

THE FIRE WITHIN

By

Joely Sue Burkhart

Drollerie Press

<http://drolleriepress.com>

<http://joelysueburkhart.com>

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Chapter One

Blessed Lady above, let him kill me quickly.

Eleni refused to cower as her brother strode toward her, his darkened face twisted with rage beneath the simple gold circlet on his head. Blood splattered the front of his velvet frock and once pristine ruffled shirt. The messenger had been reduced to a dark smear on the white marble of the High Court.

From the very first day of Darius's rule—when he'd killed his predecessor, wife, and their three-year-old child with his own hand—everyone in the Green Lands had learned to fear their new High King's wrath.

“How close?” Veins throbbed in his forehead and neck, but his voice was painfully calm. Darius didn't need volume to intimidate. “Can I stop them before they reach Allandor?”

“My contacts confirm she's already in Rashan.” Eleni's stomach clenched, but her hands were steady; her face, smooth; her voice, the same melodic and deliberately soothing tone she painstakingly cultivated. From an early age, she'd learned best how to diffuse Darius's temper in order to survive. “Both Taza and Maston have already sided with her.”

Darius paced before the golden monstrosity he'd stolen with murder, treachery, and lies. Massive lions pawed above the High Throne, mouths gaping, claws like swords. Old blood stained the regal profiles. The last person to infuriate the High King had learned that those vicious talons were not merely decorative. The young noble had suffered for two days dangling above Darius's head before finally dying.

“The North Forest holds strong with me, and the Shanhasson Guard is mine.”

Prudence told her to remain silent, but she couldn't when her brother needed information she possessed, no matter how much he would dislike it. “Your Shanhasson Guard is down to only two hundred, Your Majesty. An entire division was sent to silence the rising rebellion in the east, along with two divisions of Northerners. All were lost to Princess Jenna. You have few troops on hand, and resources stretched thin. We must—”

Darius whirled, charged, and before Eleni could soften the truth, she found herself dangling with his hand wrapped around her throat. “We, dearest sister? We must what?”

Her heart hammered in her chest, and instinct screamed at her to fight, dig her fingernails into his forearm, scream, and kick toward his groin, yet she did none of these things. Fighting would only inflame him. Crying out would only incite his need to hear more screams and pleading.

“Allies,” she forced the word out through her strangled throat.

He set her on her feet but kept his fingers locked around her neck. “I'm listening.”

Dark spots filled her vision and she couldn't help a loud rasp, fighting for air through her constricted windpipe. Eleni gasped out, “disposable allies...fighters...no claim to Throne.”

“Who?” His voice was still cold with menace, but he grudgingly loosened his fingers enough that she hauled in a wheezing breath. “The bitch has taken Allandor, my strongest enemy, along with all its allies. Pella will stand with me, but it's only a duchy, no match for the other countries in our happy republic.”

Eleni took another deep breath of air before answering. She had a feeling he would dislike this answer as well. “Keldar.”

“Savages?” Darius laughed, his dark eyes dancing as he slowly squeezed his hand shut again. “Why should the High King of all the Green Lands seek help from desert bandits?”

A wave of nausea flooded her stomach as the darkness rolled back. So many times she’d feared he would kill her. She’d dreamed it for years, in a thousand gruesome ways. Surely he wouldn’t kill her this way, so easily; endless torture was much more to his liking. She forced the word out. “Revenge.”

He waited for her to continue, but she couldn’t get enough air. Head aching, lungs blazing in agony, she clutched his wrist and tried to keep the pleas out of her eyes. *Keep calm, she thought. No panic, no tears. That will only infuriate him.*

Impatient, he slung her on the floor. She fell on her back, barely catching herself on her elbows to avoid smashing her skull open on the marble. Panting, she concentrated on breathing. With her skirts tumbled crazily, her silk stockings were bared to the room, but she made no move to cover herself. Darius would enjoy humiliating her before the entire High Court with worse if she acted missish. He’d done so, countless times already. He knew very well how best to torment and punish without a single mark.

“I’m waiting.”

“Would it not be poetic justice for you to use her distant relatives to quell her rebellion?”

Darius stroked his chin and jaw. “Perhaps. The idea has merit, but only if the savages would consider such an alliance. From the little we know of Keldar, they have no such inclinations. They know only thieving and killing.”

Now to play her most important card, the one ace that might free her from beneath her brother’s boot heel: “They’ve shown an undue interest in Green Land women in the last few years, don’t you think?”

Eyes narrowed, he stared at her for several long moments before gesturing that she could rise and continue.

“We’ve lost two caravans to Keldari raiders in the past month, and both times they took the goods and Green Land women. The men were either killed or ignored. The merchant of the last caravan had a Mambian wife, and she was untouched.”

“Perhaps the savages have no taste for exotic women.”

“I can find out for you,” she said, trying to keep the eagerness out of her eyes. “Once they capture me, I’ll bargain with their leader and win them to your cause.”

“You?” Darius turned away, hiding his face from her. He knew how well she read people. “I can’t spare you, Eleni. I considered sending you to Princess Jenna instead to parley.”

“Humbly, Your Majesty, I suggest that might be a mistake. Do you want your greatest enemy to have your best eyes and ears? Why not use me, instead, to win a horde of savages you can loose on the rebels?”

He paced, silent and hard and grim. He valued her skills as a negotiator, but he was also possessive of her. Why, when he enjoyed beating and berating her for the simple pleasure of seeing her broken yet again?

“I can’t lose you, Eleni.”

Despite all the years of torture and abuse, her heart still warmed. He was her only family left in this entire world. He’d done horrible things, and forced her to join him time after time. Yet he was her brother, and she loved him.

“Before Father died, he told me that he’d dreamed I would seize the High Throne and legitimize his royal blood. The key to my success was you, dearest sister. As long as you were by my side, I would hold Shanhasson. But if I lost you...”

Darius threw himself onto the High Throne and buried his face in his hands. Stunned, Eleni went to him and hesitantly laid her hand on his head. She'd never seen such vulnerability from her brother.

“He told me I would be better off to cut your heart out of your chest before ever letting you out of my sight.”

Her hand froze. Horror churned her stomach, burning up her throat. She could well picture their father telling young Darius such a thing. Their family had long been tormented by nightmares, darkness, and taint through their bloodline. Touched by Shadow, they wrought evil in the world without premeditation simply by breathing. Since their grandfather had raped his own High Queen all those years ago, her family's existence was a testament to the evil done in the world by men's hands.

Ignoring the terror screaming through her body, she forced her fingers back to his hair. She stroked him like a little boy and deliberately lightened her voice. “I'm never out of your sight, Your Majesty, not when you haunt my dreams every night.”

“True.” Darius raised his head, a smile quirking his sensual lips. His eyes were dark with madness, hurt, and death. Worst of all, though, was the mirth, the foul joy he found in such atrocities. He could kiss and pardon or murder with his own hand, and his eyes would never change. “I will walk in your dreams every night, dearest. I will know if you intend to betray me.”

He reached out and touched her neck with the steel blade of a knife she hadn't even seen him draw. His voice lowered to a silky smooth seduction that prefaced his most horrific crimes. “I can kill without laying a single hand on you, Eleni. But it would be much sweeter to hear your screams, taste your blood, and earn your agony with my own hands. Do not fail me, dear sister, or I will leave my

throne for that bitch, Jenna, who dares to challenge me and hunt you down in the darkest, farthest reaches of the world.”

Relief and terror warred in her heart. He would let her go, for now.

To win her freedom, her brother must die. She couldn't do it herself, though, and the very people who would bring him to justice would rightfully execute her as well. She had to win an ally for herself. She needed someone far from Shanhasson and strong enough to protect her from him, someone who could kill him.

Darius had chained her at his side her entire life with her love and duty. Now, before the darkness growing in her heart claimed the last bit of the hope, before he killed her with that love, she had to flee.

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Zahak didn't think much of the bedraggled *munakura*. Her once fancy clothes were stained and torn. Dust camouflaged her skin and hair so he could not confirm her coloring. “Are you certain she's Green Land blood?”

The Far Illone trader rushed to assure him. “Yes, yes, a Princess of the royal line, all the way from Shanhasson.”

Remarkable blue eyes glared back at him, bright and shining like moonlight on a midnight sky. Even with her wrists bound with rough hemp and surrounded by his warriors, she did indeed stand like a queen: white, small, and fragile like night-blooming jasmine.

Ah, the crucial question. Was she a true White? If not, she was of no use to him. He would be better served to let the trader sell her to a slaver bound for Mambia.

An odd impulse banded his chest and clenched his jaw. Heat flared deep in the pit of his stomach, searing flames roaring to life. Instincts not his, not human,

raged at him to seize the woman, drag her to the ground, and sink his teeth into her slender throat.

Tightening his concentration, Zahak breathed deeply, forcing down the dragon's Fire. After a thousand years of punishment, the prophecies would be fulfilled. The Last Days were nigh. He would not fail his brother in this time of great need. Roughly, he asked, "What is your name?"

"Eleni."

Her voice was soft and mellow but not afraid, a nightingale singing from the fragrant branches of desert jasmine. "What tribe? What family?"

"Eleni, daughter of Moran, bastard son of the High Queen Angelina, whose legitimate heirs were fathered by a Keldari named Jakon *rav'Tellan*"

Zahak blinked. His warriors murmured, the rustles of *taamids* loud in the desert stillness as scimitars were drawn. If she belonged to *Tellan*, they could expect fierce fighting long before they reached the Wall.

Hope blossomed in his heart. What chance that the woman he managed to find would claim the only tribe still carrying the rarest White's holy blood?

"Surely a fine choice for the *azi*." Malum trailed the tail of his supple whip through his fingers, nodding approvingly at the woman. "If you can keep her long enough. Are you sure you wish to hand such a treasure off to Amin?"

Tightening his mouth, Zahak refused to respond. No matter how many barbed hints his friend tried, he could not be baited into treachery.

"I cannot claim *Tellan* as my tribe," the woman answered calmly. "They are merely my cousins. My grandfather was not Jakon."

"Are you a Daughter?"

Emotion flickered across the woman's face: pain, misery, failure. Ah, such emotions he knew intimately. "Yes and no."

“Are you descended from your Blessed Lady, whom we call Somma, the White Dragon, She Who Hung the Moon?”

“Her blood runs in my veins, yes, but I have no power.”

Zahak knew not what she meant, and quite honestly, he didn't care. The blood was enough. Switching to Keldari, he negotiated a price with the trader and jerked his head at Malum to pay the *munakur* off.

With a malicious grin, the trader shoved the woman to her knees before Zahak and rushed to his wagons, gold clinking.

Regal and silent, Eleni stared up at him. Fear and tears he expected; the hope in her eyes bewildered him.

“What are you going to do with me?”

He leaned down to look deeply into her bright eyes. Her warm scent filled his nose, and his voice thickened with emotion he dared not admit. “You will mate my brother, Amin *tal'*Cobra, who will soon be *azi'*Keldar, He Who Leads all Keldari tribes.”

Some of the glow faded from her eyes like the moon sinking beneath a bank of fog. “I see. And if I don't choose to mate this *tal'*?”

Clenching his jaw, Zahak sat up and hardened his voice. “I'll feed you to Agni, the Red Dragon, and hope your blood purchases forgiveness for our ancient sin.”

Even more unexpected was her laughter. Although mirthless and ragged, there were no tears, not from this strange, regal woman. Perhaps she had lost her mind. If so, she wouldn't survive the long ride to the Wall, let alone life on the desert, no matter how carefully his brother tended to her.

“Why do you laugh, woman? You should beg for protection.”

Solemn once more, she tilted her head, studying him. What did she see, this fine Green Land lady? A savage, a bandit, a jackal? So he had been called, rightfully, and worse yet had he done as his brother's *saif*.

“It seems I have escaped one pit of hell merely to land in another.”

At last, something he understood. He allowed a small smile to soften his face. “Keldar is a hard land and a hard life. No rain has fallen in a thousand years, save when a White was sacrificed years ago, and we suffer the endless heat of Agni for our sins. *Iyeh*, I know hell very well.”

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