Sea Glass

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Extract

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MARIA V. SNYDER

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WORRY AND DREAD clawed at my stomach. I read the message again. The order was clear and concise. *Return to the Citadel immediately and report directly to the Council Hall.* The signatures of the entire Sitian Council and all three Master Magicians were scrawled under the missive. A bit heavy-handed, but I couldn't miss the importance nor doubt the seriousness.

"What does it say?" Janco asked. He plucked the paper from my fingers, scanned the short note and whistled. "This is major." Scratching the scar where the lower half of his right ear used to be, Janco squinted at me in concern. "You're not going to obey are you? 'Cause, if you do—"

"I know." No need to state the obvious.

"The Council will escort you straight to the Keep's dungeons where you will stay for a very, very long time," Devlen said in a matter-of-fact tone.

I glared at him.

"Did I say you can talk?" Janco asked him.

"I am trying to help," he replied, shrugging. His cloak covered his hands, which had been manacled behind his back.

"I don't want *your* help," I said.

Devlen opened his mouth, and Janco jabbed him in his solar plexus. As Devlen gasped to regain his breath, Janco threatened to yank out his tongue if he uttered another word.

We all knew it was an empty threat. Traveling with Janco, Devlen and two Ixian guards for the past twenty days had become an exercise in patience for me. Since Devlen's soul was currently living inside Ulrick's body due to a twist of blood magic, Devlen knew Janco couldn't harm him, so he needled Janco whenever possible.

We planned to escort Devlen to Moon Clan's lands in order to find his body with Ulrick's soul, and then have the Soulfinder Yelena switch them back. I had sent a message detailing this plan to Second Magician Zitora Cowan as soon as we reached the Sitian border.

"Opal," Janco said. "We need a decision. It's getting dark."

"Give me a minute." I drew in a deep breath. The Council wanted me to return. My new powers terrified them, and me, too, if I thought about it for long. The Council had an excellent reason to be nervous and want me safely contained. I could drain a magician of his or her powers. All I needed was a glass orb in my hands and I could extract their magic, transforming it into a

physical substance—diamonds. A magician didn't even have to attack me as I had first assumed. Oh no, I could milk a magician dry without them doing a thing.

The Council's messenger hadn't waited around for a response. No one disobeyed a direct order from the Council. Certainly not a student glass magician who hadn't even graduated from the Keep yet.

"Well?" Janco asked with impatience.

Finding Ulrick was more important, and putting a stop to blood magic was vital. "We'll make a detour to Fulgor first. I'll send Zitora a message. She'll understand." I hoped.

However, my plans didn't go the way I had envisioned. Nope. No warning bells or strange portents would alert me that by the next day Devlen and I would be in the exact opposite positions.

Unaware of the coming storm, I ignored the Council's message. We hiked east through a thin forest. Dead leaves crunched under our boots. The cold season had stripped the trees and bushes, leaving behind bare branches. The warming season had started a few days ago, and the frozen ground had turned into a muddy mess as we traveled farther south. Glancing over my shoulder, I noted the beauty of the stark and simple woods against the wide swaths of colors in the sky. The cool air smelled damp and fresh.

"Should we make camp before it gets dark?" Janco asked.

This section of Sitia seemed familiar to me, and my

stomach knotted as I remembered when I'd been here before.

"Is your cabin nearby?" I asked Devlen.

"I was wondering if you recognized the area," he said with a faint smile. "The good old days."

I bit my lip to keep from contradicting him. When he wasn't trying to play with my mind and emotions, he enjoyed irritating me, too. For example, he had lapsed back into the Daviian pattern of speech instead of trying to mimic Ulrick. "How close?"

Devlen scanned the woods and met my gaze. An odd sensation rippled through me. Seeing his cold calculation in Ulrick's vibrant green eyes still unsettled me. Ulrick's long eyelashes, black hair and sharp features all remained, but I longed for Ulrick's tender smile.

"Quite close. Are you sure you want to go there?" Devlen asked.

I considered. "Better than spending another night in the open. Take the lead."

He led us to a small one-story cabin as all light fled the sky. Janco lit a fire in the hearth, then unpacked our travel rations.

"It's too dark to hunt. I'll search for a few rabbits in the morning." He placed a pot of water on the fire to cook his road stew.

At first, the ad hoc concoction of Janco's had tasted wonderful, but after twenty days, I longed for my mother's apple cobbler and bread pudding. Her roast

pork alone would be worth the five-day journey to Booruby.

Homesickness and loneliness stabbed my chest. My parents must have been distraught when they learned of my disappearance. Despite knowing my mother would fuss over me and admonish me for hours, I longed for home.

As Janco stirred the stew, the two guards took turns bringing in more firewood. I grabbed a branch and made a torch. Devlen watched me. He had been manacled to the support beam in the living room. Last time we were here, I had been Devlen's prisoner.

I stepped into the kitchen to search for food, but the few scraps of bread and cheese had spoiled. Crossing the living room to check the bedrooms, I trod on glass shards, the *crackle-crunch* under my boots unmistakable.

"I did not get a chance to clean up," Devlen called.

I crouched. The shards reflected the torchlight. It had been one of the glass orbs the Stormdancers used to harvest a storm's energy. Another pang of loneliness touched me. Kade had remained behind in Ixia to calm the lethal blizzards blowing in from the northern ice sheet. Kade would fill a number of orbs with the killing wind's energy and save many lives. I closed my eyes, remembering his goodbye kiss. I would forgo my mother's cooking for another moment wrapped in his long, lean arms.

Janco announced the stew was ready. I opened my eyes and straightened. My saddlebags remained where

Devlen had tossed them in the corner with my sais still hooked onto them. Grabbing them, I returned to the fire, sitting down next to Janco.

Devlen groaned. "I should have hidden those."

Janco perked up, peering over his bowl. "What ja got?"

"My sais." I hefted the weapons. One in each hand. They looked like short swords except the main shaft was a half-inch thick and octagonal. A weighted octagonal knob at the top balanced the sai. It resembled a three-pronged pitchfork with a long center tine.

I held them in a defensive position. The metal shaft rested along my forearm. From this position I could block a strike, jab an opponent with the knob or switch my grip and do a temple strike with the shaft.

"Sweet," Janco said. "Can I try?"

I showed him a few moves and he was proficient in no time.

"These don't have the reach of a bow staff or sword, more of a defensive weapon. But in close…" He jabbed with both sais as if aiming at an invisible opponent's ribs. The weapons blurred with the motion. "In close, you have it made. I'm gonna get me a pair. A Sitian souvenir."

"She does not need to get close or even use those at all," Devlen said. "Not with the other goodies in her bags."

Janco stopped his attack and looked at me as if waiting for a treat. "Well? Spill."

I unbuckled the flaps and upended the contents onto the wooden floor. Glass spiders and bees rained out in a loud clatter. Janco exchanged the sais for one of the brown spiders. He examined it in the firelight.

"Trapping Warpers not enough? Have you moved on to trapping spiders now?" Janco asked.

"No. Tricky had attacked me with a magical illusion of big spiders. When I channeled his magic into the orb they transformed into glass." I suppressed a shudder. Those creatures had been a foot long.

"Why didn't they turn into diamonds?"

"He directed his magic at her in the form of spiders," Devlen said. "The magic only transforms into diamonds when she *steals* it." Anger fueled his words.

"From what you did with your magic, I don't blame her." Janco exchanged the spider for a glass bee. "In fact, I'd rather she steal everyone's magic. No power over another's mind. No stealing souls. No crazy or weird stuff. Diamonds are much better." He held the bee up to the firelight. The green-and-black stripes glowed. "Pretty."

I shivered. "Pretty scary. They're Greenblade bees. Their six-inch-long bodies are filled with lethal venom. Only I can crack open the glass and release the bee. One sting and you're dead."

"Cool." Janco's eyes lit with admiration.

Interesting how he could appreciate the killing power of a bee, yet he despised magical powers. I wondered if I should point out the inconsistency until I remembered

Janco could argue about any point, logical or not. I would get an hour-long lecture on how everyone knows bees sting, but a magician could hide their lethality until too late.

The next morning we resumed our journey. I planned to find a town in order to rent or purchase horses, but didn't know the surrounding area well enough. Unfortunately, Devlen was well acquainted. I hated to ask him for help, but the Council wouldn't hesitate to send a retrieval party once they figured out I disobeyed their summons.

"Do you know where the closest town is?" I asked Devlen.

"Why should I help you?"

"Do you want to walk all the way to Fulgor?"

"I do not mind. I enjoy your company. The longer it takes for us to get there, the more time I can spend with you."

"Watch it," Janco warned.

"How about I make a deal with you?" Devlen stepped closer.

My legs wanted to step back, but I held my ground. "You don't have anything to bargain with. We can just head east until we find one. Otherwise there's a good stable in Owl's Hill."

"You do not want to get that close to the Citadel and Magician's Keep." He shook his head. "I do have something to bargain with."

Unlikely, but I gestured for him to continue.

"Quartz and Moonlight." He watched my reaction and smiled.

"Who are they?" Janco asked.

"Mine and Ulrick's horses." And I missed Quartz almost as much as I missed Kade.

"I'll lead you to them and in exchange—"

"No way," Janco said.

"Let him finish," I said. And when the Ixian frowned at me, I added, "Please. They're Sandseed horses."

He nodded, but his expression made it clear to me he was unhappy.

"In exchange, I want you to remove the manacles."

"No way," Janco and I said together.

"I promise not to run. I have been cooperating with you the entire trip."

"You've been a pain in the ass the entire trip," Janco said. "I'm sure given the first opportunity you'd bolt."

"And I can't trust you at all," I said. "There is no reason for you to keep your promise."

Devlen sighed. "You know why I would not, Opal. Just look past the whole kidnapping thing and remember how you felt when we were together."

"The whole kidnapping thing? *You* might be able to dismiss it out of hand, but, to *me,* it's too big to look past."

"You just want to deny you loved me."

"I cared for *Ulrick,* whose body you stole. Not you!"

"Come on. You had to know I was not Ulrick. No one changes that much."

I almost laughed. He had done it again. Played with my emotions. It was like arguing with Janco—a no-win situation. Devlen had been trying to trick me into saying I had fallen for him well aware on some unconscious level of who he was.

The real reason he wanted me close was for the chance to reclaim his magical abilities with blood magic. The same illegal powers that Devlen had used to switch souls with Ulrick in the first place.

"Okay. Fine. Keep lying to yourself. I will take you to the horses anyway." Devlen led us to a large horse farm a few miles north of Robin's Nest in the Featherstone lands.

Peter Featherstone, the stable's owner, showed us to the pasture. Moonlight's mostly black coat stood out among the other horses. He nickered and ran to the fence with Quartz on his heels. Happy to see her, I threw my arms around Quartz's neck and hugged her. When she pulled away in impatience, I inspected her from nose to tail. Her reddish-brown and white coat gleamed. No mud or cuts marred her legs and her mane and tail had been combed free of briars and straw. Her hooves were trimmed and neat. No horseshoes, though. Sandseed horses won't let a farrier near them.

She nudged me with her nose, searching for treats. The only white on her brown face was a patch between her eyes. I probably imagined the sympathetic look she gave me, suppressing the sudden desire to pour my heart out to her.

I checked Moonlight. His sleek muscles enhanced his powerful build and he appeared healthy, too. The only white on him—the circle on his forehead and the reason for his name—shone as if recently washed.

"No doubt they're yours," Peter said.

"What do I owe you for their care?" I asked.

He looked at Devlen in surprise. "Nothing. He paid for two full seasons. In fact, I owe you."

"Perhaps we can work out a deal. I need three more horses."

"They won't be Sandseed horses. They're too expensive. It's been my pleasure to take care of these two. I've never seen such intelligence." Peter led us to the main stable.

The large wooden building smelled of earth and horses. Sawdust littered the floor and dust motes floated in the sunlight streaming through the big open doors. Two rows of stalls, sitting back-to-back, lined each side, creating three walkways. The main throughway was wider than the others. Ropes hung along the stalls to secure horses for grooming and saddling.

"Your tack is in the back room." He pointed. "I'll have my staff bring your horses and the rental horses. See what you think of them." He hustled back to the pasture.

I entered the tack room. My saddle hung on the far wall and I unhooked it. The leather had been cleaned. In fact, the bridles, reins and rest of our tack appeared to be in good condition. The neat and organized room reflected Peter's caring and professional attitude.

Which was why the crack of a whip surprised me so much. Laden with equipment, I hurried from the room.

Janco clutched his right hand. Blood poured from between his fingers. He dodged as a long leather whip snapped at him. His sword lay on the ground out of his reach. The two Sitian guards fought four men with pitchforks. Devlen stood to the side, grinning.

We were under attack.

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