind has long lifespans. A year to us is like a week to humans. Leaving would’ve meant having to reestablish myself somewhere new. Here, people don’t look twice. They just think I’m a simple tailor—well, except for a couple of the townsfolk. They know who I really am, but they’re good little pets.” She sat up and smiled at Laylana. “Just like you.”

Laylana rolled her eyes.

“Oh, come on, you know you enjoyed it.” The succubus patted the bed. “How about we celebrate your victory?”

“No, I’ve had enough demon sex for one lifetime. I’m leaving in the morning.”

Saeryia pouted. “But why? Forget about that silly quest of yours. I’ve been looking for an apprentice. The position comes with some really nice benefits.”

“Thank you for the clothes, but I’m sure of my decision. I want to go home, and if this silly quest is my ticket out of here, then I’ll do what I must.” Laylana walked over to her door and grabbed the knob. “Thank you for the information, but now I must ask you to leave. I’m tired, and I have a long journey ahead of me.”

Saeryia sighed as she climbed off the bed. She shifted back into her human form as she walked toward Laylana and the door to her room. Laylana opened it and motioned for her to leave.

“You know, you were my favorite,” Saeryia said as she placed her hand on Laylana’s cheek. “If you’re ever in town, do say hi, won’t you? I promise not to enslave you.”

“Sure. Goodnight.”

Saeryia blew her a kiss as she walked out the door. Laylana closed and locked it behind her, then pressed her ear to its surface. When she couldn’t hear the succubus’ footsteps, she walked over to the large wooden trunk on the ground and slid it in front of the door.

“That ought to guarantee me some privacy,” she said to herself as she wiped her hands on her chest. She looked over at the bed. “Time to finally get some real sleep.”

She walked over and fell onto it. She didn’t even bother changing her clothes. She just wanted to sleep. Then the smell crept into her nose and she let out a sigh.

Her bed smelled like sex. More specifically, it smelled like a certain succubus who’d just walked out the door. The smell triggered memories within Laylana’s mind, memories of when she was on her knees at the demoness’ feet.

Unlike her time with the incubus Jororyn, she had somewhat enjoyed what the succubus had done to her. It had taken a lot of self-control to say no to Saeryia when she’d offered. Laylana wanted it, and Saeryia knew that. The succubus could’ve easily pressed the issue or used her magic. She could’ve had Laylana on her knees, tongue wagging, begging like a dog with a snap of her finger. But she hadn’t used her power to influence her. She wanted Laylana to want it of her own accord.

Laylana rolled over on the bed and her mind drifted. She thought about what Saeryia said, about giving up on the quest and just starting a new life here. She thought about the world she came from and her life there; her family and friends, her job, her apartment... her male body. Would she even want to go back? Sure, there were no

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

demons and tentacle monsters, and who knows what else back on Earth. But there was also no magic, no sense of wonder and exploration. Here in this world—Vaelshore, someone had called it—she didn't have to worry about commuting to work, living paycheck to paycheck, paying taxes, or constantly hearing about doom and gloom on the news.

But this world wasn't her world. She didn't belong here. She was an outsider, brought here against her will and thrust into a situation she didn't want to deal with. Her fingers found the necklace, and she held it in her hands as she closed her eyes.

I'll save you from your imprisonment, then we'll see about going home.

A warm pulse emanated from the necklace and Laylana fell asleep.

J. Dylana - Champion of the Goddess

Chapter 13: *Oncoming Storm*

Laylana slept a deep, dreamless sleep until a cold breeze woke her in the morning. She sat up, rubbed her eyes, and yawned loudly, then wrapped her arms around her as she shivered.

"Fuck, did I forget to close the window? Holy shit, it's cold."

She walked over to the window and looked out. The sun had already risen, and the town was bustling. The sky was full of clouds and the air felt wet. It wasn't the best weather to travel in, but she had no other choice; the goddess had chosen her. If she wanted to go home, she had to save the world.

"But first, I need to downsize. There's no way I'm going to keep lugging that chest around."

She threw her cloak over herself and went downstairs. Men were still fast asleep on the tables and Yura was nowhere to be seen. She left the tavern and walked down the main street, looking for a certain store. The tannery was easy to find, as it was indicated by a pelt that hung on the face of the building.

"Name's Mit and this is my tannery. How can I help ya, lass?"

The man's voice was deeper than she'd expected coming from someone with his build. He was tall and skinny, with long red hair and some red scruff on his face. He wore a stained and torn leather apron, and around his waist was a belt that held a variety of tools and knives.

"I'm looking for something... specific. Do you have any backpacks?"

He scratched his chin for a moment and nodded. "Aye. How big?"

Laylana smirked. "What's the biggest you've got?"

He motioned for her to follow, and she looked around at the goods he had as he led her around his tannery—belts of all shapes and sizes, boots, armor, and hides. She spotted a stack of pelts and some fur rugs. She breathed in deep the smell of leather and smiled.

"Here we are." He motioned to packs of various sizes hanging on the wall. "This is what I've got already made. I can do a custom-sized one for ye, but you'd have to wait for that."

Mit had for sale some messenger bags and purses, but Laylana had her eyes set on the pack in front of her. It was tall, shaped just like the packs that hikers wore. It looked like it would hold quite a lot. She could probably fit in it herself. It also had smaller pouches on the sides and back.

"Are they waterproof?"

"Aye, that they are." He followed her gaze to the large pack on the wall and smiled. "That one's a good one. You planning on traveling, lass?"

Laylana nodded and he took it down off the wall.

"Enough space in here for supplies that'll last ya months. Not cheap, though. A gold piece, that one is. Those over there are smaller, but cheaper."

"I'll take it. Do you have any belts with pouches?"

Mit laughed and slapped Laylana on the back. "That I do, lass!"

He handed her the pack and she put it on. It fit perfectly, the bottom of the pack covering her butt completely. He walked over to a table and picked up a plain belt. She wrapped it around her waist.

"Too big. Here, try this one." They exchanged belts and the new one fit better. Mit pointed to a basket. "Pouches are in there. They come in three sizes: small, regular, and large. If you've got a weapon, I've got holders and sheaths."

Laylana grabbed a variety of the pouches and slid them onto her new belt. The sword she had came with a sheath that she could fit on there, so she didn't need one. What she did need was a new cloak, one that would keep her dry and warm.

"Got any fur cloaks?"

"Aye. Good idea, what with what looks like a storm rolling in. Do you have a color preference? I've got black, gray, and brown."

"Let's do black."

Mit nodded and walked over to a table where a pile of fur cloaks were stacked high. He dug around through it and pulled out several that ended up not being the right size. He eventually found one, and Laylana tried it on. It was heavier than she'd thought it would be, but it wouldn't be a problem. She needed to stay warm and dry.

"Anything else?"

"No, that's all I need. How much for all this?"

He eyed her, and after several moments of mental math, said, "A gold and eighty silver pieces." She pulled

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

out her coin purse, retrieved two gold pieces, and handed them to him. "Thank you kindly, lass. Best travels to you."

She bowed her head and left the store.

She returned to the inn. There were fewer men asleep on the tables and still no sign of Yura, which was fine, because she wanted to avoid him until she left his inn for good. She returned to her room and opened up the trunk.

"Time to pack."

She upended the wooden chest and spread out all her belongings onto the floor of her room, not realizing until it was too late that the floors of such inns were rarely cleaned, if ever. Not just that, but laundromats didn't exist here, so if she wanted to clean her clothes, she would have to find a river and scrub them the old-fashioned way.

Even after all her shopping, she'd barely made a dent in the money she had on her. She still had several pouches full of gold coins, not to mention the bag of precious stones and all the ornate jewelry. She put those in the very bottom of the large backpack and sorted out the clothes.

Out of the goodness of her black, demonic heart, Saeryia had gifted Laylana several sets of plain clothes she could comfortably wear under her armor. The succubus had also made her a couple pairs of sturdy traveling boots, as well as a heeled pair that went up to her thighs. She recognized the leather handiwork and realized that Mit might be one the humans Saeryia had mentioned being one of her "pets." He'd seemed normal during their short interaction, and hadn't given her the impression that he was enslaved or being mind-controlled.

Maybe she was being honest. The idea of Saeryia being a succubus with a heart of gold made Laylana laugh. She actually considered packing the slave outfit the succubus had her wear, but it was covered in demon's blood, so Laylana decided it was best to burn the garments.

Everything she had in the trunk fit in the backpack, and she added some of the tools, her sword, and some "traveling coin" to the pouches on her new belt. She also slid her dagger into the back.

The only thing she had left to pack were the fancy dresses. She held them up in front of her and inspected them.

"Saeryia would probably like these," she said. She folded the dresses carefully and placed them on the top. Then she closed the backpack and slipped it on. It was heavy, but it was tolerable. So this is what it felt like to go backpacking, she thought. She looked around the room, took a deep breath, and left.

Downstairs she found Yura mopping the floor. Only one guy was asleep now. The rest were half-awake, eating some soup.

"What?" His tone was as cold as the wind outside.

Laylana handed him her room key. "There's a wooden chest in there. I don't need it where I'm going, so it's all yours. Thank you for letting me stay."

He took the key, looked her up and down once, and then nodded slightly. He turned his back to her and returned to mopping. Laylana turned and headed for the door.

"Wait," he called out to her. She turned just in time to see a loaf of bread flying her way.

"Thank you," she said upon catching it.

He nodded once, then got back to mopping. Laylana left the tavern floor as quickly as she could, the memories which lingered there still unfortunately fresh in her mind.

The wind had picked up, but the sky didn't look any more menacing. She could see storm clouds far off, but only gray clouds above her. She passed by Saeryia's shop, as she wanted to check on her armor. Aebel frowned when he saw her approach and told her to give him just a little more time, as it was almost finished.

"Oh? Did you reconsider?" Saeryia said when Laylana entered. Then she saw the giant backpack and frowned. "I guess not."

"I have something for you," Laylana said. She took her backpack off as Saeryia closed the doors to her shop.

"A present? For me?"

"I found these out in the forest before I came here." Laylana opened up her backpack and held up one of the fancy dresses. "I figured you would like them, as I don't see myself wearing anything like this."

Saeryia's eyes went wide. "Where... Where did you find these?"

"I found a chest out in the forest. Had a couple dresses like these, plus other stuff. Why?"

"Quickly, put those away, I cannot accept them." Saeryia took the dresses and quickly, but expertly, folded them and returned them to Laylana's backpack.

"What's wrong?"

"Those dresses... they belonged to Princess Kaetha."

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

Laylana's face turned pale. "Wait really? No, that can't be."

"Definitely. So it seems the princess made it into the forest after all, but the fact that you found her chest doesn't bode well." They both went quiet, and the silence lingered until Saeryia said, "Oh, I'm glad you came by. I was going to try to find you because I wanted to give you a parting gift—well, two gifts."

"Two gifts?"

"Yes, wait here. I just finished them not too long ago." Laylana watched as Saeryia walked over to her workstation and grabbed a wrapped package. She handed it to Laylana. "Open it."

Laylana couldn't help but laugh when she opened the package. "I should've known," she said as she inspected the clothes. It was another version of the slave outfit: long gloves, a collared crop top, and a miniskirt.

"I changed up the feet of the stockings. I built a high heel into them."

"I'm not sure if I'll ever wear this, but thank you? I guess?"

"Well, hopefully if we see each other again, you can wear it for me." The succubus winked. "Here is your other present."

It wasn't wrapped. Saeryia grabbed Laylana's hand and placed it on her palm. It took a moment for Laylana to register what it was, and when she did, she dropped it like it was a venomous snake. Laylana wished it was a snake, because Saeryia's second gift was a demon cock dildo—one that looked exactly like the cock Saeryia had grown to tease Laylana.

"Wherever it is you're from, I'm sure that's not how you're supposed to react when someone gives you a gift," Saeryia said as she bent down and picked up the dildo.

"No one has ever gifted me a demonic dick before," Laylana replied, taking a half-step back, face twisted into a grimace.

Saeryia extended her hand, and Laylana hesitated for a moment before gingerly taking the "gift" from her.

"It's not cursed or anything," she laughed. "You don't have to hold it like it'll give you the plague. It's a gift from me to you. If you ever find yourself lonely, use it and think of me."

"Thanks?" Laylana said, trying to force her lips to smile. She tucked it into her backpack.

As she straightened up, Saeryia wrapped her arms around her, and before she could even blink, the succubus placed her lips on hers. Laylana protested for a moment, but she succumbed and kissed the succubus back. Her lips tasted sweet and their tongues danced.

The succubus pulled away and Laylana leaned forward to keep the kiss going. She opened her eyes and caught herself before she fell forward. Saeryia laughed as Laylana acted like nothing just happened.

"Go on now, beautiful Laylana. Be off on your journey, my dear sweet pet. I hope to see you again soon."

Laylana tried to hide the deepening red on her cheeks as she shouldered her backpack and made her way out the door. She looked back at the building only once as she made her way to the blacksmith. This time, Aebel was waiting for her.

"I replaced the leather straps and buffed and polished the metal as best as I could," he said as she equipped the armor. "You're heading off, I take it?"

"Yes, I'm actually going to search for the missing princess."

"Ah, I see. Well, her trail has been cold for twelve years now. Everyone believes she's truly dead—goddess rest her soul—but if you're still going to search for her, take a boat across the lake to Cralo. She was last seen there. But again, it's been over a decade. Just head down to the dock and ask after Gryn. He'll ferry you across."

"How long does it take to cross the lake?"

"Oh, half a day. It's a big lake. Though you best be hurrying if you want to cross before the storm hits."

Laylana looked up at the sky. The clouds had darkened some, and far off she could see the familiar rain curtain.

"Cralo is a town much bigger than ours. Many inns there—with some very good ale."

"Thanks for the information, but I'd best be off."

"Good luck!" Aebel shouted to her as she practically ran off toward the dock.

It didn't take long for her to find Gryn. He was the epitome of a crusty old sailor. His skin was as tough as leather, his hair was messy and gray, and he reeked of fish. He was the only one still on the docks. Everyone else had their boats tied down and secured, but he was sitting atop his cabin, legs propped up and smoking a pipe.

"Are you Gryn?" Laylana called up to him.

"Aye, what do you want, lass?"

"I was told you could take me across the lake."

He stood and jumped down from his perch. "That I can. You're not afraid of a rough ride, are ye? You won't be pukin' in my boat, will ye?"

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

“No sir.”

There was truth to her statement. Laylana had been on boats several times in her life, including a weekend fishing trip of the coast of Baja California. She never got seasick, and the waves never bothered her.

“No need for ‘sir’ here, lass. Just call me Captain. Passage across will cost ya fifty silvers.”

She tossed him a gold coin. He smiled as he pocketed it.

“Welcome aboard.”

Laylana sat on what looked like a bench and watched as Gryn prepped his boat for launch, humming a tune as he did. A couple minutes later, they were drifting away from the dock. She said a silent farewell to the town of Braedon and turned her gaze forward.

The wind shifted and the first drops of rain pelted her face. She pulled her hood over her head and kept her eye on the boat captain. He was unfazed by the worsening weather, even when a bolt of lightning lit up the sky before them.

Chapter 14:
Detour

Aebel wasn't kidding; Lake Cralo was much bigger than Laylana had realized. Gryn had plenty of larger-than-life stories to tell her as they crossed the deep-blue waters. The worsening storm didn't bother him in the slightest. The lake was more like a wide river. It snaked through the forest instead of just being a big, round pool of water with shoreline visible from every side.

It would've been a pleasant trip, if it weren't for the heavy rain, the strong winds, and the ten-foot swells. Laylana would've been knocked off the boat if it hadn't been for her magically enhanced strength. She'd gripped the railing so hard it was starting to splinter.

There was a loud crack!, and through the cacophony of the howling wind, the thunder, and the rain, she heard the creaking of wood. Gryn looked down at her as she looked up at him. They both knew what was about to happen, and before Gryn could shout his warning, the boat crested a wave, and the front half kept going while the back half broke away, upending Laylana's world.

She opened her eyes to find herself sinking. She swam with all her might back toward the surface of the lake, illuminated by back-to-back forks of lightning. Her lungs greedily sucked in the air when she broke through and grabbed hold of the nearest piece of flotsam she could find. Luckily in the brief moment between the boat breaking and getting flipped over, she'd had the presence of mind to don her backpack.

All around her were broken pieces of ship and abandoned cargo. Gryn was nowhere to be seen. She gripped the debris tighter as a wave filled her vision. Knowing what was coming, she took a deep breath just before it crashed on top of her and cast her back into the dark depths of the lake.

Laylana came to moments later as the surf pushed her toward the trees. She still managed to grip the wood keeping her afloat, and she could do nothing more than maintain that grip as the wind and the waves buffeted her.

The waters calmed as the current pushed her through the treeline. Laylana had expected to come upon some kind of shore or beach, but all she could see in what little light that made it through the storm clouds were trees. The rain still fell, but the wind and storm surge had weakened significantly. In fact, the surface of the water was incredibly still, except where disturbed by the rain and her splashing. The smell gave away her location, and Laylana made a mental note to keep her head above the surface.

The forest had become a swamp, and it was eerily quiet.

Not long after she floated between the trees did her feet drag against the ground. She kept the piece of wood in front of her as she stomped her way farther into the swamp. She felt the ground rise, and soon enough she was trudging through knee-deep swamp water. The rain had also stopped, and the air grew warm and heavy.

By the time she found a patch of dry ground, Laylana was no longer wet from the rain, but soaked through with sweat. She fell to her knees and almost kissed the patch of sandy dirt the size of a gas station convenience store. With an exaggerated sigh of relief, she pulled her waterlogged boots off and let her feet air out. Then she took off her backpack and stretched.

The canopy above her was thin enough for her to see that it was well past noon, and she decided it would be best to make camp here and give her belongings a chance to dry out. She'd spotted no signs of life during her trek from the lake to this little island in the swamp besides the occasional bird and plenty of flying insects. She just hoped there wouldn't be any snakes or alligators.

That's the last fucking thing I need right now, she thought as she fondled the hilt of her sword. Some giant fucking snake or whatever.

"Come and get me, you ugly motherfucker!" Laylana shouted to nothing as she pulled her sword out. Her voice didn't even echo; it just faded away and she was answered by deafening silence.

She turned and started hacking away at the trees around her and gathered what dry wood she could find. The sky was a fiery orange-red by the time she got a fire going. She took out the spool of thread she'd bought from Saeryia and made a clothesline between two trees. Then she dumped out the contents of her bag and threw the clothes over.

"I hope the lake water didn't ruin this dress," she muttered as she fingered the regal dress. She smirked when she imagined herself wearing such a fancy dress at a fancy party.

With all her clothes hung up to dry, she spread her cloak out onto the ground, fur side up, to dry as well. Then she stripped off of her armor and stretched out her limbs. A thought crossed her mind that made her grin. Then it made her blush. She surveyed the land around her. There were no signs of anything, and the only sounds were some distant birds and the crackling of the fire.

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

“Well, these are wet,” she mused aloud, “and I should check for leeches.”

Before she could change her mind, she stripped off her shirt and pants and stood completely naked on the island. She walked over toward the edge and wrung her clothes out. Then she nervously power-walked back to the fire and held her shirt up next to it, willing it to dry as quickly as possible.

“Knowing my luck, a ship full of pirates will float by, see me naked, and have a grand old time.” She frowned. “Rum sounds really good right about now.”

The shirt wasn’t completely dry, but it was dry enough. She kept the pants off just a little bit longer, but they too weren’t fully dry when she put them back on. She gathered some small stones and made an arrow pointing in the direction she’d come from. After gathering a large pile of wood, she sat down next to the fire, and for the first time since she’d woken up that morning, she relaxed.

Her stomach rumbled, and she unwrapped a cut of salted pork. The tight leather bundle had kept the meat dry, and using her knife, she cut the meat into small strips and skewered them. Then she held the two strips over the fire and the smell of cooked meat filled her nose.

The swamp was shrouded in mist when she woke the next morning. Her fire had long since died and she stretched and yawned as she sat up on her fur blanket. Her clothes had all dried off, and one by one she took them off the makeshift line, folded them up, and placed them back into her backpack.

She equipped her armor and sword and left her camp to scout the area. Gryn had told her that the lake was in the far end of the forest, and that the last bit of the lake was out of the forest. She figured that if she hiked perpendicular to the direction she came, she would find her way out. She also decided to hike in one direction, and if she came upon nothing, she’d turn back around and head back in the opposite direction.

Laylana took a deep breath and stepped off the island.

The water came up to her knees quickly, and at some points she was waddling waist-deep, sword held above her. Not long after losing sight of her camp did she realize something was amiss, and it wasn’t until she felt déjà vu that it was too late.

Ripples appeared on the surface in front of her, and by the time she unsheathed her sword, the tentacle was wrapped around her ankle. It lifted her off her feet while another secured her hand before she could chop the limb off.

“Oh no, no, no, no!” she shouted as she tried to pull away.

A monstrous, octopus-like head surfaced, and Laylana grimaced as she dangled upside-down. She reached for the sword with her other hand, but the monster swung her into a nearby tree, knocking her blade free where it landed in an exposed root.

Laylana’s head throbbed and her vision blurred, but she still struggled. The beast smashed her against the tree once more, this time breaking the bark, and her world went black.

She came to sometime later, held aloft, arms and legs spread. She opened her mouth to shout, but another slippery appendage wrapped around her neck, the tip slipping into her mouth.

Fuck! No, no, no!

The tentacle had a salty, bitter taste. She bit down into the beast’s flesh, and it responded by pumping liquid down her throat. She gagged, but only for moment as her entire body went lip and her throat went numb. Laylana couldn’t even wiggle her fingers.

There was a sound of fabric tearing, and she grunted as she felt a tentacle slide into her pussy. This is not going to end well, she thought as it slid deeper and deeper.

She tried to scream and shout in pain as the intruder thickened itself to the size of her forearm. Then she felt another gush of liquid slide down her throat, and all the pain vanished. Her eyes glazed over as the chemical high flooded her mind. Her drugged-out brain recalled what felt like a very distant memory of when she’d had her wisdom teeth removed and was prescribed very strong painkillers.

Her head tilted back, and her eyes looked up at the sky above her as the tentacle beast pumped her full of its seed. She could feel her insides expanding, but there was no pain. She felt like a water balloon getting filled up and wondered if she’d burst. Then the tentacle crawled back out of her mouth.

“Oh... oh fuck...” she moaned quietly.

The beast shifted her body and her head titled forward. Her belly had swollen to well beyond nine months pregnant, as if she was carrying octuplets. She giggled drunkenly, so drugged out of her mind she couldn’t react properly.

She felt no pleasure. The beast didn’t massage her breasts or rub her clit. It didn’t even bother penetrating her asshole. Laylana watched, stoned beyond comprehension, as the tentacle beast gently placed her up against a large tree, high above the ground. Another tentacle appeared above her, its end shaped like a flower.

“Awww... so pretty...”

It sprayed her with a sticky green substance that covered her head to toe until she was securely stuck to the tree. It covered her eyes, leaving her engorged belly and pussy still stuffed full of tentacle exposed.

It pulled out eventually. As to how long it was pumping her full of its cum, she didn't know; she had lost all sense of time. The beast's cum oozed out of her before it was reduced to a trickle. Then a different tentacle filled her mouth and slid down her throat. It filled her stomach with something; she was already impossibly full, and now was even more so. It retracted, and she burped.

“What... What's going on?” She heard the beast slink away into the mist. “Hey... Heeeeyyyy wait...”

A few moments later she was all alone. The swamp around her had grown deadly silent. Not even the wind stirred.

Laylana wasn't sure how long she was stuck up there. The high went on for hours and hours, lasting past sunset, until finally she dozed off.

It was the stirring of something inside her that finally woke her up. She wasn't sure how long she had been asleep; it felt like days. If she hadn't been awake already, the shooting pain would've done the trick.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” she screamed. She heard the flapping of birds. She didn't realize she could scream that loud.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” There was definitely something alive inside of her. She had seen Alien and its sequels—she knew what was coming. “Please don't fucking burst out of my stomach! I didn't come all this way to die like this!”

Whatever it was that she was about to give birth to must've sensed her pain, as once again, her mind and body were doused with an immensely powerful painkiller. As potent as it was, there was still pain. She had seen childbirth on countless TV shows and movies, even some video games. They always had the same things: the woman pushing, the woman breathing, and there being pain... lots and lots of pain.

She felt her insides stretch. She felt her pussy stretch. She felt the thing squirming around inside of her, its many serpentine limbs pressing on her insides. She grunted as she started to push. There was no way she was going to come out of this alive. The thing would rip her in half.

“Get... the fuck... out of me... already!”

Small tentacles about the width of her fingers poked out of her vagina. They tickled her exposed flesh and rubbed her clit. Pleasure mixed with pain as her vaginal opening continued to spread. Her heart pounded and sweat covered her body. She could feel it underneath the web-like fabric that bound her to the tree like a spider's prey.

More tentacles appeared, reaching down to her inner thighs—more and more with each passing second, spreading her wider and wider.

Laylana screamed and grunted once more as she put all her effort into expelling this cursed spawn. “Fuuuuuuuuuuck!” she groaned as the second half of the beast slid out of her in one long, slick movement until she had fully given birth. She heard it splash into the water below a second later.

She felt very, very empty. Hollow, as if filled with air. Fluid flowed out of her, and she hoped and prayed it wasn't blood. Exhausted, she gasped for air. She heard sloshing as the newborn tentacle beast scurried off into the marsh.

After some time, her body calmed down and returned to normal. She still felt very bloated, and she wondered if her body would ever return to normal. Women's bodies mostly recovered after childbirth, but what she'd given birth to was bigger than any child ever born.

But none of that mattered at the moment. She was still bound to the tree, unable to do anything. She couldn't see, couldn't even move her head. She heard birds chirping. Then the wind started to blow and a clap of thunder rolled across the swamp. She felt the rain fall on her face.

Well, now what?

The rain fell on her for quite some time. Then she heard a crack! and her bonds loosened a tiny bit. She squirmed, and using all her strength, she managed to free one of her arms from the hardened cocoon. The rest of the shell started to crack, and she began to break it off in chunks.

She broke off one too many pieces and toppled forward into the swamp water below. Fortunately for her it was more than waist-deep, and upon splashing down, she got to her feet and went straight for her sword. She pulled it out of the exposed root and moved to higher ground. Laylana stood poised, ready to fight, sword in hand, in case the monster wanted to go and try to get her pregnant again.

Only one tentacle spawn. Any more and you'll have to pay child support.

Nothing happened. The only noise was her heavy breathing and the rain falling around her, along with the occasional clap of thunder. After a couple tense minutes, she let out a heavy sigh and fell to her knees, breathless,

exhausted.

Then she started to cry, and her tears turned into sobs.

When she had first come to this world, she'd thought it was awesome. She was in a world of fantasy, and maybe she was the hero.

She was also a man who went by Luke.

Not long after her arrival, she'd gotten lost in the woods and was raped by a vine monster. She'd found a necklace that granted her strength and speed, but turned her into a woman. She was raped again by a pair of imps, sexually dominated and mind-controlled by a succubus, and then raped a third time by an incubus. The demon had turned her into a sexual thrall, and while under the influence of his corruption, she'd initiated a one-woman orgy in the town she was trying to save.

After being miraculously cured and killing the demon, she'd left town to find the missing princess and save the goddess so she could get the fuck out of here.

Then, wouldn't you know it, she got shipwrecked in a swamp, only to get raped for a fourth time. This time she was actually impregnated and subsequently gave birth to the beast's spawn. She had played her fair share of Dungeons & Dragons back on Earth. She had rolled her fair share of critical failures, but never before has she had this many back-to-back. Not only that, but they were getting worse.

What's next? Caught by a giant spider? Ingested by a plant-beast and transformed? Hypnotized by a giant snake? Enslaved by a minotaur?

"Fuck that shit. Next thing that tries to rape me, I'll fucking cut its cock off like I did that cunt Jororyn." She gathered her strength and stood and inspected her body.

Her stomach was still bloated, but it was more of a "too many helpings of Thanksgiving dinner" than a pregnant stomach. Her vagina was loose, gaping a little, but surprisingly no blood. "I heard it takes weeks for it to heal," she said to herself, fingers gently probing her exposed flesh.

She sighed and looked around. She dropped her shoulders and frowned. "I have no fucking clue where I am."

Chapter 15:
Intruder

By some miracle, she found her camp. Fortunately she had packed up all her clothes, so they remained dry in her backpack. Her campsite was undisturbed, except for a couple birds pecking away at the dirt. It stopped raining shortly after she arrived, and she used the opportunity to take off her torn pants.

“What the...?” Laylana bent forward and inspected her vagina. It was no longer gaping; in fact, it looked like it had never even gone through the hell that was childbirth. She made a mental note to never give a woman grief about that. Then again, she not only had to go through the birthing process, but she also gave birth to something bigger than a human child. Still, nothing she should ever bring up in a conversation, even in this godforsaken world. Changed and ready to go, she said goodbye to her little island and trudged off in a different direction.

Not long after departing, the ground and air dried out and the swamp turned back into forest. The ground was also gently rising, and after a couple of hours, her ears picked up the rumbling of a river. It grew louder and louder, and the forest grew denser and denser as she neared. She squeezed through a thicket and her eyes widened.

The source of the rumbling wasn't a river, but a waterfall.

“No fucking way,” she whispered to herself as she took in the scene. In front of her was a small, bean-shaped lake about a hundred feet long. A wall of trees enclosed the lake right up to the ridge that bore the waterfall.

Laylana felt like she'd walked into a dream.

The water was a bright, crystal blue, and bordering the small lake was a thin stretch of grass where wildflowers of all colors grew. Small and large boulders were spread about, and trees grew right up to the lake's edge closer to the cliff. Birds chirped happily and Laylana felt the warmth of the sun.

She slowly walked away from the tree line, hand resting on the hilt of the sword as she gazed about. Above, the sky was clear and as blue as the lake. She bent down and sniffed one of the wildflowers, and its fragrance brought a smile to her face.

Laylana shrugged off her backpack and set it on top of a rock before stepping up to the lake's shore. The water was cool, but not too cold. She got down onto her knees and splashed her face and drank from the lake. Almost instantly she felt refreshed and reinvigorated. The darkness that had taken over her mind faded.

A minute later, she was stark naked—wearing only the necklace (there was no way she'd ever take it off again)—and waist-deep in the water. It was like swimming on a nice summer day. She dropped below the surface for a few moments before springing back up, long brown hair flopping about.

“Fuck, this feels amazing!” she said as she splashed her face once more. She combed her fingers through her hair and looked around. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this wonderful—not since before she'd come to this world.

She dove forward and swam toward the waterfall. The water was clear enough to see the bottom, which she guessed to be about thirty feet. Little fish swam near the muddy bottom, and it was shallow enough for her to stand under the cascade.

The waterfall itself wasn't that much wider than her arm span. She stood and let the water crash down on her. She closed her eyes and felt herself drift off into a meditative state. She let the sounds of the falling water shut out the outside world and wash away the dirt and slime from days past.

“I'd kill for a bottle of shampoo and a bar of soap right now,” she said as she opened her eyes. “I probably smell awful.”

She dove forward and floated on her back in the middle of the lake, eyes on the sky. She hummed a tune.

“Who defiles this lake?! Identify yourself, intruder!”

“What the?” Laylana murmured as she looked for the source of the voice.

There was a dark figure lurking in the shadows of the trees. The figure crept into the sunlight, and Laylana caught the reflection off the tip of a spear. She said nothing. Instead she turned and swam toward the opposite shore, arms flailing about.

She crawled onto the shore, but stopped when the tip of the spear filled her vision. Laylana's heart pounded in her chest and the color drained from her face. The tip was pressed against her chin and gently coaxed Laylana's head up. She'd guessed the figure to be a human from the shape of the shadow in the tree line, but now that she could see her captor in full, she discovered she was only half right.

The woman's skin was a mix of tan and dark green, and parts of her body were encased in bark. It crept up her legs like vines and hugged the sides of her body, leaving her midriff and breasts bare. The two halves connected

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

at her collar bone and extended out into her shoulders, giving her wooden pauldrons that had leafy branches growing out. Her forearms were also covered in tree bark armor that had twigs and branches growing out of the dark wood.

Her hair was as brown as the soil, extended down to the middle of her back and interwoven with vines. She had human eyes with dark green irises that stared down at Laylana with a fierce intensity, and her green lips were curled into a scowl.

"I'll say it again: Who are you?" The woman moved the tip of the spear to Laylana's cheek.

"I... I mean you no harm. I'm just... just a traveler," Laylana said, voice quivering.

"Liar," the woman spat. "Stand up."

Laylana put her hands into the air as she slowly stood. The woman's eyes moved from her own down to the necklace. Her expression worsened.

"You're a thief! Where did you get that necklace?!" Anger dripped from the woman's voice as she stepped forward and placed the spear tip against Laylana's neck.

Laylana screamed. "I'm no thief! I swear!"

"You were dead the moment you stepped foot into the pool," the woman said as she drew the spear back.

Laylana closed her eyes and braced herself for what she knew was coming. So, this is how it'll all end? Could've been worse. She was surprised at how apathetic she was. She should've been angrier, not so accepting.

Only the piercing stab never came. Laylana opened her eyes to see the woman frozen in fear, jaw slack and eyes locked on the necklace that was nestled between Laylana's breasts. The gem glowed.

"By the goddess!" She dropped her spear and fell to her knees, prostrating herself before Laylana. "I... I didn't know. Please forgive me!"

"What?" Laylana looked down at the necklace. The glow dissipated.

"I thought you a thief," she said to the ground. "But the necklace you wear is none other than the necklace of the goddess herself! You are Myrithania's champion. Please, forgive me!"

Laylana looked around, thankful that there was no one else to see the look of embarrassment on her face. "Get up. Please stop that."

The woman hesitated for a moment before grabbing her spear and standing. She placed her free hand on her chest and bowed. "My name is Cassia. I am a dryad, a spirit of the forest and servant to Myrithania. It is my duty to protect this forest, but there are very few of my kind left and the darkness grows ever stronger." She lifted her head and gestured to the small lake behind Laylana. "This is one of the last pure places left in this forest. I protect it with my life."

Laylana frowned. "I'm so sorry. I didn't realize this place was sacred. It's just..." She turned and looked at the pool.

"I can sense the darkness in you." Cassia placed her hand on Laylana's shoulder. "The water here is pure and can cleanse even the most corrupt of creatures. It comes from a spring deep below the surface, far away from the taint that has taken over these woods. Come, as a servant of Myrithania it is my duty to aide her champion in whatever way possible."

Cassia stabbed her spear into the ground beside her and took Laylana by the hand. The dryad led her back to the waters, and the two women entered the pool together. For the first time since Laylana came to this world, she felt safe. She could tell that there was something about this place from the moment she first stepped through the thicket of trees. No evil had ever stepped foot here. No harm would come to her. The necklace thrummed gently against her chest, reassuring her of that notion.

Cassia moved in front of her, took both of her hands, and led her deeper and deeper until they were both chest-deep. Then she stepped behind Laylana.

"Close your eyes."

Laylana felt the necklace thrum again as she closed her eyes. It radiated a gentle warmth as the dryad spoke softly in a language she didn't recognize.

Cassia placed her hand on Laylana's head. "Take a deep breath and submerge your head."

Laylana went below the surface. For a moment, nothing happened. Then the thrumming intensified and her body began to shake. Her stomach twisted into a painful knot, but Cassia's hand kept her head below the surface. Laylana pushed with all her might, but the dryad was far stronger than she was.

Begone from her!

Cassia's voice echoed in her head. Laylana coughed, expelling the breath she held in her chest. She flailed, fingers clawing at the hand that held her under. The pain in her body grew stronger and stronger, expanding within her. It burned her throat as she screamed.

J. Dylana - Champion of the Goddess

Begone!

Cassia's hand gripped her hair and pulled Laylana's head back above the water's surface. She took in a deep, desperate breath, and just before uttering an array of curses, Laylana turned and vomited. What came out wasn't bile or food; it was a liquid as black as a starless, moonless night. It floated on the surface of the water, and Cassia's eyes shined bright white as she moved her hand toward the living blackness.

It erupted in flame, and Laylana felt the heat as the ooze burned. The flames dissipated a moment later, and there was no trace of whatever it was. Laylana grew weak, and the last thing she saw before the world went black was Cassia.

It was still day when she woke up. She was half-submerged in the water, and still completely naked. She didn't move; she just stared up at the sky and the fluffy white clouds that passed overhead.

"How do you feel?" she heard Cassia say from somewhere nearby.

Laylana sat up and stared out over the surface of the pool. She felt the warmth of the sun, the gentle caress of the breeze. She could smell the flowers, and the world around her seemed clearer, more vivid.

She looked back to see Cassia squatting beside her. The dryad looked at her with kind, caring eyes.

"I feel... Well, I feel great," Laylana said with confused excitement. She leaned forward and looked at her hands. She felt alive.

"You've been through a great many ordeals. I saw into your mind. You're not from this world, are you? She brought you here to save her, to save... all of us. The demons of this forest and the world left a lasting mark on your soul. Had you had another encounter like the one with Jororyn, you would've been lost forever."

"What was..."

"What was the black thing? It was the essence of corruption. I apologize for what I had to do, but it had to be done to remove it from your soul. Had I told you, you would not have gone along with it. It had control over you. It is what led you into the swamp. It is what led you to the swamp monster that bred you. It would've made you doubt me, maybe even turn against me."

"Cassia..."

The dryad turned her gaze away from the pool to Laylana.

"Thank you. Ever since I came to this world, it's been one bad thing after another. I had little hope left that I would be able to find my way out of here. To do what I was brought here to do and find my way home."

Laylana stood. She rolled her shoulders and stretched out her limbs. "How can I repay you for what you've done for me?"

Cassia stood and met her gaze. "As a spirit of this forest, I only live to serve the goddess. It was my honor and my duty to aid her champion. I require no repayment. In fact, there is more that I can do to assist."

"Oh? Like what?" Laylana watched as Cassia's eyes moved up and down her body, and even the green hue of her skin couldn't hide the blush on her cheeks.

"I, um... sense some lingering corruption. I don't think I got rid of it all." The dryad took a step forward. "Please, champion, allow me to find and, um... get rid of any last trace."

"Call me Laylana."

J. Dylana - Champion of the Goddess

Chapter 16: *Wildflowers*

Cassia took another step forward and her fragrance filled Laylana's nose. The flowery smell gave her the sensation of walking through a field in spring. Her eyes left Laylana's and moved down her body. She placed her hands on her shoulders and took another step forward. The dryad brought her lips to hers and the two women embraced. She tasted sweet, like strawberries.

The dryad stepped back, took Laylana's hand, and eased her down to the ground. Laylana's back pressed against the grassy slope and Cassia kissed her body, her lips moving lower and lower until they found their way between her legs.

Laylana yelped in surprise at the sensation of being kissed down there. She couldn't help but giggle at her own reaction, but her laughter quickly shifted to a moan as Cassia's tongue disappeared between the folds of her flesh. She chewed on her lower lip and squirmed on the soft grass.

Oh... oh, my god! Is this... is this what it feels like?!

Laylana had received her fair share of blowjobs back in the world she came from, back when she was a man. However, her ratio of giving to receiving was, well... lopsided. She could count the number of times she'd gone down on a woman on one hand. One of her exes had a talent for giving the best blowjobs, something that never sat right with Laylana, how she was so good at it.

But even those paled in comparison to what she was feeling right now.

"Oh, fuck!" Laylana moaned as her body twisted and writhed on the grassy knoll. She arched her back as her hands grabbed fistfuls of whatever she could get a grip on.

Cassia's tongue dove deeper and deeper. Each flick, each twist sent waves of pleasure throughout Laylana's body. Her heart raced, her body glowed and glistened with a layer of sweat. Her breaths came faster, shorter.

"Oh... fuuuuuck!" she cried out as she orgasmed. Her body spasmed as it went over the edge and her mind swam. Time slowed to a stop as she drifted through a sea of ecstasy, her mouth open as she gasped for breath.

Cassia appeared over her breasts, her face dripping wet with Laylana's fluids. "I take it you enjoyed that?"

"I... I... Wow!" Laylana's chest rose and fell quickly. She spoke breathlessly and her gaze turned up to the darkening sky. "Wonderful. I think I need another bath."

The two women laughed. Cassia stood and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Make yourself at home." She looked up at the sky. "It'll be dark soon. You're welcome to make camp here, just keep it clear of the tree line."

"Where are you going?" Laylana asked as Cassia walked off toward the trees.

"To gather some supplies for you."

Before Laylana could respond, Cassia turned and walked off. She looked down at her own body. In the orange glow of evening, she could see the glistening layer of sweat. She looked tanner than usual.

Her fingers found themselves down at her still-wet sex. She held them up in front of her and examined the fluids that coated them.

She looked up at the sky and sighed. She thought about her past relationships and how infrequently she reciprocated. She wondered if any of them would've lasted longer had she pleased them as much as they did her—had she catered to their needs as much as her own.

Laylana cast the thought aside as she reentered the pool. She dove beneath the surface and remained submerged there for a while, letting the pure water of the pool wash away the doubts and fears in her mind before resurfacing. She made a mental note to thoroughly browse the shops at the next town she visited to find anything resembling shampoo or soap.

Cassia's a dryad. Maybe she has some flowery oils or something.

The dryad was coming out of the tree line when Laylana walked out of the pool. She had her arms folded across her chest and looked to be carrying something. When she got closer, Laylana saw that she held a large leaf, and on it were a bunch of bright red berries.

"What are those?" Laylana asked, trying to hide the disappointment in her voice. She'd hoped the dryad would bring back a deer or something. But then she realized that a forest spirit would likely be against murdering other forest creatures.

"These are called ayliberries. They grow on bushes and are very sweet. I've heard your kind like to turn them into wine or bake them into pies, but they're just as good raw." Cassia smiled as she carefully set the leaf

J. Dylana - Champion of the Goddess

down in front of Laylana. Laylana grabbed a berry and examined it for a moment before tossing it into her mouth. They tasted like blueberries, only just a little bit more bitter.

“Oh, very tasty,” she said. “Thank you, Cassia.”

The dryad bowed. “I’ll be back later. I have been neglecting my duties.”

Laylana smiled and waved as the dryad backed away. She waved back to her before disappearing into the trees.

A breeze made Laylana shiver, and she realized then that she had spent almost the entire day naked. She found her bag right where she left it, though she could’ve easily found it even if she somehow became blind.

The backpack had become a very smelly reminder of her time in the swamp, and the grass around it looked to have died. She dug around through her bag, grimacing as the smell assaulted her nose, until she found her flint. She got a fire going while there was still some sunlight, and she dumped her clothes onto the ground.

“Fucking hell... it smells like... college.” She gagged. The smell reminded her of her roommate freshman year of college. The very definition of a terrible roommate, the guy was always out partying and constantly forgot his room key. He’d bang on the door to the dorm room and Laylana—Luke—would pretend to not hear him. The man was a selfish jackass who constantly cheated on his girlfriend, who was still in high school.

He was also notorious for never doing his laundry. He would wear something, toss it into the laundry, and dig it out a week later. Laylana had lost count of how many bottles of air freshener she went through that year.

I’d kill for a laundromat right now.

Fortunately her fur cloak had been lying out in the sun all day, and only smelled like body odor and not like swamp mixed with dirty socks. Laylana sprawled out on the cloak, using it as an impromptu blanket, and looked up at the darkening night sky as she munched on the berries. She felt no urge to put clothes on and decided that tonight she’d sleep naked under the stars. In the morning she’d wash her clothes, and hopefully Cassia would help her find her way out of the forest.

Laylana frowned and turned onto her side to face the fire. She didn’t want to leave this place. It was so peaceful, and Cassia was so...

The events from earlier replayed in her mind, and Laylana smiled as she felt warmth in her cheeks. Then she remembered what the dryad had said. The forest was her home, and her home was falling apart. The corruption was spreading, and soon even this place would become tainted.

It’s no longer about just going home. It’s about saving this place.

She rolled onto her back and drifted off into sleep as she looked up at the starry night sky.

She was much warmer than she’d expected. Laylana assumed that she’d be woken up in the middle of the night by the cold, as her fire would’ve gone out and she had nothing to cover herself with. Instead she was warm and bundled up, a thick fur blanket covering her naked body.

Cassia must’ve come back after I fell asleep.

She stood and wrapped the fur around her. A thin, knee-high mist covered the grass and the water. The sky was pale and the air cold, but the forest was alive. She heard birdsong and saw a pair of deer nibbling on the grass at the far end opposite her. She heard footsteps and turned to see Cassia exit the tree line.

“I see you’re awake,” the dryad said with a warm smile.

“Is this your doing?” Laylana gestured to the fur coat.

Cassia nodded. “You were shivering. I didn’t kill the bear, if that’s what you’re thinking. Many years ago I found an abandoned hut in the forest. The forest had taken back the home—it was covered in vines—and inside I found a handful of furs like that one.

“I occasionally find humans lost in this forest. I find them cold and alone, hungry. I give them one of the blankets and a pile of berries. Some I find too late and bury their bodies in the forest.” She smiled. “I’m glad I wasn’t too late to find you.”

Laylana returned the smile and clutched the fur coat tighter. “I’m glad too.”

Neither spoke for a while. Then the gurgling of Laylana’s stomach broke the silence, and both women burst into laughter.

“You, um... wouldn’t happen to have anything besides berries, would you?” Laylana said as she patted her stomach. “Not that there’s anything wrong with them! They’re quite tasty.”

Cassia giggled. “There’s fish in the pool. I can help you catch some, if you’d like.”

“There’s something I want to ask of you,” Laylana said as she took a bite of the freshly cooked fish. “But I feel weird asking it.”

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

Cassia replied with a bewildered stare, which made Laylana blush out of embarrassment.

"I, um... was wondering if it would be okay for me to wash my clothes in the pool. I feel like I'd be... defiling—"

"Oh! Of course you can," Cassia interrupted. Now it was her turn to blush. "I was actually going to offer to, um... wash you." She looked away and pointed out into the forest. "You see, there's some flowers that, um... make a nice-smelling oil that you humans like to... well... In the past, when the forest wasn't so dangerous, they'd come here and harvest them. I actually gave them some seeds to grow their own years and years ago."

"Oh, Cassia," Laylana said with a wide smile and a satisfied sigh, "you have no idea how badly I wanted a proper bath."

Cassia stood. "I'll be back in a bit, then." She smiled and bounded off for the forest.

Laylana finished the fish and dumped her backpack out onto the grass. Her eyes went wide when she saw the demon cock dildo roll off to the side. Oh, fuck! I totally forgot about that. She grabbed it and tossed it into her backpack. She looked around and sighed with relief when she didn't see Cassia anywhere. I wonder what her reaction would've been to that.

With the sex toy safely tucked away, she took stock of what she had. There was the armor set and sword—which could use a sharpening—three sets of plain travel clothes; three pairs of boots, one with a high heel; two regal dresses and one plain dress; and the slave outfit. There was also the thick, fur-lined leather cloak and a thinner cloth cloak.

"I don't think I'll wash the slave outfit," she mumbled as she packed it.

She had three heavy bags of gold coins, one bag of jewelry and gemstones, the ornate dagger, her hunting knife, and the spool of twine. Her bedroll got lost when the boat sank, but luckily that was the worst of it. She tossed the pants that the swamp beast tore open, so she was left with a spare shirt.

Laylana stood and scratched her chin. All her life she'd had access to modern day washing machines, and never once had she had to do things the old way.

Cassia returned not long after. The dryad had a large wooden bowl, and in it were bottles of a clear liquid with a slight pink tinge. The bowl looked to have been carved out of a tree trunk.

"Fill this with the lake water and add a bottle of this. Then just let your clothes soak in it for a while, and they'll be all clean and smelling great!" The dryad smiled. "While those wash, we can wash you."

They filled the large tub and let the clothes soak. Laylana told Cassia about the dresses, and the dryad expressed her concern about the missing princess.

"Had I known, I would've offered to escort her to the goddess' temple. It's a shame what happened to her. I hope she is still alive."

Cassia took Laylana's hand and led her back to the water. They said nothing to each other as they waded out to where the pool became chest-deep. Laylana didn't want to ruin the intimacy of the moment. She truly cared for the dryad, and it wasn't because she was the first non-human creature to show her kindness. She was beautiful, not to mention she smelled wonderful. Her eyes sparkled in the sunlight and her touch was gentle.

Laylana always enjoyed taking long, hot showers. Letting the water fall down her body was relaxing, and it gave her the opportunity to forget about the world for a few minutes. She looked up at the sky as Cassia massaged her scalp and combed her fingers through her hair. The smell of the oil the dryad used was very fragrant, like lavender or jasmine.

"There. Much better, don't you think?"

Laylana breathed in deep. "That smells amazing. Thank you, Cassia."

"It was my pleasure."

She escorted Laylana out of the pool and helped her hang her clothes to dry. They sat on the fur blanket and ate berries as they basked in the warmth of the sun. As much as she wanted to stay here forever with the dryad, Laylana knew that she'd have to leave.

The time came for her to pack. It felt strange to wear clothes again. The thought made her chuckle.

"There is one last thing you must do before you leave this forest. The trees tell me of an encampment that has come under attack. I can't assist them, but I believe you can." Cassia took Laylana's hands in hers. "You have been blessed by the goddess. I know you can defeat the evil that has taken over this land."

"Cassia, if I could, I would stay here with you forever. Your kindness has really made me feel so much better. I feel refreshed, reinvigorated. It was amazing getting to meet you." She leaned forward and kissed Cassia. The dryad returned the kiss. "I promise to come back here once this is all over."

Cassia smiled. "I have some gifts for you, for your journey." Laylana recognized the bottles of the oil they'd used to wash her hair and clothes. The dryad gave her several of them. "It won't keep you smelling this way

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

for long. It'll wear off after a time." She handed her another bottle, the liquid inside an amber color.

"What is this?"

Cassia blushed. "It's... made from my own flowers. Should the darkness ever take hold of you, drink it. I hope you'll never have a need for it."

"Thank you, Cassia. I hope I don't need it either."

"I have one more gift for you." The dryad produced a larger bottle, about one liter in size and containing a red liquid. "It's mashed ayliberries mixed with water from the pool. A refreshing drink for your travels."

Laylana took the bottle and wrapped her arms around Cassia. "I cannot express with words how thankful I am. Seriously."

"Just keep your promise, okay?" Cassia said, a little short of breath.

"I will," Laylana said as she put the gifts in her backpack. She slugged it over her shoulder and stood. She took a deep breath as she looked over the pool one last time.

"Come," Cassia said. "I'll walk with you as far as I can."

She took Laylana's hand, and the two women crossed the tree line back into the forest.

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

Chapter 17:

Exiles

Despite the rocky, uneven terrain, Laylana walked with a spring in her step. She smiled as she hooked her thumbs under the straps of her backpack and hiked through the forest, following the directions Cassia had given her. She hadn't felt this good in a long, long time.

The trees whisper of tribes in this forest who have come under attack, the dryad had told her. Not only am I not strong enough, but during these dark times, I must keep a close eye on the pool. You are their only hope, Laylana.

Laylana blushed as she replayed her time with Cassia over in her mind, recalling her gentle touch, her soft voice, her wonderful smell. The dryad had not only cured her of the corruption that apparently still plagued her, but cleared her mind and filled her with hope. Cassia had shown Laylana that not every creature in this world was malicious and cruel, and that there were still good and pure-hearted beings. If there were other creatures like Cassia left in this world, or even if the dryad was the only one, Laylana had a duty to save them.

And that's not because I want to go back and spend more time with her, Laylana thought. She squirmed and let out a quick breath as her body recalled the pleasure from Cassia's tongue. If—when—I return to Earth, I'll for sure go down on a woman the same way Cassia went down on me.

Laylana fingered her necklace as she followed Cassia's directions. She bounded up a steep ascent and found herself overlooking the encampment. She quickly dropped to the ground and laid on her stomach as she shrugged off the backpack and crawled to the lip of the ridge.

"I wish I had some binoculars right now," she murmured as she peered down at the encampment. "Or a sniper rifle."

The encampment was egg-shaped, and Laylana counted about fifteen small round huts with a sixteenth that was much larger than the rest. The rest looked to have burnt down. The settlement was surrounded by a high wall made of logs with the tips sharpened into points. She spotted activity within the walls of the encampment, humans milling about. There were two guards stationed at the single entrance, the thinnest point of the egg.

"This stupid bitch is more trouble than she's worth!"

"Not sure why we have to do this outside the camp."

"Can't we just—ow! Stupid fucking—"

Laylana rolled back onto her stomach and crawled over to a different part of the ridge toward the source of the ruckus. Four figures were walking away from the settlement. Three of them were robed, the fourth—who was slightly taller than the other three—was a mostly naked woman. The woman had long, dirty blonde hair and tanned skin. She had a metal collar around her neck, and one of the robed men was leading her by a metal leash. She had her arms bound behind her back and walked in the middle of the group.

One of the robed men was limping about in a circle. He faced the woman, and Laylana saw his hand erupt in dark flame. The other robed man not holding the metal leash stepped between the woman and the man with his hand on fire.

"Casior, stop! Basmihr gave us strict orders not to harm her. She is to be offered as a tribute to mighty Jororyn unspoiled."

After a few tense moments, the fire vanished from the man's hand and the group continued their hike.

Bad news, boys—Jororyn ain't so mighty anymore.

Leaving her pack on the ridge, Laylana crept down. She held her hunting knife in a reverse grip and stalked toward the group. They moved slowly, clumsily, as the terrain was uneven and rocky, and their robes were catching on the brush. Their captive didn't help; she moved slowly and lazily, a chain connecting her ankles, and resisted with each step.

Laylana kept her distance as she closed in on them. In her previous life, she had played her fair share of stealth-based video games. Unfortunately, those games involved a decent amount of trial and error, which also included the ability to save and reload when things went wrong.

Laylana only had one attempt at this, but time was on her side.

The non-existent trail the group followed led them up onto a ridge with a steep drop on one side. Laylana knew what was going to happen just moments before it played out.

You'd think cultists would be smarter, she thought as one of them plummeted off the ridge. The prisoner pretended to stumble, which put her within range of one of the two cultists trailing behind her. She lowered her shoulder and rammed square into the chest of the cultist, sending him reeling back a couple feet, which put him over

J. Dylana - Champion of the Goddess

the edge. His yell was cut short by a loud thud, followed by a crack that sent a chill up Laylana's spine.

"Well, that's fucking great," one of the two remaining cultists said. Their prisoner barely stifled a laugh, and that laugh turned into a muffled scream as the cultist who held her leash placed a dark flame-engulfed hand on her forehead.

The woman fell to her knees, and Laylana was surprised to see her skin unharmed. The cultist struck her with the back of his hand and she fell onto her side. She wasn't even on the ground for a moment before she was pulled back onto her feet, the fight gone from her. Once they reached the top of the ridge and vanished out of sight, Laylana followed the trail up.

She caught sight of them not long after reaching the top. The woman was on her knees, head hung low, and the two cultists were engaged in a heated discussion, their backs conveniently turned to Laylana.

The woman lifted her head and spotted Laylana approaching through the gap between the robed men. Laylana brought her finger to her lips. Then she pointed to her knife and to the man on the left, the one not holding the leash.

The argument between the two cultists had escalated into a shouting match. When Laylana was about twenty feet from the group, the captive lunged forward and headbutted the man who held her leash in the stomach. The cultist stumbled back and fell to his knees, wheezing. The prisoner turned to run, and before the other cultist could take a step, Laylana was on him. She pulled the man's head back and dragged her knife across his throat. He dropped to his knees and fell forward, a pool of blood staining the ground.

The last cultist turned his attention to Laylana, hands vanishing inside plumes of black flame. She took a step back and reached for her sword.

"Why, you insolent—"

Whomp!

The prisoner's body flew into Laylana's vision as she tackled the cultist. She rolled off of him as they both fell to the ground. The cultist scrambled to get to his feet, but it was too late. Laylana leapt and drove her sword down through the man's chest. He lifted his hand toward her, still engulfed in flame.

"Curse... you...!"

Laylana released her sword and stepped back. The fire from the man's hand vanished and his arm fell limp to his side.

"Fuck you too," Laylana muttered as she stepped on the man's chest to pull her sword out. She wiped the blood off using the man's robe then sheathed it. She walked over and pulled the gag out of the prisoner's mouth.

"Keys."

"What?"

The woman motioned with her head toward the cultist. "He has the keys."

"Oh, right."

"Thank you for saving me," the woman said as she watched Laylana search through the man's robes.

"Not a problem," Laylana said with a smile. "Oh, here they are." She pulled the key ring off of the cultist's belt.

"Who sent you?"

"A dryad," Laylana said as she tried to unlock the handcuffs. "She told me that the trees told her your encampment was in trouble."

"A dryad?" the woman said as she massaged her free wrists. She looked at Laylana with a mixture of apprehension and awe. "Who are you?"

Laylana got down onto her knees and fiddled with the ankle lock. "My name is Laylana. I'm just a traveler."

"I am Leha. You have my thanks. They were going to give me away as a prize to Jororyn."

"I heard."

"He is the demon who rules over this part of the forest." Leha squinted at her. "Why are you smiling?"

"Well, let's just say that Jororyn won't be ruling over anything anymore."

"No! It cannot be!" Leha stared at Laylana like she was some kind of celebrity. "You... You defeated Jororyn?!"

"Well, it wasn't easy." Laylana scratched her head. "But yes, he's dead."

Leha stood, and Laylana took a couple step back when she saw just how tall Leha actually was. Not only that, but the woman had the body of an athlete. When Laylana was Luke, she was a couple inches short of six feet, but she was sure that in her transformation she had lost several inches. The woman standing in front of her was definitely over six feet tall, as she was eyelevel with Leha's collar bone.

J. Dylana - Champion of the Goddess

“Whoa,” Laylana muttered under her breath as her eyes slowly scanned Leha. Her sweat-soaked, scarred body glistened in the sunlight, and Laylana couldn’t help but stare at Leha’s six-pack abs. She wore nothing more than a small loincloth and a simple strip of leather just wide enough to cover her breasts, and Laylana felt subconscious about her body. She suddenly felt very, very, feminine.

“You must help free my village,” Leha said.

“Of course—” Laylana coughed, her voice sounding exceptionally feminine. She straightened and folded her arms across her chest. “Of course. I’d be honored to.”

Leha cocked an eyebrow at the obviously artificial deepening of Laylana’s voice, and there was a long, awkward silence as the two women looked at each other.

“This way,” Leha said jerking her thumb behind her. Without saying anything more, she turned and started walking.

Laylana exhaled and relaxed her body, letting her arms fall in front of her. What the fuck was that? I don’t have any masculinity to be insecure about. Or perhaps...? She studied Leha’s back as she followed the woman toward the encampment.

Despite her broad shoulders and muscular body, Leha still had a feminine look about her. She wasn’t some sort of competitive bodybuilder. She was more like the attractive women seen in exercise commercials advertising home gym equipment.

What Laylana felt wasn’t a threat to her masculinity; it was the fact that Leha made Laylana feel very feminine, like she was some housewife and Leha was the hardworking man. Like even in a lesbian relationship, Leha would wear the pants and she’d be in a dress.

“Hey, watch it!” Leha said in a harsh whisper.

“Oh, fuck, sorry,” Laylana said as she backed up. She’d been so caught up in her thoughts she hadn’t seen Leha stop and had bumped into her. How fucking embarrassing. “Are we back already?”

Leha nodded. “Just over that ridge. I think we should wait until nightfall.”

“Sounds good.” Laylana looked around. “I’ll be right back. I left my gear on a ridge just over there.”

“So, what actually happened?”

Laylana and Leha sat across from each other under the shade of a short rock wall. She took a sip from the bottle of ayliberry juice and handed the bottle to Leha. The other woman took a sip and nodded in approval.

“It’s good, but it’s got no kick to it.”

“It’s not alcohol.” Laylana smirked as she recorked the bottle and returned it to her pack.

“When we free the village, you’ll get to sample how we drink ayliberries.” Leha smiled, but it vanished a few moments later. “We are exiles. Jihea, our queen, led us to this forest years ago, and we have lived in peace ever since. We remained untouched by the corruption that has taken over this land since the fall of the kingdom. Then Basmihir and his followers showed up. We fought, but their magic was stronger, and we became slaves.”

“I saw the bodies.”

Leha nodded. “A rebellion. Now a reminder. They mutilated some and enslaved the rest. Their minds are no longer their own, and they serve Basmihir. I was to be given as a prize to Jororyn, who blessed Basmihir and his followers with a staff that gave them the power to rule over us.” She tugged at her collar. “They put these on us. No key can unlock them, only the magic of the staff. Basmihir wields the staff and has deemed himself leader.”

“Is Jihea—”

“Jihea still lives. Her mind is her own and her will is intact, but I’m not sure how much longer. She is the strongest of us, and if she breaks...”

“We’ll save your people, Leha. I promise.”

Night fell, and Leha and Laylana crept toward the entrance to the settlement and took cover behind a boulder just outside the gate.

“You’re likely better at using it than I am,” Laylana whispered as she handed Leha her sword. Leha took it with a sly smirk and nodded.

Together the two women snuck through the camp. It was a dark, moonless night. Only a handful of the small metal braziers were lit, which made staying out sight much easier.

The cultists were drinking and laughing. Some were torturing the captive tribe. Others were forcing themselves upon the women, several of whom were bound to poles in a kneeling position, their arms chained above their heads.

The closer they got to the main building, the angrier Leha got. They killed several cultists on their path and disposed of their bodies behind crates. Then at last, they arrived at the doors to Jihea’s lodge and took cover behind

a wood pile.

“Let’s go.”

Leha sprung out from behind the wood pile and ran toward the entrance. Laylana faltered, caught off-guard by Leha’s sudden departure. She poked her head out from behind the wood pile, and after verifying that the coast was clear, she ran after Leha, who had already disappeared behind the door to the lodge.

I’ve got a bad feeling about this, Laylana thought as she crossed the threshold.

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

Chapter 18: *Warrior Queen*

Laylana heard laughter and felt sick to her stomach as memories of Jororyn's laugh came back to her. On the far side of the room, sitting upon a throne atop a dais, was the demon Basmihir. He sat lazily in his chair; one elbow propped up on the armrest with the staff resting on his lap. In the middle of the room was a firepit, its flames providing the only light. Five pillars held up the dome, each carved with intricate runes and spiraling designs.

Laylana's throat clenched and her stomach dropped when she spotted Jihea. The queen laid sprawled at the foot of the demon. She was naked except for the gold piercings in her breasts, bellybutton, and ears. She wore a silver braided circlet encrusted with a single red gem on her forehead. She looked at Leha with empty eyes.

The scene reminded Laylana of Jabba's Palace from Return of the Jedi, with Jihea filling the role of Slave Leia.

"What have you done to her?!" Leha shouted. "Jihea, my queen! Can you—"

"She's not your queen anymore, human," Basmihir laughed. "She's my slave."

"You lie!"

"Show them who you truly serve," the demon said.

He reached forward and patted Jihea on the head. Jihea stood and bowed to Basmihir. Then she turned and picked up a long, doubled-edged sword.

"No..." Leha turned to Laylana. "I'll take care of her. You must kill Basmihir."

Laylana nodded and looked down at the knife in her hand. Goddess, please watch over me.

Leha walked around the right side of the fire while Laylana moved toward the left. Jihea smiled as she dragged the tip of the sword on the ground as she approached Leha.

"I'm sorry, my queen," Leha said.

"I'm insulted," Basmihir said as he stood and pointed at Laylana with the tip of his staff. "Just one woman?" He smiled and pointed his staff at Leha. "I'll enjoy breaking both of you and adding you to my harem alongside dear old Jihea. I only wish you could've been here when I broke her. Her screams were oh-so delightful."

Jihea charged forth, and the lodge filled with the sounds of metal clashing upon metal. Jihea's attacks were relentless and forced Leha into a defensive stance early on. It was obvious Leha didn't want to harm her queen, even if her mind and will were broken.

Laylana took a deep breath. She'd been able to best Jororyn because she'd had the element of surprise. He'd believed her to still be under his influence, and she was able to get up close and personal—a little too close and personal. Basmihir was smaller than Jororyn, thinner too. The demon's single pair of horns were curved down and out, and he didn't have a scar on his body. Even his dick was smaller.

A ball of purple fire shot out of the tip of the staff toward Laylana. She dove out of the way just in time. She didn't have a second to think before another came flying at her. She leaped aside and took shelter behind one of the five pillars supporting the lodge's domed ceiling.

Against the wall was a rack of spears. She ran for it and managed to grab one before another ball of purple fire collided with the rack. Laylana turned and hurled the spear in Basmihir's direction, feeling the necklace thrum against her chest as she let it fly. It streaked across the lodge and buried itself in Basmihir's left shoulder.

"Curse you, human!" he cried out as she staggered back. Laylana glanced over at Leha. Jihea's swing moved laterally and would've taken Leha's head off had she not ducked. Leha swung her sword and struck Jihea's hand with the flat of the blade, causing Jihea's weapon to fly from her grip.

Laylana turned and sprinted toward the demon as he tried to remove the spear from his shoulder. He fired another blast of magic from the staff, but missed. His aim was off, and she easily dodged the next several blasts and closed the gap.

"No!" he screamed as in one fluid motion she gripped his wrist and brought her knife up, cutting his arm off at the elbow. He collapsed onto the steps of the dais and crawled backward, blood gushing out of his wound.

"Lord Basmihir!"

Laylana turned to see several cultists gathering in the doorway. Their eyes went from the fallen demon to Leha and Jihea, who were wrestling on the floor, and back to Laylana.

She squatted and pulled the ornate dagger out of the back of her boot, then moved toward Basmihir. With all the strength she could muster, Laylana brought her heel down onto and shattered the dark crystal that powered the staff. A dark cloud floated out from the shards and vanished.

There was a click, and Laylana turned to see the collar around Leha's neck break in half and fall off her

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

body. Jihea slipped into unconsciousness as Leha stood and turned.

A look of pure terror filled the faces of the cultists at the doorway. They looked down at their hands, then turned and ran.

"I'll deal with them," Leha said as she ran out of the door, sword in hand.

Laylana nodded and turned toward Basmihir.

The demon was muttering nonsense as he crawled on his back away from Laylana. He slipped in his own blood and cried out in pain as he fell down the few stairs.

"Who... Who are you? How could you have bested me?!"

"You know, Jororyn said the same thing before I cut his dick off." Laylana reached under her shirt and pulled out the necklace. A radiant light shone from the gemstone, and the demon hissed as he covered his eyes. She tucked it back into her shirt and dropped her knee onto the demon's chest. "Any last words?"

Basmihir coughed and his lips curled into a smile. "The Demon King will enslave you all."

Laylana plunged her ornate dagger into the demon's chest, and his laughter turned to a scream as his body disintegrated. She tucked the dagger back into her boot and walked to the door.

Outside was chaos. Led by Leha, her clansmen and women had gathered and slain the cultists who imprisoned them. One by one they were rounded up and executed, their bodies thrown into a pile.

All but one.

"He surrendered," one of men said, pushing the cultist forward. The man fell to his knees, trembling in terror.

"Please... don't kill me," he said as he prostrated himself in front of Leha.

Laylana looked at Leha. The woman's face was as cold as stone, but her eyes burned with rage. Laylana was about to voice her opinion, but it was too late.

"Lock him up. We'll deal with him once we're done with the cleanup."

The man who'd brought the cultist forward nodded and stepped forward. He grabbed the man by his cloak and lifted him to his feet.

"Move!" he said as he shoved him.

Silence fell over the crowd for a few long moments until someone asked, "Is Jihea...?"

The cold expression from Leha's face vanished. She frowned as she closed her eyes and hung her head. "Our queen. She's..."

"She's alive!"

Leha and Laylana turned to see Jihea standing in the doorway, her expression grim. "Leha, come." She turned to Laylana. "You as well." She disappeared back inside the lodge.

They found her standing by the fire, her back to them. It was only now that Laylana saw the scars and wounds that crisscrossed across her back. Some were still fresh and trickling blood.

"What is it, my q—"

Jihea raised her hand and Leha went quiet.

"I am no longer your queen." She turned and faced Leha, her face stoic, but her eyes wet with tears. "I have failed you; I have failed my people. I am not worthy of being your queen." She reached up and removed the circlet from her hair and held it in front of her. "I wasn't strong enough. I let my will be broken and I became a slave. I let my people become slaves."

"No... there was nothing you could do. We were all powerless against the demon. You held on longer than any one of us."

"I've made my decision." She turned to Laylana. "What is your name, savior?"

"I am Laylana, but please, I am no savior."

"That necklace of yours says otherwise. You are the goddess' champion. Tonight we feast in your honor, and in memory of those we lost." She walked between Leha and Laylana. She stopped at the door and looked back. "And in celebration of our new queen."

Laylana looked at Leha, who stood wide-eyed, mouth agape. She blinked, looked over at Laylana, then back at the door. Laylana jerked her head toward the door and Leha finally shook off her shock and regained her composure.

Outside, Jihea and the rest of the tribe were waiting for her.

"My people!" Jihea shouted. "I have failed you all. Because of my weakness, we were beaten and enslaved. My will was broken, and I became a puppet." She looked back at Leha and motioned for her to stand next to her. "Because of this, I am no longer fit to be your queen."

Murmurs and hushed whispers filled the crowd.

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

Jihea took a breath and turned to Leha. “Leha, you didn’t break. You didn’t bow down. The goddess herself chose you, sending her champion to fight alongside to save our people.”

Laylana felt her cheeks burn as the crowd gasped. All eyes turned to her, and she took a half-step back. She thought she was going to have a heart attack.

“Because of your deeds here and now, I pass my crown and duties onto you, Leha.”

Jihea lifted the braided circlet and placed it on Leha’s head. The tribe erupted in cheers, battle cries, and applause. Tears streamed down both women’s cheeks, and Laylana had to bite the inside of her own cheek to stop herself from sobbing.

Jihea raised her hand and the crowd quieted down. Then she backed away from Leha and took a knee. The rest of the tribe followed, and Laylana joined them.

“Tonight we remember those who have fallen,” Leha commanded. “Light the braziers and gather the bodies of our comrades. Let us build a pyre and send their spirits on to the next life.”

“What about the cultists, my queen?” Jihea asked from her kneeling position.

“String up some to serve as a reminder and a warning. Burn the rest outside the wall.” Leha turned to Laylana, who was still kneeling. “Stand up, my friend. Will you join us in this feast? It would be an honor to have the goddess’ champion dine with us.”

Laylana stood, and the rumbling of her stomach spoke for her.

Leha laughed. “It is decided.” She clapped and turned back toward the rest of her village. “Go and prepare!”

There was a loud battle cry, and then the tribe went to work.

J. Dylana - Champion of the Goddess

Chapter 19: *Civilization*

It was dawn and Laylana was hungover. She was also naked under a fur blanket, and the little spoon to another naked woman. The other woman had her arm draped over Laylana, and her breasts were pressed against her back. Laylana rolled over to see that it was Leha, the newly crowned queen of a warrior tribe.

Panic filled her, but the sensation went away moments later when her fingers found the necklace still around her neck.

Then she squirmed and let out a yelp of surprise when Leha's hand slid between Laylana's legs. This brought giggles from the warrior queen.

Laylana crawled out from under the blanket and stood, yawning and stretching. In the dim, pale light filling the lodge which served as both throne room and living quarters, Laylana discovered she wasn't as naked as she thought. An array of spiraling, crawling tattoos climbed up her body and twisted around her limbs.

"Are these permanent?" She asked Leha, who had rolled onto her back and folded her arms under her head.

Leha opened one eye, then closed it and smiled. "Why? You afraid of wandering around looking like that?" Leha opened her eyes and sat up onto her elbows. The blanket fell down and exposed her bare chest. "No, just paint."

Laylana inspected her body, admiring the tribal design.

Leha stood up and yawned. She stretched her back as she looked down from the loft at the throne and the central fire pit. She looked back at Laylana. "You don't remember?"

Laylana rubbed her forehead. "Last thing I remember was eating at a long table next to you. Why? What happened?"

"We got married."

Laylana stared blankly at Leha. The queen's face remained stone-cold serious, but only for a few moments. Then her lips curled into a smile and she started laughing.

Leha walked over to Laylana, combing her fingers through her hair. "No, we didn't get married. Though I think you'd make an excellent princess." Leha finished the thought with a light smack of Laylana's ass, which made her blush.

"Not sure I'm princess material," Laylana said as she rubbed her butt cheek. Damn, she's got strong hands.

"As my wife, your duties would be mostly to serve me, which after last night..." Leha's lips curled to expose a wide, toothy grin.

Laylana felt her cheeks burn and she covered her face with her hands. "I'm just going to die of embarrassment right here and now."

Leha pulled her hands off of her face and smiled down at her. The warrior woman's eyes were soft and her expression genuine. "It's because of you I'm standing here now, a queen instead of some demon's sex slave." She reached for and lifted the necklace off of Laylana's chest, her thumb gently rubbing the pink stone embedded in the shiny gold. "I wish I could join you on your quest."

"Yeah, I'd love to have you along too."

Leha sighed. "But I'm the queen now, which means I have important shit to do. Hopefully I can get everything squared away and join up with you somewhere down the road."

"I'd like that."

Leha smiled. "But before you depart, I do have a gift for you."

She backed away, and Laylana watched as Leha picked up a small wooden box hidden among the new queen's belongings. She handed it to Laylana.

"Oh my god!" Laylana said as she opened it.

Inside were two rings, one gold and the other silver. Leha removed them from the silk they rested on and held them up for Laylana to see. Both had one edge that was smooth while the other was cut in a jagged, zig-zagging pattern.

"These were a gift from my mother. My father gave her the silver ring, and he wore the gold. The two rings fit together..." She pieced the two of them together forming one perfect ring. "When my father died, my mother took off her ring and gave them both to me to give to someone I cared for." She took Laylana's right hand and slid the silver ring onto her ring finger. Then she slid the gold onto her own finger. "The rings are magic, so they adjust to the size of the wearer. While we aren't married or anything, I'm giving you this ring in hopes that you'll never forget me—as a thank-you for saving my life."

J. Dylana - Champion of the Goddess

"It's very pretty," Laylana said as she lifted her hand up. I feel like I was just proposed to.

"I'm glad you like it." Leha wiped away some tears and straightened. "Well, then, I guess you should be ___"

Laylana reached up, grabbed Leha by the head, pulled her down, and planted a kiss her lips.

"Leha—Queen Leha—I could never forget a woman such as yourself. Thank you for the ring. I'll treasure it always."

Leha smiled and pulled Laylana in for a tight embrace.

"Is there no way I can convince you to stay, Jihea?"

The tribe's elders had gathered inside the lodge, the rest of their people waiting outside. Leha sat on her throne with a concerned look on her face. She looks really good on that throne, Laylana thought as she scanned the room.

Now dressed and packed, she rubbed the ring on her right hand. She had never worn a ring before. She'd had a class ring that she'd gotten back in high school, but that was heavy and awkward. The ring she wore now was the opposite. It brought a smile to her face. Never before had she received a gift like this. Then again, usually men were the ones buying jewelry for the women in their lives.

Standing before Leha was Jihea, who was also packed for travel. "The time has come for me to leave. I must go and earn redemption."

Leha's gaze shifted to Laylana, then back to Jihea. Then she stood, and all attention was focused on her. "So be it. Jihea, as queen, I honor your decision and thereby exile you from our tribe. Go and earn the redemption you seek. Your first step on the path is to escort the Champion out of the forest so that she may continue on her journey."

Jihea bowed. "Farewell, Leha, and thank you." She turned to Laylana. "I'll wait for you outside the gates. Come when you're ready."

The crowd silently parted for Jihea. When she was gone, Leha turned her attention to Laylana.

"Laylana, Champion of the Goddess. My people and I are forever indebted to you. You will always be a welcomed and honored guest, and our grandchildren's grandchildren will sing tales of your heroics, should you succeed. I hope we meet again, and next time in much better circumstances."

Leha stepped down from her throne and hugged Laylana. "Good luck, and may the goddess be with us all."

Jihea was waiting for Laylana right outside the gate. The former queen seemed to have aged twenty years overnight. Her eyes were distant, her expression stoic. She said nothing to Laylana when she approached her; she just stood from the rock she rested on and started walking.

After a few hours, Jihea came to a stop. She pointed ahead of her. "Keep going in that direction and you'll be out of the forest in only a few minutes." She turned to Laylana. "This is where we part ways. I have a trial of my own to face." She slammed her arm against her own chest and bowed. "Good luck, Champion."

And with that, she turned and walked off in a different direction.

Laylana watched her until the exiled former queen vanished in the trees. Then she turned and peered ahead. For most of their quiet hike, they had been traveling downhill, where the path twisted through shallow ravines and around ridges. They'd stopped only once at a stream for a quick drink of water. Laylana had barely had a chance to swallow a second handful of the crisp, clear water before Jihea had started off again.

Ahead of her the canopy thinned, and Laylana could see a wide-open field through the trees ahead. She quickened her pace and practically ran to the tree line.

The sight left her speechless. In the distance were jagged, snow-capped mountains that cut across the landscape like the spine of a great dragon. It was a vast landscape dotted with small patches of trees and rolling, grassy hills. At the bottom of the slope, a dirt road skirted the edge of the forest. Laylana found herself smiling and on the verge of tears.

"I can't believe I'm getting this worked up over finding a fucking road."

An uneventful hour or so later, Laylana entered the city of Cralo. It was a proper town that made Braedon look like the frontier settlement that it actually was. Surrounding the town was farmland, and from her vantage point, she could see fishing boats coming and going from the harbor.

The narrow path that Laylana followed joined with the main road like a small stream merging with a coursing river. It went off toward the north, where it vanished behind distant hills. A wagon led by a single mule and driven by an elderly man passed by her, heading toward the town. The man gave her a cursory look, which to Laylana seemed borderline suspicious. His wagon carried what looked like a fresh harvest and she decided to follow him into town.

J. Dylana - Champion of the Goddess

The town was a good deal larger than Braedon. As she walked down the main road, Laylana spotted all sorts of shops and stalls. In addition to the expected blacksmiths, leatherworkers, and tailors, Laylana spotted a jeweler, hatter, and a saddler. Then her nose caught a whiff of freshly baked bread, and her body moved on its own until she was staring through the glass window of a baker and salivating like a starving orphan.

A couple minutes later, she was wolfing down what looked like a cherry pastry and walking toward what she was told was one of the town's inns—which, come to think of it, should've been obvious by the fact that it was three stories tall.

The inn's designers must've used the same interior decorator, she thought as she scanned the building from the entrance. The bottom floor was exclusively a tavern, lined with benches and gambling tables, though she recognized none of the games being played. She got some strange looks, but nothing troubling as she maneuvered toward the desk, behind which a gray-haired woman sat.

She was scribbling something in a thick tome and held her hand up to silence Laylana before she'd even opened her mouth to speak. A few moments later, the old woman placed her quill pen in a small jar of ink and straightened up.

"How may I help you?"

The woman reminded Laylana of a school principal she'd had when she was young. She had a stern look on her face and spoke with a voice of authority, or of someone who has to deal with shit day in and day out.

"I'd like a room."

"What kind of room?" The woman's eyes drifted past Laylana to her backpack. Then they scanned the rest of her, and the woman made no effort to hide her grimace.

"What do you have?"

The woman rolled her eyes and let out an annoyed sigh. "We have several different types, each more expensive than the last. All our rooms come with a bed, a chamber pot, and a table." She spoke as if she'd rehearsed this spiel countless times. "We have your basic room, about five paces in either direction, good for a single traveler. Then there is the medium-sized room, which boasts a larger bed. We have a large family room, and lastly, the suite."

"What's the suite?"

The woman raised an eyebrow. "The suite is one of our finest rooms. In addition to the larger bed, the floor is covered with a rug, a seat is provided for the chamber pot, and a clean pitcher of water for the washbowl. The rooms also have a lovely view of the lake. It is fifty silvers a night for the suite."

Laylana took out three gold coins and gave it to the woman. "Not sure how long I'll be here, so book me for a couple nights."

Almost immediately, the old woman's expression changed, going from ice-cold to the practiced warmth of a concierge at a luxury resort. She smiled as she took the coins and even bowed her head. The coins vanished into a slot in the woman's desk, and Laylana watched as she lifted her necklace, revealing a key hidden under her clothes. She used that key to unlock a drawer which contained several polished metal keys, each with a number etched into its surface. The woman removed one of them before locking the drawer and tucking the necklace-key back into her outfit.

She turned toward the bar and whistled. Laylana's eyes widened as a massive man lumbered toward her. He was built like an ox, with wide shoulders and arms bigger than her head. He had a short beard and eyebrows as fuzzy as caterpillars. He was almost two heads taller than her, and if he wanted to, could probably pick her up and swing her around like a club.

The woman handed him the key. "Third floor, suite one."

The man nodded as he took the key. Then he turned to Laylana and stretched out his hand.

"I'll take your bag," he said, voice deep like distant thunder. She shrugged off her backpack and handed it to the man, who shouldered it effortlessly. "Follow me, miss," he added before turning and walking toward the staircase.

The man said nothing as he guided her up to the top floor and stopped at the first door they came upon. He unlocked it and went in first. The room was bigger than she'd imagined it would be. The bed was queen-sized, and the room was surprisingly clean. There was a large window on the far wall which let the sunlight in.

The man set her backpack down on the bench at the foot of the bed, then walked over and grabbed the pitcher next to a polished washbowl.

"I'll return with a fresh pitcher of water. Would you like anything from the kitchen or the bar?"

Laylana thought for a moment before shaking her head. For now, she just wanted to kick off her boots and take a nap.

"I'll be back in a moment," the man said. He bowed his head and exited the room, closing the door as he

did.

She walked over toward the window and looked out at the view. The inn was located near the center of the town, so rooftops took up most of the vista. She could, however, see the lake and the forest surrounding it. She could also see the mountains beyond.

Her attention was drawn from the outside world to the ring on her finger, which she'd forgotten she had on. It was perfectly sized, and Laylana couldn't help but smile.

There was a knock on the door, and a second later it opened. Laylana turned back to see the man from earlier enter carrying the pitcher of water. Without a word, he placed it and a fresh rag on the dresser next to the bowl. He bowed his head and left, and Laylana locked the door behind him. Then she kicked off her boots, and moments later, she was out cold.

It was late afternoon when she woke. Her stomach protested the lack of food, so she roused herself from the surprisingly comfortable bed. She left most of her armor in a neat pile on the floor, wearing only her breastplate and equipping a small knife, which she kept hidden. Then she donned her cloak and headed downstairs.

The tavern was full, as was to be expected. The benches were crowded, and a thousand different conversations were going on. She briefly scanned the crowd from her vantage point on the stairs until she spotted someone she wasn't expecting to see ever again. She wormed her way through the crowd, ignoring the stares and the drunken jeers that followed until she arrived at the long counter where hunched over a mug of ale was Gryn, the boat captain. She slid into the vacant seat to his right, which drew his attention almost immediately.

"Aye, didn't expect to be seen ye," he drawled. He eyed her up and down. "In all my life, I've never dealt with a storm that rough."

"I washed up on the shore."

"The swamp, most likely. Scary place, that is. You must be one tough lass to make it through there."

Laylana frowned as the memories came back to her. She forced them out, replacing them with those of Cassia and Leha. "I came here looking for information. I was wondering if you can give me some."

Gryn nodded once. "Lookin' for someone?"

Laylana looked around. No one seemed to be paying any attention to the two of them. She moved closer to the sailor, which she regretted when the fragrance of saltwater and fish filled her nostrils.

"I'm looking for someone who was seen here some time ago." She looked around once more before bringing her voice down to a whisper. "The princess."

Gryn's expression remained stoic. "Aye, Terric is the man yer lookin' for. Down at the Siren's Song, you'll find him." He nodded once, then turned away from her.

Laylana blinked. "Where can I find that?"

Gryn turned toward her and gave her a crooked, toothy grin. "Follow the moaning." He nodded once more, then turned away from her again.

Laylana frowned, sighed, and then left.

Outside the air was crisp, and the blue sky was just starting to shift to the warm colors of sunset. Laylana continued down what she assumed was the main road as she looked for the venue known as the Siren's Song. She stopped to buy what looked like a drumstick from a food cart and silently prayed that she wouldn't come down with salmonella or E. coli as she bit into the charbroiled leg.

She tossed the bone into a trash pile, and then for the first time in her life—as both a man and a woman—Laylana experienced her very first shakedown. She heard them before she saw them.

"Hello there." The voice dripped with venom, and Laylana turned to see four men approach her. They spread out until they surrounded her, and given how the other townsfolk backed away and minded their own business, she surmised these boys were trouble. They all wore deviant grins, drooling as they eyed her like a piece of meat.

"Can I help you?" she said, folding her arms across her chest. They were young—she guessed late teens to early twenties. Two of them were as thin as twigs, one weighed as much as the other three combined, but the fourth—the one who'd spoken—actually had some muscle on him. They wore similar clothing, most notably the blood-red armband on their right biceps.

One of the stick-thin boys pulled out a knife, which he licked. The fat one looked like he actually wanted to eat her.

"Never seen you before. Figured we'd... show you around."

The other three snickered.

"Why don't you take your little band, go somewhere quiet, and fuck each other?" Laylana suggested.

J. Dylana - Champion of the Goddess

The snickering stopped. The four of them looked at each other incredulously, then laughed even harder. Laylana, having had to deal with enough shit already, not to mention far worse than a couple of human street thugs, decided she had had enough.

She lunged toward the goon spinning the knife and punched him square in the face. She then took the knife and jabbed it into the leg of his friend, who let out a squeal of pain as he fell to the ground. The leader of the thugs snapped out of his stupor and withdrew a knife he had tucked somewhere on his back.

He lunged for her, but his movements were slow. She stepped aside, and as he went past her, she tripped him and pushed him into the heap of smelly rubbish she'd tossed the bone of her turkey leg into.

The fat one just stood there, slack-jawed. He blinked once, twice, then turned and ran off.

Laylana dusted her hands in a satisfied gesture, then continued on her way down the road, trying not to notice the looks of disbelief from the townsfolk.

She found the Siren's Song not long after.

While she couldn't hear any moaning from the street, it was still obvious from the outside what business was conducted inside. What she could hear were the waves crashing on the lake shore and the birds circling above the fishing boats. It was a large building, almost as big as the inn, and was in much better shape than the rest of the buildings around it. It bore no sign or other identifier besides two small brass mermaids, one on each side of the double doors.

Laylana stood dumbfounded in the entrance to the brothel. While she had never stepped foot inside one, or anything similar to that back in her old life, she had seen her fair share depicted in books, televisions, movies, and even video games.

What she saw in front of her was the opposite of what she'd expected. The floor was polished stone, the furniture was clean and ornate. It was of the highest caliber, so much so that even someone like her—who'd stumbled upon a literal treasure chest filled with wealth—wouldn't be able to afford it. She wondered how a man like Gryn, who was a walking trope of a salty sea captain, could afford this place.

"Hello and welcome to the Siren's Song," a jovial female voice said. Laylana turned to see one of the most beautiful women she'd ever seen standing next to her wearing nothing but a loose ocean-blue dress.

"Hi," was all Laylana could muster. She felt like she was back in high school, a lowly freshman trying to talk to the girl she had a crush on.

"How may I help you?" the woman said as she wrapped her arms around Laylana's left arm. "My name is Tana. What is yours?"

Laylana almost found herself saying Luke. "L-Laylana."

"Such a pretty name."

Tana led her deeper into the main hall, where mirrored staircases took clients to the floors above. There was a small, knee-deep pool in the middle of the lobby, and as Tana led her deeper inside, more and more women started to appear. Laylana also spotted a collection of men who ran the gamut between gutter trash and nobility, all of whom were chatting up the employees.

"We have clients come from all around Vaelshore," Tana said, voice as sweet as honey. "Is there anyone in particular you'd like to spend time with?"

They stopped and Tana turned Laylana. Whoa, was all she could think when she found herself facing down a small crowd of women, each as beautiful and alluring as the next. No wonder they call this place the Siren's Song.

"Actually, I'm looking for a man."

Tana giggled. "The only men here are—"

"His name's Terric."

"Oh," Tana said. Her jovial smile faltered for a moment and she released Laylana's arm. "Follow me. I'll take you to him."

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

Chapter 20: *Bottom of the Barrel*

"Was it something I said?" Laylana asked. Tana's good mood had evidently soured. She walked ahead of Laylana, not bothering to look back to see if she was still following her.

"Not often we get women here," she replied. "They're almost always angry wives looking for their husbands, or mothers coming after their sons. Right this way."

Laylana frowned. She hadn't meant to spoil the mood.

Tana led her through a pair of double doors watched over by an armed guard into what appeared to be the back room of the brothel.

"You his daughter or something?" Tana asked, perturbed. "Girlfriend?"

"What? No."

"Bounty hunter? Good luck apprehending him."

Laylana was about to ask what she meant by that when a trio of scantily clad women ran in front of them. The women were laughing, as if enjoying the chase. Moments later, a heavily armed man came in lumbering after them.

"Come on, ladies!" he slurred. "You said you would!"

"As if, Terric," one of them answered.

"You're old enough to be my grandfather!" another said.

The man, who unfortunately seemed to be Terric, could barely stand up straight as he brought a bottle to his mouth and downed the contents.

Tana turned to Laylana and thumbed behind her. "There he is. All yours. Come find me if you're interested in a deep body massage." Then she headed back the way she came.

Laylana watched her walk off for a few moments before turning back toward Terric. She couldn't accurately gauge his height, since the older man never stood up straight. When he wasn't leaning against a pillar or wall, he was staggering back and forth. The three women he was chasing scampered off, and he didn't have the energy to go after them.

"Damn. I'll get you..." He took a swig, only to find the bottle was empty. It was at that point, after looking into the bottle and shaking out the last drops, that he noticed Laylana standing there. "Can I... help... you?"

"Terric?" Laylana hoped he would say no.

"Who's asking?" He blinked and attempted to look her up and down. "Bounty hunter, are you?" He dropped the bottle, which surprisingly didn't shatter, and went to draw his sword. Instead his hand slipped on the grip, he lost his footing, and he fell onto his side.

It had been a while since Laylana had to deal with a belligerent drunk, and that one time had been more than enough.

"I... need your help." Laylana took a step toward him. Then, faster than what a man in his condition should have been capable of, Terric climbed back onto his feet and drew his sword.

"Who do you work for?" He wiped his drool with the back of his hand. "Show yourself, demon!"

Laylana lifted her hands and stepped back. "I can assure you I am no demon. I need your help to find the princess."

Terric blinked. Then he blinked a couple more times before sheathing his sword. "I don't take kindly to mockery," he said, his tone somber. "Whoever you are, leave me be. I don't need to be reminded of my failures."

"I'm not mocking you. I—"

"Enough!" He reached down for the bottle, barely able to stay on his feet. "My place is here, in a whiskey bottle, forgotten by the world. Now, I have to go protect some whores."

After once again discovering that the bottle was empty, Terric tossed it aside, and half-limping, half-staggering, he headed off in the direction the three women had disappeared to.

Laylana sighed and scratched the back of her head. "I need a drink."

The tavern of Siren's Song was not a place to go for a quiet drink. Having lucked into an empty table in the corner, Laylana leaned forward, resting her head on her arms as she pondered what to do next. She didn't have much time to think before some of the staff sauntered by the table, hoping to entice Laylana into their beds.

To her own surprise, it failed to work. Despite their overall attractiveness, including one who had beautiful sky-blue eyes, Laylana just wasn't in the mood. She finally had a lead, had made some actual progress, and it had wound up amounting to nothing more than a has-been—a man who couldn't be bothered.

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

“So, what do you need Terric for?” Tana said as she slid into the chair opposite her.

Laylana lifted her head and slouched. “I guess you can call it a job,” she said, figuring it was best to not inform every stranger of her goal. “I’m searching for something, and he supposedly knows where it is.”

Tana cocked an eyebrow, then snickered. “Only thing he’s good at finding is the bottom of a bottle.”

“Figured I’d talk to him again when he’s sober.”

“Hope you don’t mind waiting around for a while, then. When he gets like this, it takes a few hours.” She gestured to one of the sirens as she walked past. “You sure I can’t interest you in one of the women? Or do you prefer men?”

“I’ll have an ale.”

Tana smirked, then snapped her fingers. A moment later, one of the ladies approached the table.

“Yes, mistress? What can I do for you?”

“Get my friend here an ale, and some food.”

The waitress bowed, then left.

“Mistress?” Laylana said, straightening.

“Correct. This is my brothel, after all.” Tana gestured to their surroundings. “The women work for me. I am their caretaker, their mistress.”

“I thought you were—”

“One of the whores?” Tana chuckled. “Good. That is how I want it to seem. Besides, I do enjoy a good lay from time to time. Keeps my mind clear, my skills sharp.”

The waitress returned with a tall wooden mug and a platter of bread, butter, and various meats and cheeses. Laylana didn’t realize how hungry she was until the spread was placed before her. It looked like any other charcuterie board she’d ever been privy to, but it smelled so fresh.

“That’ll be all, Orana,” Tana said with a slight bow.

Laylana cocked an eyebrow as she brought the mug to her lips. “Seems awfully generous.”

Tana fixed her gaze on Laylana as she tapped a finger on her chin.

Laylana looked at her from over the rim of the mug as she took a long sip of the ale. It was room temperature, but as much as she missed a frosty beverage, it didn’t taste all that bad.

“Something I can help you with?”

Tana smiled. “Who are you, really?”

“I’m just a traveler.” Laylana ripped a piece of bread and spread some of the butter onto it.

“There’s more there. More you’re not telling me. Why Terric? There’s plenty of others just like him who aren’t drunk.”

Laylana didn’t answer, instead choosing to randomly sample some of the meat and cheese. She had no idea how to handle this line of questioning. For all she knew, Tana could be another demon in disguise, or working for them.

Tana leaned forward and spoke with a hushed tone. “It’s about the missing princess, isn’t it? Terric was her sworn bodyguard, after all, and she was last seen here in Cralo. It’s how he ended up working here—drunk, penniless, name and reputation as sullied as the gutter I pulled him out of.”

“I was hoping he could help me find her.”

Tana leaned back, a smug, satisfied grin on her lips. “What makes you think you can convince him?”

Laylana took another sip. “New evidence.”

“Bah,” Tana scoffed. “It’s been twelve years. She’s as good as dead.” She stood. “Do me a favor, will you? While you wait for our hired muscle to sober up, don’t just sit here drinking. Throw some money at my girls. They’ll make the wait worth your time.”

Laylana grinned. “How about that massage?”

Tana returned the smile. “Now you’re speaking my language.”

As wonderful and cleansing as her bath with Cassia had been, Laylana was in need of a deep tissue massage. Despite the enhanced abilities granted to her by the goddess’ necklace, her body ached, her legs especially. Wherever she traveled next, she would not do so on foot. She’d go on horseback, or if possible, a wagon of some sort.

She’s had enough walking to last a lifetime. Or two.

Tana’s chambers were what Laylana expected for the owner. They were posh, with a large bed, ornate furniture, a massage table, and a grand view of the lake. There was also a long rack of clothes, several massive trunks, and a vanity with makeup strewn about its surface.

“You’re a very beautiful woman, Laylana,” Tana said as she guided her to the bed. “You’d make a

wonderful prostitute, should you grow tired of travelling.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she replied dryly.

“If you’ll be so kind, please strip. You may place your items on the table here.” She gestured to a small side table as she continued on toward her vanity.

Laylana watched the brothel madam as she slowly undressed. The woman stood beside her vanity, examining clear bottles with various colored liquids in them. She herself had been to a massage parlor only once, back when she was Luke. It had been an interesting experience. Her masseuse had been a guy, and since she had gone with a full-body massage, it meant being naked.

“That’s a lovely necklace you have. Family heirloom?”

“Something like that. You don’t mind if I keep it on, do you?”

Tana glanced over at her from her table. “Don’t trust me?” She winked. “Now, lay face down on the table over there and we’ll get started. Any place in particular that needs attention? Arms? Shoulders? Back? Legs?”

Laylana climbed onto the table, making sure to place her boots with the hidden knife within arm’s reach, just in case. “All over, actually.”

The effect was instantaneous. As Tana’s hands glided across her back, shoulders, and neck, Laylana’s muscles softened and relaxed. There was a delicate, soothing warmth that followed her touch, and the flowery smell of the oils remained her of Cassia.

“You’re definitely tense,” Tana grunted as she worked on a particularly stubborn portion of Laylana’s left shoulder. “Needs a lot of—”

The door burst open. “Unhand her, foul demon!”

Startled, Laylana attempted to grab the dagger from her boot and face the intruder. Instead she fell off the padded table. She got to her feet, knife in hand, only to see Terric standing at the doorway, sword drawn, pointed at Laylana.

“Terric! What are you—”

“Mistress Tana, I’m here to... save...” Terric drifted off as he stared at Laylana.

Laylana had forgotten that she was stark naked until Tana tossed a robe onto her.

“That necklace,” Terric said, lowering his sword. “Where did you get that?”

“Terric, you drunken ass. Explain yourself!” Tana moved to position herself between Laylana and the likely still-drunk Terric.

He ignored Tana and instead fixed his gaze on Laylana. “You wear the necklace of Myrithania. If you’re a thief, prepare to lose your head.” He raised his sword, the sharpened steel pointed at her, unwavering.

Tana stepped aside, looking back and forth between Laylana and Terric.

“I am no thief,” Laylana said, returning his gaze. “I am the goddess’ chosen.”

“A liar and a thief,” Terric said with a grin. He stepped forward.

“So it is true,” Tana muttered. “What they were saying about Braedon. The demon there.”

“Jororyn’s dead. I killed him. The town is free.”

Terric frowned. “Then what you were saying earlier...”

“I need your help, Terric. To find the princess.”

After a few tense moments, Terric straightened and sheathed his sword. “Then what are we waiting for?” Then he fell forward, and snoring filled the room.

Tana sighed. “He’ll be like that for a while. Hop back onto the table. The goddess’ chosen is getting the best damn massage of her life.”

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

Chapter 21: *Toward the Rising Sun*

In the time it took for Terric to wake up, Tana had finished working out all the kinks, knots, and stiffness in Laylana's body. Wholly satisfied with the job done by the brothel mistress, Laylana upgraded the package to add three additional women. Their names she likely wouldn't remember, but she'd certainly remember the experience. There was nothing quite like being a part of a five-woman orgy, bodies glistening with sweat and the fragrant oils Tana had used during the massage.

When Terric did return, he did so the correct way: by knocking on the door and waiting to be summoned.

Laylana sat in a tub, but not alone. Tana sat behind her and rubbed her shoulders. Upon seeing the two women naked in the tub, Terric averted his eyes.

"Modesty? Really, Terric?" Tana jeered. "You've seen more women naked in the past week than most men do in their lifetimes.

Terric coughed, but eventually turned his gaze to the women. "My apologies, it's just... Champion, please get dressed so that we can discuss our plans."

"Laylana," Laylana said. "Call me Laylana."

After a moment, Terric nodded. "I'll be downstairs." Then he turned and left.

"Promise me something," Tana said as Laylana climbed out of the tub. "Take care of him, will you?"

Laylana looked toward the door, then back at Tana, who had all but submerged into the still-hot water. "I'll do my best."

"Come back when it's all done, okay?" Tana rested on the rim of the tub, chin propped by her elbows. "It's not every day you get to wait upon the goddess' champion."

Laylana said nothing as she stood in the doorway. Instead she gave Tana a warm and comforting smile.

As she descended the stairs, Laylana recounted all the people—notably women—who she'd made that same promise to, from pure souls like Cassia, to demons like Saeryia. How many other towns were like Braedon, or tribes like Leha's? How many creatures used to be like Cassia, but had succumbed to corruption and demonic magic?

Terric leaned against the wall at the base of the stairs. "Come with me. We need to speak privately."

When sober, Terric was an imposing man. Even with the gray in his hair and beard, he was a full head taller than Laylana, broad shouldered with deep green-gray eyes. He led her down a narrow hallway in the back portion of the brothel.

"These are my chambers. We'll talk here." He gestured for her to enter, then closed and locked the door behind them, but not before peering into the hallway to see if they'd been followed.

The room was, for lack of a better word, a mess, which Laylana supposed was appropriate for a man who had apparently spent all of his time either drinking or chasing after the women who worked in the brothel he was the hired muscle for.

He claimed the only chair in the room, and after rubbing his face and temples, looked up at Laylana. His was a cold, unwavering stare, as if he was trying to bore directly into her mind or soul. When he spoke, his tone was as serious as his expression.

"I am going to ask you some questions, and I expect nothing less than the truth, understand?"

Laylana gulped as childhood memories of her father lecturing her for something she'd done flashed before her mind's eye. When she finally nodded, he continued.

"Where did you find the goddess' gem?"

Laylana frowned. There was absolutely no way she was going to tell him that not only was she not from this world, but that when she'd come here, she had done so as a man, or that she'd found the clearing after getting violated by a massive tentacle beast.

"In the forest. I entered from Serridale. After wandering for a few days, I came upon a clearing. There was a ruined temple, and the necklace was there." Her frown deepened. The more she recalled the event, the more it labeled her as a thief.

Terric must've been thinking the same thing, because he stood and drew his sword. "So you are a thief—a heretic masquerading as the goddess' champion." He took a fighting stance and Laylana stepped back. "I'll give you a chance to die honorably, thief. My sword may be old, but it's still sharp enough to lop off your head."

The necklace thrummed against her chest, and when Terric took another step forward, Laylana's body moved on its own, lifting the necklace out from beneath her attire. The gemstone glowed, illuminating the dim room

with a vibrant pink light.

Terric's expression changed from fury to disbelief, and finally to remorse. His sword slipped out of his grasp as he dropped to one knee, turning his gaze to the floor.

"Please forgive my transgressions. I... I've lost all hope. Goddess forgive me, for I have failed you."

A surge of energy flowed through her, and when Laylana spoke, her voice reverberated. "Terric, all hope is not lost. Aid my champion in her search. Gather the artifacts. Find the princess. My power hangs on by a thread. You... have not... failed..."

Laylana's body went limp as the energy left her, but Terric managed to catch her before she fell to the ground and set her onto the chair.

"That was..." She blinked and rubbed her forehead.

"I am truly sorry for doubting you, Champion. It's been... an awfully long time since I had any hope."

"Laylana," she said. "And it's okay. I understand. Just glad you didn't lop my head off."

Terric stood and scratched the back of his head. "Again, sorry." He paced about his room. "I can't believe it. The princess... she's alive somewhere." He pulled Laylana to her feet. "Come, gather your things. We must leave at once."

"Where are we going?" Laylana said, still a little uneasy from the experience of being possessed by a goddess.

"Laekerah Desert to the east. The Staff of the Goddess rests at the base of a mountain in the sacred village of Asyar. This is the first of the artifacts we must gather."

"The first? As in there's more than one?"

Terric tossed an assortment of clothing into a knapsack, only to reconsider and upend it back onto the floor.

"The Demon King tried to kill the goddess Myrithania, but she was able to imbue her essence into several relics: that necklace, a staff, a helm, and shield. Princess Kaetha went in search of them in hopes of using their power to defeat the Demon King."

He tossed the pile aside and scratched his head.

Laylana cocked her head to the side. "Should I... come back later?"

"Yes. Pack light. Take only what you need to survive." He looked past her at the door. "I... have some things I need to take of first. We leave at dawn."

The night sky was awash with stars. Torches illuminated the cobblestone streets of Cralo as Laylana attempted to find her way back to the inn.

As much fun as the forest had been, she was not looking forward to navigating a desert. The heat always made her miserable. Who knew what kind of monsters might be lurking out there? Were there massive sand worms like in Dune? Or maybe something like the sarlacc from Star Wars?

Terric's words echoed in her head: Take only what you need to survive. There was no way she was about to just toss the items she's lugged this far. Sure, part of her would feel no loss for the regal dresses, and maybe the demonic dildo, but the considerable amount of gold coins and precious stones she carried were definitely worth finding some sort of long-term storage for.

"Ah, what can I do for our esteemed guest?" The innkeeper's expression improved dramatically as Laylana approached the desk.

Laylana scratched her chin. "Does this town have some sort of... storage facility? I have some items of great... sentimental value that I'd like to lock away safely until I return."

The innkeeper nodded. "The bank should be able to help you."

The Bank of Cralo was located in the very center of town, and one of the buildings that ringed the plaza. What surprised her the most wasn't the size of it—it was smaller than she'd expected—but that it was still open this late in the evening.

What didn't surprise her was that she still needed to fill out paperwork.

Into the trunk went the princess's dresses, all the gemstones, the bulk of the gold coins, and the demonic dildo. As she held it in her hands, Laylana got the urge to use it. The room was private, and the bank employee had said to take all the time she needed, since the hour was late.

In the end, Laylana decided not to, seeing as to how only an hour or so ago, her body had been possessed by the goddess herself, and it probably wasn't the best idea to seek pleasure in the form of a sex toy gifted to her by a succubus. Laylana realized she probably shouldn't trust Saeryia at all. Who knew what kind of spell or curse Saeryia might've put on the object?

She whispered an apology, then tossed the item into trunk. The bank gave her a copy of the key and

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

finalized the deposit with a fingerprint made in blood. Then, with her backpack significantly lighter, Laylana decided the best place to stay the night would be back at the Siren's Song.

A thick fog covered the town as she silently followed Terric through the streets. She still wasn't fully awake by the time they got to their destination: the stable. Seeing the horse she was supposed to ride lifted what grogginess remained as Terric effortlessly climbed up onto the dark brown steed. Laylana had ridden a horse before, but only once when she was fourteen.

"Do you not know how to ride?" Terric grumbled.

The stableboy, a stick of a boy probably half her age, helped her up onto the smaller chestnut horse. "Its... been a while."

Terric sighed. "I hope you're a quick learner." Then he spurred his horse on.

Before Laylana could say anything, the stableboy smacked the backside of her horse, and off she went. Several frantic and heart-pounding minutes later, Laylana and her horse reached a mutual understanding and followed Terric out of town, where they turned east and traveled along the road that skirted the northern border of the forest.

It was a bumpy ride. Laylana remembered how sore she'd been from her half-day easy ride back when she was a teenager. Given the pace Terric had set, there was no way she would be able to walk tomorrow.

The morning mist still blanketed the hilly farmland north of the forest as the sun rose, painting the landscape in an array of reds, oranges, and purples. It wasn't until the sun was high in the sky that Terric decided to not only take a break, but to speak to Laylana for the first time since they'd mounted the horses.

"We ride till sundown. Then we camp."

Laylana took the opportunity to stretch her already aching body as the horses drank from a river. "Where are we going?"

Terric glanced over at her as he inspected his horse's saddle. "Where are you from? You seem to know nothing about Vaelshore."

"I, uh, am from the forest. We had a small cabin. Well-isolated. I was an only child."

Terric muttered something unintelligible, but from the sounds of it, he believed Laylana's lie. Then he gestured at the sword on her hip. "I assume you know how to use that?"

"I'm still alive, aren't I?" She shrugged.

Terric frowned, then climbed back onto his horse. "Then tonight you train."

Much to her own surprise, Laylana was able to get back onto her horse on her first attempt. "Great," she mumbled.

For the entirety of the day's journey, the forest remained to their right as they traveled along the east road. It was no wonder she'd spent so much time within the forest's border. It was bigger than she'd imagined. It was probably bigger than Los Angeles or New York City. As nice as a car, or even a helicopter would be right now, she was just glad not to be traveling on foot.

Despite Terric's stoic silence, it wasn't a bad first day's ride. Her horse seemed to know the way, so Laylana was able to take in the scenery. Memories of staring out the window on long car rides came back to her, her imagination taking her beyond what she could see from the road. That had been the kind of exploration she could only do in an open-world video game, until she'd arrived in this place.

The downside to the silent ride was that it gave her plenty of time to think.

On the second day, as the road that bordered the forest turned south, Terric and Laylana continued east through rolling grassy hills, then around the northern end of a small mountain chain that headed south into the eastern edge of the forest. Once more Terric said little to nothing as they rode, waiting until they camped for the night to acknowledge her existence, and only then to lecture and train her in swordplay.

As thankful as she was to learn how to actually use a sword, all Laylana wanted to do after a day of riding was take a long, hot bath and sleep. What she wouldn't have given for Tana's skilled hands.

On the third day, as the air grew warmer and drier and the grass gave way to dirt and rocks, they arrived at the town of Whitgulf.

As they approached the gate, Terric turned to Laylana and offered a warning. "Trust no one. Speak to no one about who we are or where we are going. We are only here to rest and stock up for our journey into the sands. From here on out, our path only gets more difficult."

Laylana looked behind them at the setting sun and hoped she'd see those woods again soon.

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

Chapter 22: *Tainted History*

Whitgulf was as welcoming as a stone floor was comfortable to sleep on. It was a border town, as Terric described it to her, and a crossroads between the desert peninsula and the central heart of Vaelshore. For Laylana, the most welcoming part was the crash of ocean waves. It was a town of fish and sand, warm, salty air, and townsfolk as abrasive as the barnacles that grew on the boats in the harbor.

Laylana pulled her cloak tight and her hood over her head as she followed Terric through the streets. They were trading their horses in for a pair born and raised in the desert.

Terric spoke little to Laylana as he found them a place to stay, as well as when they sat across from each other eating a surprisingly delicious bowl of seafood stew. What few words he did say to her were almost generic, vague, as if he suspected someone was spying on them. He was taking this task, this quest, very, very seriously. She'd never known anyone quite so committed, so focused. It was no wonder he'd been Princess Kaetha's bodyguard. Laylana could only wonder what had been going through his head since the Myrithania spoke to him through her.

"Are there demons out this far?" she asked when they had returned to their lodging, a sparse closet of a room with two twin beds.

Terric glanced over at her as he inspected the goods they'd bought earlier. "There are demons in all parts of Vaelshore. The Demon King and his cultists came from the Laekerah Desert, but there are older, fouler evils in the desert to the east, as well as in the northern frostlands and the jungles along the western shore. Demons are only a recent addition to these ancient lands."

He jerked his head toward the bed that Laylana sat on the edge of. "Get some rest. Traveling through the desert makes our previous journey seem like a pleasant walk in the fields."

Laylana shrugged and lay down, knowing full well that whatever sleep she got wouldn't be enough.

"Welcome to the Laekerah Desert," Terric muttered.

Laylana had expected to see something like the Sahara—rolling sand dunes as far as the eye could see—but instead it was something more akin to the Southwestern United States: a dry, sunbaked, rocky landscape. When she mentioned as much to Terric, he simply laughed.

"It's a two-day trip," he told her, "if we're lucky."

Laylana frowned, then pulled her facemask up as the wind shifted toward them.

The sun bore down on them unrelentingly. It took only a few minutes before she found the heat intolerable. She kept her rumblings to herself, since Terric wouldn't know the first thing about air conditioning. What very little shade they could find in the broken landscape provided little reprieve.

As the sun started to descend, the wind shifted. Laylana glanced over her shoulder and her stomach sank.

"Uh, Terric," she shouted ahead to him. "I think we have a problem."

He turned back toward her, then at what her gaze was fixed on. "What is... Goddess help us."

Laylana had only seen sandstorms in the movies. It rumbled toward her like a wave on the beach after it crested. But instead of white seafoam, it was a rusty, copper-brown that made her feel no bigger than a grain of sand.

She heard it then, the distant roar like a stampede.

"Come on! Let's go!" Terric shouted. "We need to get below ground!"

She didn't need to be told twice. Her horse seemed to know what to do as well, since it took off at a full gallop, following Terric.

After several heart-pounding minutes, the pair descended into a ravine. Visibility had dropped significantly; a few minutes more, and they would've been stranded. The wind continued to buffet them as they searched for a cave big enough to hide in. Brilliant flashes of lightning lit up the sky like fireworks, the roar of the wind so loud she couldn't hear herself think.

It was noticeably cooler in the cave, but as the storm rolled over them, the sun disappeared and the world turned dark. While thankfully not pitch-black, it was too dark to take in her surroundings, and Laylana hoped that they had not entered the dwelling of some desert monster.

She didn't have to wait long, as after a few moments, Terric illuminated their hideaway with a torch.

"Well, I'll be," he muttered.

Laylana's jaw hung slack as she took in their surroundings. This wasn't a cave, but an antechamber. The

J. Dylana - Champion of the Goddess

light from the torch almost reached the far side, and she could just barely make out what looked to be carvings on the wall.

“What is this place?”

Terric frowned. “A temple of Satar, the Snake God. He and his followers were cast down by Myrithania a millennia ago. As ancient as this ruin may be, it would be best to stay clear of it. His evil may still linger within its walls.”

Laylana could make out the serpentine nature of the carvings now. “I assume Satar was not a nice god.”

“He held dominion over blood sacrifices, mind control, and slavery, among other things. Legends say his most devoted followers were transformed into snake-human monstrosities. The goddess cast him down and cursed him and his followers. I’m sure there are other ruins like this buried deep under the sands of Laekerah Desert.” He turned back to the horses. “We’ll camp here and wait out the storm.”

Laylana frowned. She had hoped to explore the ruins and see if there was any treasure. But perhaps it wouldn’t be the best idea to investigate the ancient temple of an evil snake god. Knowing her luck, she’d awaken some giant world-eater serpent, or fall through a trap and get impaled on a floor of spikes. Or maybe she’d get crushed by a stone ceiling, or otherwise suffer in any number of ways depicted in adventure films like Indiana Jones or The Mummy.

Any treasure that may have lain in wait would likely be cursed. After all, the last treasure she’d found turned her into a woman, and that was the necklace of a benevolent goddess. Whatever she found in this Temple of Satar wouldn’t be as nice.

Laylana waved off the ruins and turned toward the makeshift fire. It was best to leave some ancient ruins unexplored. Maybe when this was all said and done, she could come back—after Myrithania’s power was fully restored.

She wasn’t sure when she had fallen asleep, but Terric wasn’t the friendliest of alarm clocks. She’d thought he’d treat the goddess’ champion with a bit more respect, but he decided to wake her up with a couple nudges of his booted foot.

The world outside was unnervingly quiet. The dim, pre-dawn light transformed the Laekerah Desert into an alien landscape. She could see for miles in all directions, and for the first time, their destination. Ahead of them stood a solitary mountain, not quite to the scale of Fuji or Kilimanjaro, but still impressive.

“We’re not climbing to the top, are we?”

“Afraid of heights, Laylana?” Terric glanced back at her. “No, the staff is located in a shrine at the foot of the mountain, near the holy city of Asyar.” He pointed out a very dim collection of lights near the base. “But I fear after twelve years of the Demon King’s rule, the city has become anything but the holy place it used to be.”

“What’s the significance of the mountain?”

“The peak is where Myrithania fought and defeated Satar. Pilgrims would climb the mountain as a test of faith and hope she would answer their prayers.”

They rode the rest of the way in silence. The sky remained clear and the air calm as they neared their destination. But even from afar, Laylana knew something was wrong.

As they drew in close, Terric’s worst fears were confirmed. The once-holy city of Asyar had fallen to ruin, and it was anything but abandoned.

All eyes turned toward Laylana and Terric as they slowly passed through the crumbling walls. Everywhere she looked, someone stared back, from dark windows to darker alleys, rooftops and scaffolding. Even the street merchants looked upon the duo with a calculating gaze.

But no one said anything. No one hassled or tried to rob them, and Laylana didn’t relax until they pulled into a stable.

“How long you plan on staying?” The stablemaster, a man with a long, black and white beard, looked them both up and down as he took the reins.

“Just for the night,” Terric said. “Is there a place we can get some food?”

The stablemaster glanced over at Laylana, who tugged at her facemask to make sure it was up over her nose.

“First time in Asyar?” he asked.

Laylana nodded, but Terric said, “I was here fifteen years ago or so.”

The stablemaster’s gaze lingered on Laylana for a moment before turning to Terric. “Lot’s changed. Town isn’t safe. Don’t start any trouble and you’ll be fine.”

Terric paid the man with a gold coin. “I need some information.”

J. Dylana - Champion of the Goddess

What remained of the shrine had been desecrated. The staff was gone, and the stone altar that had once proudly displayed it was broken. Laylana could feel the rage emanating from Terric, but she felt nothing coming from her necklace. The gem had been quiet since Myrithania's brief possession of Laylana, and she hoped that the power still remained within the necklace and that it hadn't slipped away, reducing it to nothing more than a piece of expensive jewelry.

Laylana wasn't surprised at the staff's absence. Asyar wasn't a secret village; it was widely known that the staff would be here. It had been twelve years since the Demon King had taken over, and since it apparently did not have some sort of magical field to protect it, it was no surprise that someone would've taken it. The question was: who?

She opened her mouth to speak, to say something like, "Maybe the princess has it," but she decided against it.

"I need a drink," he muttered.

The tavern that Terric decided to enter was the seediest place Laylana had ever laid eyes on. It made the Mos Eisley Cantina from Star Wars look like a children's playground. Everyone was armed in some way, carrying knives, swords, axes, spears, and even a bow. Grizzled men hunched over drinks and cards, and a prostitute was draped across the lap of some ugly fella who had more scars than teeth.

Then there were the three robed men in the corner, dressed very similarly to the cultists who had taken Leha's tribe hostage. The fact that worshipers of the Demon King were not just welcome, but paying clients of this establishment did not bode well.

There was a crash, some shouting, and before Laylana could figure out what was going on, Terric grabbed her by the arm and pulled her toward the door. There were men waiting for them outside—a half dozen or so heavily armed thugs.

Without hesitation, Terric drew his sword and went after the closest ruffian. By the time Laylana drew her own weapon, two of them were dead. Terric grabbed her by the arm and ran off, leading her toward the stable.

"What happened back there?!" she shouted.

Terric said nothing. He no longer held her arm as the pair barreled through the darkening streets of the once-holy city of Asyar. Word seemed to have spread, as everywhere they turned, thugs were waiting for them.

They turned a corner and sprinted down an alleyway. Then someone else grabbed Laylana's arm and pulled her aside.

A hand covered her mouth. "Come with me," a male voice said. "I know who you are. Trust me."

Terric came running after her, sword drawn as Laylana was released. She spun around to see her captor, but the man wore a face wrap. All she could see were his eyes as he waved for them to follow.

"Come on, you don't have much time."

Then he opened a hatch in the floor and jumped in. Laylana followed after him.

"Wait, we don't know who he is. We can't trust him," Terric said.

"Yeah, but there's about twenty men chasing after us looking to kill us, so... I'll take my chances."

Then she climbed down into the hole and hoped she wasn't making a huge mistake.

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

Chapter 23: *The Jewel of the Desert*

Thankfully, the only thing waiting for Laylana besides her supposed rescuer was dust and detritus. The small room that the hatch led to looked to have once been storage. It was for the most part empty, except for the remnants of a few crates and barrels.

Terric joined them not long after Laylana made the plunge, and the stranger closed the hatch just as the footsteps and shouting following them grew louder.

"Who are—" Terric began to say before the stranger brought a finger to his lips and pointed above them.

The three of them waited for what felt like an eternity until the chaos above went quiet. Then after another minute or so just for good measure, the stranger revealed himself.

"My name is Arokath," he said. He had dark, messy hair, a goatee, and tanned skin, and Laylana guessed he was close to her age, maybe a few years younger. He bowed. "Welcome to my home, Champion of the goddess."

Laylana couldn't help but blush as he kissed the back of her hand. But then she snapped out of it and pulled her hand away. Terric placed the edge of his sword under Arokath's chin and the man straightened, smirking.

He raised his hands defensively. "I'm on your side, I promise." He flashed a wide, toothy grin.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't spill your blood," Terric said. "Start with explaining how you know who she is."

"We don't get many outsiders here. I followed you to the shrine. You're here for the staff, are you not? Oh, and I had a dream about you, Laylana—a very lovely dream."

Terric pressed the sword into Arokath's neck, forcing him to stiffen. "You're a filthy liar."

"I swear. The goddess, she came to me in a dream a few nights back. She showed me you. Told me to help. The necklace. I know you wear it. I saw it."

"What color is my hair?" Laylana said.

"Brown. And let me just say you have such lovely brown eyes."

She blushed again, thankful to have the wrap hiding it. She couldn't deny that Arokath was attractive—he had this roguish, bad boy charm that seemed to work on women. But despite having been transformed into a woman, Laylana still seemed to retain most of her original male identity and sexual preferences, though she wondered if over time that too would change.

"Do you know where the staff is?" she asked.

Arokath pointed at the sword. "Can you tell your bodyguard to relax? I swear I'm here to help."

Laylana nodded at Terric, who after a few moments of hesitation lowered his blade.

"So where is it?" Terric asked.

"Nelashara."

Terric swore under his breath and Laylana looked between the two men. "Where's that?"

Arokath gave Laylana a look that was a mixture of surprise and uncertainty. "South of here. The heart of the desert. It's a wonderful—"

Terric interrupted. "It's a bastion of degeneracy."

"I was going to say the jewel of the desert and a free city where you can live your life as you want, but sure." Arokath shrugged. "A bastion of degeneracy."

"How do you know it's there?" Terric rubbed his forehead. When Arokath didn't respond, Terric raised his sword, the tip inches from Arokath's throat. "How do you know?"

"It's in the hands of a private collector," he said, scratching the back of his head. "I, uh, was sort of hired to get it for him."

Laylana had to act quickly, otherwise Terric would've lopped off Arokath's head right then and there. She pulled Terric back as the old warrior swore up a storm more violent than the sandstorm they'd hidden from. Arokath seemed more worried about the noise Terric was making than the threat on his life.

"Shut up, you idiot," Arokath said in a hushed shout. "They'll find us."

Terric pulled himself free from Laylana and grabbed Arokath by the throat. "You stole the Staff of the Goddess for some... private collector? A holy relic of Myrithania is on display in the most wretched of towns to exist in Vaelshore?!"

"Look, I'm sorry..." Arokath struggled to breathe. "But... but I'm trying to..."

"Terric!" Laylana grabbed his arm. "You're going to kill him!"

Terric scowled, but eventually released the thief. He sheathed his sword.

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

Arokath coughed and rubbed at his throat. “Look, I know what I did was terrible, but I was only trying to survive, okay?” He stood and took a few steps away from Terric. “I’m not happy about going back there, either, but she chose me.” He glanced over at Laylana. “Just like she chose you.”

Terric nodded. “Take us to the staff and let it serve as your penance.”

Arokath sighed. “We’ll leave after sundown.”

Under the cover of darkness, Arokath guided Laylana and Terric through the side streets and alleys of Asyar. They moved quickly and quietly, and Laylana couldn’t help but smile at the fact that for the first time in her life, she felt like a ninja. As much as she enjoyed stealth-based games and missions, she almost never completed them on the first try. Through trial and error, and many, many quick saves and reloads, she would figure out the path through a level without getting caught. There was none of that here, which made it all the more fun and terrifying.

Thankfully, their horses were still at the stable. Terric paid the stablemaster another gold coin, and he let them leave without any trouble. It wasn’t until the city was a tiny speck of light behind them that they slowed down.

“That was fun, wasn’t it?” Arokath laughed and slapped his leg. “I told you I’d get you out of town safe and sound.”

“We’re not safe until we leave this desert with the staff,” Terric grumbled.

“Not to worry, we’ll get to Nelashara by sunup. It’s the safest time to enter the city. That’s when it’s the quietest and the streets are empty.” He turned toward Laylana and his tone became serious. “I must warn you about the town. Nelashara has this... air about it. If you’re not careful, it’ll pull you in and you’ll find yourself unwilling to leave.”

“Who has the staff?” Terric asked.

“A man by the name of Athanas. He’s a crime lord, one of the handful who—”

“A crime lord?!” Terric fumed.

“Yes, a crime lord. Look, I was a street rat trying to survive. I pissed off the wrong person, so I either had to get the staff or be made an example of. As I was saying, he’s one of a handful fighting for control of the city.”

“What’s the plan?” Laylana asked. “We’re not just going to walk right in and take it, I hope?”

Arokath shook his head. “No, no, no. You’re not doing anything. At least, not right away. First thing is to get settled in a small, no-name inn. There the both of you will wait while I snoop around. Gather some information. Reach out to some old contacts.”

“You expect us to sit around and do nothing? To trust you?” Terric growled.

“Yes.” Arokath glanced back at Terric. “You are obviously an outsider.” He turned to Laylana. “And you would wind up in chains in some dark, back-alley brothel. No offense.”

Laylana sighed. The last thing she needed was to become some brothel slave. She’d prefer the swamp monster to that, since at least it had let her go when it was done with her. Or even Saeryia; the succubus would take care of her in some sense.

She glanced down at the ring on her hand. She hoped all was well with Leha, with Cassia, and with the folks of Braedon.

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Arokath occasionally hummed a tune to himself, but neither Terric nor Laylana said anything. Terric’s eyes were always looking ahead, fixed on the rogue guiding them through the desert. But Laylana spent most of her time looking up at the night sky, its countless stars, and the unfamiliar constellations. Wherever this world was, it was far from Earth.

The sun had risen over the mountains to the east by the time she laid eyes on the city. As much as she dreaded it, she was glad to finally be there. It meant getting off her horse and enjoying some shelter, food, and water—and a bed.

There were no armed guards posted at the gate, but the massive wood doors were thrown open—doors that, as Arokath had mentioned, were only open during the day. At sunset they closed and would remain shut through the night. No one would be allowed in or out unless they scaled the massive walls.

It was far bigger than Cralo, but at first glance, the city didn’t seem all that special. The streets were mostly empty, a few citizens milling about as street vendors got ready. They got some stares, but none lingered too long. It was a far more friendly welcome than they’d received in Asyar, but after sundown, Laylana was sure she would see the city’s real face.

The inn Arokath chose was a lot like the dingy room Laylana had shared with Terric in Whitgulf, only worse. The window was no bigger than a pizza box, and it only opened a couple of inches. The two twin beds were the only furniture in the room, other than the small box in the corner that held the chamber pot.

After getting them settled, Arokath returned after a few minutes with food and water. “I’m going to go see

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

what I can find. I have no idea when I'll be back, but no matter what happens, do not leave this room."

"What about food?" Laylana asked.

"Good point." Arokath nodded. "There's plenty to eat and drink around here, but whatever you do, do not wander far. Stay clear of any dark alleys and do not—I repeat, do not—go anywhere near the city center."

With that, he closed the door and left. Terric moved to the window and watched. Laylana, on the other hand, decided to get some much-needed rest.

When she woke, the sky was dark and Terric still hovered by the window. There was some food laid out for her, and she was about to ask what time it was but stopped herself.

"He's still not back," Terric muttered. "Eat. I'm tired of waiting. He's not coming back."

Laylana rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. "Terric, no. He said to wait. We must trust—"

"Trust him? A no-good thief? Because of him, we're in this mess."

"It's been, what, twelve years since the Demon King took over? You saw what the town looked like. If Arokath hadn't stolen it, then someone else might have."

Terric pulled his gaze away from the window to glare down at Laylana. "Princess Kaetha might've found the staff. Maybe she's here somewhere. A prisoner."

"You don't know that." Laylana stood. "You said there were other relics, right? What if she went after one of those instead of the staff?"

Terric strode toward the door and opened it. "Stay here. Wait for our good-for-nothing guide—if he even does return." He glanced back at Laylana. "I'm going to have a look around."

He didn't wait for a response.

"Terric, you stupid fucking bastard," Laylana grumbled. She paced around the tiny bedroom, practically pulling her hair out as she debated what to do next. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!"

She ran over to the window and saw Terric storm out into the street. He looked around briefly before heading toward what looked like the city center.

"Shit, shit, shit," Laylana cursed. Her armor lay at the foot of her bed. She didn't have time to put it on. She left her sword as well, bringing only her knife, her cloak, and her traveling clothes.

The streets were a lot more crowded than it had been when they'd first arrived. The city center was easy to spot—the main road went straight toward it. From a distance, the town looked to be circular in layout, which meant any major road would lead straight to the heart of the city. Laylana would just have to remember which one was hers.

"Oh, I'm so fucked," she muttered as she half-walked, half-jogged toward the bright lights.

J. Dylana - Champion of the Goddess

Chapter 24: *Ambrosia*

There was no way Laylana would find Terric in this crowd. The road was packed full of people moving from one establishment to the next, some fully clothed, others completely naked, almost all under the influence of one substance or another. It reminded her of the streets of New Orleans during Mardi Gras or Brazil during Carnival.

Squeezing through the gyrating crowd, Laylana managed to escape the mob of people and stepped into what looked like one of the main establishments. The five-story building had an opulent exterior, and an interior that made the Siren's Song back in Cralo look like a small-town strip club on a Tuesday morning.

Despite having enough room to swing a sword and not hit anybody, the air in the building felt stuffy. It had a light floral scent to it that was almost sweet. She gasped for breath alongside the inner wall and found a chair to gather herself on. Laylana had never been a fan of crowds. They always made her anxious, claustrophobic.

She wasn't sure whether it was a product of navigating the crowd or the heavily perfumed air in this building, but she was starting to feel a bit lightheaded. Fast, off-tempo drums from outside clashed with a more ornate, elegant strings from deeper within the establishment.

This was a terrible idea. Arokath had probably returned to the inn not long after she'd left.

"Miss? Are you all right?"

Laylana lifted her head out of her hands to see a woman standing beside her. She wore an elegant, yet provocative jade dress trimmed with gold. Her hair was a deep, dark black, yet her eyes were an almost copper color that nearly matched her skin. She wore heavy makeup in a style often used by porn stars and adult entertainers. She was adorned in jewelry, chandelier earrings, bracelets, armbands, and even a choker, all of which were bedazzled with gold, silver, and precious stones in a variety of colors.

Laylana looked around. There were other women dressed nearly identically, though they differed in appearances.

The woman bent down and placed a hand on Laylana's. Her nails were long, polished, and painted black. They came to a point like the talons of a bird.

"You look unwell. Is something wrong?"

Laylana looked away from the stranger. "I'm looking for someone. A friend."

The woman helped Laylana up. "What do they look like?"

"He's a man. Tall, older. Gray hair. He's wearing a cloak, and..." Laylana blinked.

"And what?" The woman placed her hand on Laylana's shoulder. "Are you sure you're okay? Would you like some water? Maybe something to eat?"

Laylana turned toward the exit. "I'm sorry, I need to find him."

She took a couple steps, but collapsed. Her head swam, her vision blurry. Something was wrong. Was she tired? Thirsty, maybe? She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten.

The woman helped her back up. "You're in no shape to go looking for your friend. Come with me. You need to rest. Let me give you something to drink. It'll make you feel better."

Another woman approached with a cup. Unlike the other woman, this new one had long blonde hair and fair skin. The first woman took the cup and offered it to Laylana. The liquid that swirled about in the wide, decorative vessel gave off the same fragrance she'd smelled when she'd first entered the building.

"You look so very thirsty," the woman said. "The air here is so dry and hot. Did you just arrive?"

Laylana nodded and brought the cup to her lips despite the voice in her head warning her not to. But she was so very thirsty. It had an almost citrus flavor to it, but nothing that she could recognize. But even after the first sip, she felt better.

The woman took the cup away when Laylana had finished the rest, handing it off to yet another woman wearing the same jade dress.

"Come, tell me about your friend while we get you someplace where you can rest."

The woman guided her deeper into the building, away from the main floor through a set of doors. With each step, Laylana felt better. The stress and anxiety, the fear of not finding Terric or Arokath, and the weight upon her shoulders simply... vanished.

"What was his name?" the woman asked. "I'm sure we can help you find him."

They walked down a short hallway and into a room. It was lavishly decorated with a large vanity and mirror that looked like the ones Laylana had seen back in Cralo with that woman—what was her name? She ran the

brothel...

Her escort handed her another cup. "Do you remember your friend's name?"

Laylana took a sip. It tasted much better this time, not as sour. She opened her mouth to speak, but her words failed her. She could picture his face, but his name... she couldn't remember. It started with a "T," right?

She was so very thirsty.

The woman took the cup away and set it on the table. Laylana looked at the empty container. There was something in the liquid. Something that was making her...

"Don't worry if you can't remember his name. I'm sure it'll come to you." The woman gently rubbed Laylana's shoulders. "Do you feel better? You can rest here as long as you want."

She handed Laylana the cup again. It was full. When did it get refilled?

"Let's get you out of those filthy clothes and into something a little more comfortable. How does that sound?"

Laylana took another sip. Whatever it was tasted sweeter. It was so very good, and she was still so very thirsty.

A couple other women appeared. They helped her to her feet and gently assisted her in changing out of her clothes. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Something was... different. Her hair—was it always this long? It flowed down past her shoulders to her breasts. The color was different too. It was lighter—much lighter.

This drink, it's...

"My name is Nesaea," the woman said. "Can you tell me yours?"

Laylana opened her mouth to speak, but the word never came. What was her name? How could she forget her name? She needed to get out of here. There was something... someone she was searching for.

"Kylira, is it?" Nesaea said. "Such a beautiful name, don't you think? Do you feel better?"

She looked at her reflection. Her hair was fully blonde, and her breasts—were they always this big?

"Kylira? Is something the matter?" Nesaea combed her fingers through her long blonde hair. It was a bright, golden color. Her hair wasn't supposed to be blonde, was it? It was...

The other women lifted her shirt up over her head. She stood naked before Nesaea, her full breasts, narrow waist, and wide hips on full display. She caught the reflection of her necklace in the mirror.

"My, my, that's a pretty necklace," Nesaea said. "Where did you get it, Kylira?"

"I... I don't know," Kylira said. "I've always had it."

Nesaea reached out and touched the necklace, but pulled her hand back as if it had burned her.

"Mistress, are you all right?" one of the other women asked.

Nesaea shook the pain from her hand. "I'm all right. Continue." She turned to Kylira. "Let's get you ready, Kylira. The night is young, and there's a full moon out."

Kylira turned back toward her reflection in the mirror. Was that her name? She couldn't remember. It must be, or else why would Nesaea call her that? There was something else, though. Something seemed... wrong. Like she was forgetting something. Something important.

The other women helped her into a jade dress. It fit her perfectly, hugging every curve of her body as if she were meant to wear it.

Nesaea gave her another glass. Whatever this drink was, it was unbelievably delicious, and it made her feel wonderful.

"What about the necklace?" one of the women asked.

"Leave it. We'll figure that out later," Nesaea said.

They decorated Kylira in jewelry and painted her face. Dark eye shadow ringed her sapphire eyes and her thick lips shone with pink gloss. They polished and painted her fingernails a matching pink, and finished with a couple sprays of perfume, a flowery fragrance that made Kylira smile.

When they were all done, Nesaea took Kylira by the hand and helped her up. "Come, Kylira."

"Where are we going?" Kylira asked.

"Why, to see to our clients, of course, silly girl. You remember, don't you?"

Kylira smiled and nodded. "Yes. Of course, Mistress Nesaea."

"Good, then let's begin," Nesaea said, leading Kylira out of the dressing room and onto the main floor where the night's clients awaited her.

To be continued...

J. Dylena - Champion of the Goddess

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Champion of the Goddess*, Book Two of *The Tainted Forest*. I hope you enjoyed it!

For updates and more, follow me on Twitter @SashaDylena