

# **A Tale of Kindness and Dangerous Love**

## **A SilverShadows Story**

**By**

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Aduro's sensitive ears picked up the sounds of people moving in the courtyard intertwined with the creaks of wooden wheels and horses stomping in the dirt. Preparations were underway for their journey. He walked over to his mistress' bed and nudged her gently with his cold nose.

"I hear them, Aduro," she said. "I'm just being lazy for a few more moments. It's going to be a long, hot, tiring couple of days, but it must be done. I'm glad you're coming with me. I want you to ride part of the way in one of the wagons with Denesia. If you walk all the way, your feet may get sore."

The big white dog looked intently at Casia as if he understood her words to him. Then he turned toward the door of her bedroom and motioned for her to follow him.

"OK. I'm coming. Go ahead downstairs. I'll be there in a moment," said Casia as she got up and swung open the door to the outside stairs for him. Aduro stopped in the middle of the stairs and looked back at her. "Don't be so impatient. I'll be there in just a minute. You might want to get a little breakfast and a drink from the kitchen."

Casia closed the door and returned to her apartment to briefly splash her face with the spring water stored in the basin near her bed. She combed her long dark hair now laced with thick silver streaks and pulled it up and away from her face. Then she twisted it into a bun on the back of her head. It would be cooler this way. Casia put on her leather riding pants and boots. Though the soft, well worn leather would protect her during the long journey, it did nothing to help with the unrelenting heat. She put on a white linen blouse and a matching linen tunic bordered with Phoenician purple, denoting the royal status of her family.

"We'll have to be careful to protect people and the livestock from this heat," she thought. "Hopefully the winter rains will begin in a few weeks. The fields need the moisture and we all need to be cooled down a bit."

After a brief look in the mirror, she threaded her money pouch onto her leather belt and left down the back stairs. By this time, the courtyard was crowded with activity. Men from the stables were hitching the horses to several wagons loaded with amphorae filled with fresh water, food and wine. Another wagon contained medical supplies including bandages, a surgery kit, and wooden boxes filled with herbal potions. The medical assistants Casia had trained were checking to be certain all their supplies were in order.

Casia had asked her ailing father not to wake to see them off, but she knew he wouldn't be able to resist coming to the courtyard. Cleetus stepped onto the porch which faced the inside of the courtyard and waved to his daughter and her companions.

"Have a safe journey, Casia. Are you sure you don't want to take more men with you?"

"Don't worry, father. Spathus and Vallo are with me. With the two of them as bodyguards, we could hold off an entire army," replied Casia with a slight smile.

Two thick, muscular men helping to load the carts stopped long enough to raise their hands in greeting to Cleetus. They had the look of seasoned warriors.

"We'll take good care of her, Sire. Don't worry. When Casia rides, it's the rest of the world you have to worry about!" said Spathus with a laugh. "Besides, who would want to tackle Aduro? He stays at her side every minute."

Aduro had just turned the corner coming from the kitchen. He let out a deep, convincing bark at the sound of his name.

"You see?" said Spathus as he gave the big dog a friendly pat on the head.

"Father, remember that we won't be able to travel very fast since I anticipate that the prisoners will be weak and some will be wounded. We'll travel at least two days to intercept them, but it may take four to get them back to the farm. Don't worry," said Casia. "I may not be able to spare a messenger."

Cleetus stood pensively at the railing of the second story porch. He slightly lowered his head and paused for a moment considering something seriously. "Casia, you and Spathus come speak with me before you go. I'll be by the fountain," said Cleetus with a somber tone in his voice. Then he turned and walked back into the house.

When the wagons were fully loaded, Casia instructed Vallo to start the wagons on their journey.

"We'll catch up to you on the horses after we talk with my father," said Casia. "Let's make as much time as possible while it's still cool. We'll rest in the middle of the day."

Casia, Aduro, and Spathus went inside the house while the small train of wagons pulled out of the courtyard and moved onto the road leading from the Valarius family farmlands to the main highway toward the capital.

Cleetus was sitting on a bench waiting for them.

“Please join me for a moment,” said Cleetus. “I hesitate to burden you with this information before your journey, but I’ve had several new messages from the capital. I want to share the news with you.”

Casia took a seat near her father and Spathus stood respectfully close by with Aduro at his feet.

“Bellator is becoming even more aggressive; taking control of the entire army and pushing the council harder for military law. I’m not sure that anyone can stop him now. His greed for money and power outstrips any concern he had in the past for our people and government. I’ll go to the capital next month and make one last attempt to stop the spread of this war. Bellator is planning to attack the northern province of Nevia in order to gain control of their seaport. He’s stretching our forces so thin that he’s going to eventually out run our supply lines. Nevia is no threat to us. They want to maintain friendly relations and trade with us. It’s Bellator and his war-mongering generals who want to take power. The ruler of Nevia is no fool. He’s preparing now to stop our army from invading his territory. I’m not sure what’s going to happen, but I’m not hopeful that the civil government will maintain control. This may be the last group of prisoners we can help. Have we moved as many people as we can through the passes to our northern strongholds?”

“Every few days, I send another group with supplies toward the passes. They travel at night, and I keep them as quiet as possible. Our scouts haven’t identified anyone watching them. There aren’t many soldiers this direction because of the heavy fighting to the south,” said Spathus.

“I’m only keeping the minimum number of people here that we need to farm the fields and take care of the livestock we haven’t moved. They’re all volunteers, mainly people without a family,” said Casia. “I’m so glad we moved the families with children through the passes in the spring. At least I know they’re safe. There’s plenty of water and enough supplies for the winter. If we need to, we’ll be able to grow enough food in the summer meadows to stay there indefinitely. With the warriors we have, no one can get through the narrow, high passes without our permission. Our long term planning has really paid off for the safety of our people.”

“As I recall, I was one of those who thought all of the planning and acquisition of the high meadow country would never be important. It seemed impossible several years ago that our country would have changed so radically,” said Cleetus sadly.

“Maintaining a government free of corruption and greed is a constant struggle. Unfortunately it’s been difficult to keep enough of the other royal families interested in the central government rather than their estates, wine and elaborate dinners. If you must go to the capital, father, and speak to the council, I want to go with you. I fear for your safety. Very few others are willing to put their lives on the line,” said Casia.

“We’ll see. Pick up these prisoners. Our spies tell us that Bellator has instructed his men to push them until they drop just to spite me. I’ve already paid for them to become my slaves. The more that die on the way to my farm, the better as far as he’s concerned. He won’t be expecting us to meet his troops to take control of them. Save as many as possible. Bring them here. Then we’ll plan the trip to the capital. I don’t think Bellator is ready to openly defy me. He’s biding his time like the predator that waits patiently for the kill. But it won’t be long. I can only hope that there are others who will find the courage to speak out.”

“Get some rest while I’m gone,” said Casia as she kissed Cleetus on the forehead. “Come on, gentlemen. Let’s get these prisoners and get back home as soon as possible.”

Casia, Spathus, and Aduro walked to the courtyard where two stable boys had horses ready for the humans to ride. Aduro was excited and ready to go. He raced through the gate and then dropped back to lope next to the horses down the dusty road. His mistress needed him, and he was happy to travel with her.

The wagons, guards, and medical personnel made good progress toward the capital by traveling until the heat of the day and then making camp to rest and water their horses. Vallo had already paid several farmers at strategic locations along their path for the right to rest in shady areas with good water. Once the heat began to wane, the wagons would resume their journey until the next planned rest stop at about sundown. They would intercept the prisoners and guards before sundown on the second day. Time was of the essence if they were going to save as many of the prisoners as possible.

During the rest period on the second day, Vallo scouted ahead. He returned with a report for Casia.

“The prisoners are being herded on the road about six miles ahead of us. If you ride ahead and take possession of them, we’ll be near the farm where I’ve arranged for us to spend the night and give initial medical care, water and food to them,” Vallo told Casia. “I observed them from a ridge. It’s a shabby lot. They look tired, many are injured, and the guards are killing any who can’t keep up.”

“Break camp a little early and get the wagons started moving. Vallo, Spathus, and Aduro, you’re with me. Leave the rest of the guards with the wagons. They’ll catch up with us as soon as possible. Let’s move,” said Casia with some urgency.

“Casia, once we officially take control of the prisoners, the soldiers will leave. Are you sure it’s wise for just the four of us to move so far away from the wagons?” asked the always cautious Spathus.

“I understand your concern, but we must balance the risk to our safety with the danger to the prisoners we’re trying to save. Put Dorius in charge of the wagons and impress on

him the importance of speed. The animals are fed, watered, and well rested. The wagons shouldn't be too far behind us," said Casia who was already moving with Aduro toward her horse." Vallo, you'll need a fresh mount."

Spathus had seen this look of resolution in Casia's eyes before. There was no sense in arguing with her now.

The four of them made good time and reached the prisoners and their guards within the hour. Casia hid her emotions but was disheartened at the small number of exhausted and desperate men that still remained. The guards should have started with over one hundred prisoners. Casia guessed that there were no more than thirty-five still alive.

Casia rode directly up to the sergeant in charge of the prisoners.

"I am Casia of the House of Valerius. I have come to take possession of my father's slaves. You will relinquish them to me at once."

"My orders are to deliver these slaves to Senator Valerius personally. They're my responsibility until then," said the roughly dressed soldier.

"I have official papers from my father directing you to give custody of these slaves to me," said Casia. "We have paid handsomely for them. They won't be any good for work in the fields if they're dead before they get there."

Vallo handed the sergeant a scroll containing the orders and a small bag of coins. The sergeant opened the scroll and glanced at it with some apprehension. Casia realized suddenly that he couldn't read it.

"The money is a little something extra for you and your men. I relieve you of this duty. Leave and don't come back," said Casia.

"You are threatening me?" said the sergeant under his breath.

"No," said Casia. "Let's just say it probably isn't worth it to you to try to stay."

Aduro crouched down and gave a low but distinctive guttural growl as he targeted the sergeant's throat.

"Hold, Aduro," said Casia. "I doubt if a group of half-dead prisoners is worth a fight to this man, especially since he will feel our wrath first."

"They're yours. Take them," said the sergeant. "They'll probably try to slit your throat for us. Come on men. We've got some drinking money and time before we have to report back. Let's make the best of it."

The soldiers turned and made a hasty retreat down the road back toward the capital. Casia jumped off her horse and began speaking to the prisoners in their native language.

“We are here to help you, but we will not tolerate violence. Any man who tries to escape or hurt another will be killed on the spot. Wagons will soon be here with clean water, food and medical supplies. If you can walk a few hundred more yards, we have a place with shade for you to rest. Help each other and follow me.”

The men glanced at each other and somewhat reluctantly began to follow the statuesque woman and her warrior companions. Aduro kept close watch for any signs that one of them might plan to harm to his mistress. Around a bend in the road, Vallo indicated a side path that led to a pond surrounded by tall larches with plenty of shade.

Casia noted that a group of men was staying very close to one of the wounded soldiers taking turns helping him walk. The injured man’s eyes were half closed. He was caked with mud almost as if they had smeared the mud on his body. Without the assistance of his fellow prisoners, he most assuredly would have fallen to the ground. There was something special about this wounded man which attracted Casia’s attention.

“Sit in the shade and rest. Do not drink the water from the pond or use it to wash your wounds. Pure water is on its way. This water might make you sicker,” yelled Spathus. “Others will be here in a short time to help you. If any of you try to hurt them, are violent, or try to escape, the edge of my sword will be the last thing you ever feel.”

It seemed like an eternity to Casia before she heard the creak of wheels and the movement of horses. As soon as the wagons circled near the pond, Casia’s team began to unload water, bread and medical supplies. Four men started erecting a tent to treat the most serious wounds. They built fires for hot water to wash wounds and to prepare broth from the dried meat they brought. Thirsty, starving men reached for the dippers of water and pieces of bread offered to them.

“Start slowly. There is plenty for all. If you eat too quickly, you will be sick,” yelled Spathus as he moved from group to group with his hand on his sword being sure that his people were as safe as possible.

“Are there so few?” asked Dorius.

“Those that couldn’t walk were killed along the road,” replied Casia. “Let’s concentrate on helping those that we can. Start triaging. I’ll evaluate the men with the most serious wounds first.”

Casia moved toward the group of men protecting the mud-caked wounded soldier. They closed ranks to prevent her from reaching him.

“If you don’t let me treat him, he looks as if he is going to die,” said Casia to the group. “You are safe here. We only want to help you. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, we understand,” said one of the men reluctantly. He motioned for the other men to allow her to pass.

Casia knelt down next to the wounded man. He had a deep gash in his left thigh which was draining a foul smelling greenish fluid. She placed her hand on his forehead and felt a sudden deep connection with him which temporarily startled her. Casia quickly regained her composure and was impressed by his intense desire to live. He was delirious from his high fever, pain, and dehydration.

“He’s very ill. He has to be moved at once to the medicine tent,” said Casia.

“I must go with him,” insisted the same blond soldier who had spoken to her before and seemed in charge.

“All right. But stay out of the way,” replied Casia.

She instructed some of her assistants to carry the wounded prisoner to the medicine tent while she evaluated several other prisoners.

Dorius was lining up prisoners denoting the most seriously wounded first. Casia walked near the men placing her hand briefly on each one’s forehead and giving instructions to her assistants. For several of the men, death was inevitable. Casia knew that they could not survive even with the best of her medical skills. These men would receive comfort and medicine to help with their pain and make their journey to the next world as easy as possible. For others, she gave instructions for medication and wound care.

Her abilities were a gift and, at the same time, a great burden. It was painful for her to feel the touch of death. Sometimes with her thoughts she could help the dying and comfort them as they released their grip on life and chose to move onto another path. With others, she could see only blackness. From a practical stand point, Casia used her knowledge to concentrate her medical resources on those who could be saved.

As quickly as possible Casia completed her triage and went to the medicine tent where the seriously wounded man was already being washed by Denesia. He was older than most of the other soldiers but still strong and powerfully built. White hair peppered his temples and his chest. As soon as the mud was cleaned off, Casia recognized the tattoo on his right shoulder as that of a royal house of Nevia. She wasn’t familiar enough with Nevian notation to recognize the exact royal family, but this man was certainly not your typical foot soldier. That explained the actions of the other soldiers. Nevia wasn’t officially at war yet. What was he doing here? Were they scouts or spies trying to determine when and where Bellator was going to strike their country?

“Pardon me, Lady Casia, but this man already has the smell of death. Is there anything we can do for him?” asked Denesia.

“I’m not sure,” said Casia as she sat down beside him and began to probe and clean his wound. The man groaned in pain as she opened the wound and removed the foul smelling tissue.

“It’s a good sign that he can still feel pain when I clean his wound. Denesia, we must pack this open with herbs. Bring the mixture for infection.”

Casia gave her patient a small sip of pain medication and then worked as quickly as she could applying the medication and loosely bandaging the wound.

“I will care for him the best I can. You need water, food, and rest,” said Casia to the Nevian guard who watched her every move. “You can’t do anything for him right now. He will hopefully need you later.”

The young soldier didn’t move.

“Get out of here and get some food and rest. I’ll call you if there’s any change,” said Casia more forcefully. “I could have you removed if necessary. You don’t look like you have enough strength in you to resist.”

“All right. But call me if anything changes,” he said as he reluctantly left the tent.

“Denesia, put down the tent flap. Don’t let anyone else enter,” said Casia as she began to take down her long, silver streaked hair. It flowed over her shoulders almost to her waist. For some reason her healing skills were strengthened when her hair was free and loose around her. Casia placed her left hand on her patient’s forehead and held his right hand in her own. Melding with someone so ill was dangerous, but she felt compelled to help him. This man was special....special to her in a way she didn’t fully understand.

Casia relaxed and allowed her mind to settle down deep within itself. Then she slowly channeled some of her life energy through her hands into the body of the weak and dying man. Her great grandmother had trained Casia in the healing arts. The women of their family were gifted with the power to heal especially as they became older. For many reasons they did not tell those outside their immediate family about their exceptional healing abilities. It wasn’t a good idea to call attention to being too different. For the same reason, Casia didn’t advertise her true age. Some of the women of her family lived to be considerably over one hundred with minimal signs of physical aging.

Casia’s ability to help those sick or injured varied greatly from one patient to another. But, she had never experienced as perfect a melding with a human as she had with this man. Only an advanced practitioner would be able to modulate the flow of energy which threatened to rush out of control from her body to his. Casia willingly allowed his life force to tap her power. Slowly....carefully....she controlled the exchange helping him to fight the infection which threatened to take his life.

“Enough,” Cassia said out loud as she pulled back her hands.

“Lady Casia, are you all right?” asked Denesia as she came back into the tent.

“Yes, I’m just tired. I need to eat and rest a while. I’ll be fine in a few hours. Would you stay with him? See if you can get him to take a little water. Call me if there’s any change.”

“I’ll take good care of him, Lady,” said Denesia.

“I know you will, Denesia. You are a talented nurse. Thank you for your help,” replied Casia gently touching the cheek of her young assistant. “I’ll sleep outside with Aduro, but I’ll be near.”

Aduro was waiting for Casia outside the tent. He walked with her to the kitchen where they both ate, and Casia drank deeply of a mixture of wine and water that Dorius had prepared for her. After Aduro drank his fill of water, he led her to their sleeping place where a pallet had been prepared for her. She lay down and fell asleep with her arm draped over the neck of the big dog who slept beside her. Casia was very tired, but she could sleep and renew her strength without worry. No one could bother her with Aduro at her side.

**W**hen Casia awoke, it was late evening and only a few rays of the setting sun continued to illuminate the camp site. Her staff was still busy caring for the prisoners by the light of several fires. Everything seemed quiet and she did not sense any danger or concern from Aduro.

Casia got up and had a quick drink and a piece of bread and cheese from the kitchen tent. She was always hungry after expending so much energy treating a patient. Aduro also had a drink and some of the gruel of meat and grain the staff had prepared for the prisoners. Denesia was still in the medicine tent next to the injured soldier when Casia and Aduro returned.

“He seems better, Lady Casia. He isn’t as hot, and the wound doesn’t smell as bad.”

“Has he spoken?” asked Casia.

“No, only brief sounds in his delirium that don’t make any sense,” replied Denesia. “He has actually had some restful sleep. He hasn’t seemed in pain. I haven’t given him any more pain medication. I thought he might need it before we change his dressing. We will undoubtedly need to remove more of the dead tissue. I hope we can save his life without removing his leg.”

“We’ll see. I’ll stay with him for a while. Go get some food and rest for a few hours, Denesia. You’ve done an excellent job. Tomorrow will be another busy day.”

“Thank you, Lady Casia. Call me if you need me.”

Casia sat down near her patient’s bed. Aduro lay down at her feet and dozed off. She gently re-established her mental connection with the ill man. His life force was more coherent. He was definitely better, but his wound was still seriously infected. Casia focused her healing energy toward the damaged leg using imagery to guide her. Cautiously she probed deeper. The essences of their individual realities blended together like perfectly complimentary parts of a whole. She knew him from the depths of his soul, and although he was unaware of the transfer, he knew her in a similar way. When Casia fell asleep draped across his chest, they were dreaming together.

Near dawn, Casia became aware that something had changed. She felt the soft touch of fingers in her hair. When she raised her head, she was staring into a pair of deep blue eyes looking at her inquisitively.

“Am I dreaming or is there a lovely woman lying on my chest?” asked her patient in a quiet deep voice.

“You aren’t dreaming. I’m Casia of the family Valerius. You are injured, and I am taking care of you,” said Casia straightening up and trying to look as aloof and professional as possible.

“I see. Well, thank you, Casia of the family Valerius. I’ve heard of a senator from that family.”

“My father.”

Aduro had awakened with Casia’s first movements. At first he growled slightly under his breath as a warning to the stranger that he must not harm his mistress. He studied and sniffed the wounded man and then gently licked his hand.

“Well, you seem to have Aduro’s approval. He’s very discriminating. You should be flattered,” said Casia.

“I am. He looks as if he could be a very serious dog if he needed to.”

“Yes,” agreed Casia. “You have no idea.”

“The last thing I remember my men and I were cut off from our other troops during the fighting. Are any of them here?”

“Several of them were protecting you when I arrived,” replied Casia. “I had to threaten to have one of them, a young blond man, forcibly removed. He seems very concerned about your safety.”

“That will be Emile. He is very stubborn and loyal. I will chastise him for giving you so much trouble. May I speak with him?”

“Only for a moment. You have been flirting with death, and I have stolen you back. It’s going to take some time for you to recover. I don’t want all my energy to be wasted,” said Casia with a slight smile.

“Neither do I,” said her patient. “We have not been formally introduced. I am called Segus.”

“I must make a few things very clear, Segus. I know you are the leader of your men. We are here to take you to my family farm so that you can recover from your injuries. We will not tolerate any violence. Don’t get any ideas about escaping. Neither you nor your men are strong enough to get very far.”

“So, we are prisoners? Are we destined to be slaves, also?” asked Segus with an almost amused look on his face.

“Although we love our country, we do not believe in the wisdom of this war. My father bought you as slaves for his fields. It’s the only way we are able to save any of the prisoners from death or something worse. But, we are also responsible if our slaves escape or harm others. You must give me your word that you and your men won’t try to escape or harm anyone,” said Casia seriously.

“And will you take my word if I give it to you? I could lie,” replied Segus.

“I know you. You will not lie to me,” said Casia.

“No, I will not lie to you,” said Segus looking intently at Casia. “You have my word that neither my men nor I will harm you or your family. For now, we also will not try to escape.”

“Then I will allow you to speak briefly with your men as soon as I clean and redress your wound,” said Casia. “Take a few sips of this pain medicine before I begin. I must remove any infected tissue.”

“I’ll be all right without the pain medicine,” retorted Segus.

“OK. Let’s get something else straight. For now, you do what I tell you to. Is that clear?” said Casia forcefully. “You’ll be glad you took the pain medicine by the time I finish cleaning your leg. Don’t argue.”

“Yes, Mam,” he said with a slight mocking tone in his voice. But, he took the cup she offered him and drank it without further protest.

Denesia entered the tent looking refreshed from a little rest and food.

“Well, Lady Casia. I didn’t expect to find our patient awake and so talkative,” said Denesia.

“Yes. Well, he was a lot less trouble when he couldn’t talk,” teased Casia. “Bring me the herbs for infection, honey, cloths, and hot water. I need to redress his wound.”

Casia removed the old dressing and irrigated the wound to remove the spent herbs and tissue debris.

“Lady Casia, this looks remarkably better. I’ve never seen a wound heal this fast. There is almost no odor of death about it now. How could this happen so quickly?” asked Denesia.

“Keep this to yourself, Denesia,” said Casia under her breath. “I don’t want this generally known. There are already too many rumors about me.”

“I understand,” Denesia replied as she gathered up the supplies Casia needed. “I’ll heat a knife in the fire.”

When Denesia returned, she placed all the materials Casia had requested on a small table by the bed and went to the head of the bed to hold her patient’s shoulders.

“Segus, this part is going to hurt,” said Casia seriously. “Put this leather between your teeth and hold onto the sides of the bed.”

Using her fingers and the blade of the knife, Casia quickly explored the interior of the wound to be certain there weren’t pockets of pus or remaining dead tissue. Segus moaned with pain but didn’t move. Even Casia was amazed at the difference her treatment had made. She had never had a patient respond this quickly before.

She poured honey and herbs into the wound and redressed it.

“Well, I am certainly glad I obeyed your orders about the pain medication,” said Segus after removing the leather from between his teeth. Perspiration flowed down over his forehead. “That wasn’t much fun at all.”

“You’re much better. I think you’re going to live,” said Casia. “I’ll let your blond friend see you for a few moments and then you must sleep after you drink some broth and tea. Denesia, let me know if he gives you any trouble. I’m going to check on some of the other prisoners.”

“Thank you for helping me,” said Segus seriously.

“It’s my duty,” replied Casia as she left the tent.

Casia stopped to tell Emile that he could visit Segus for a few minutes, and then she made rounds with Dorius to evaluate the remaining prisoners. Three had died during the night, and two others would soon follow them. Dorius also asked Casia to treat two wounds that needed special attention. The other prisoners were responding well and quickly regaining some strength.

“Dorius, we’ll stay here one more day and start the return trip in the morning. I want to get home as soon as possible, but an extra day of rest and treatment should make a big difference for the more severely wounded. Decide who needs to be in the wagons and who can walk tomorrow,” instructed Casia. “I want everyone ready to leave at dawn. Let Vallo and Spathus know our plans.”

That day Casia stopped by the tent several times to check on Segus who continued to make rapid progress. His fever had broken, and his breathing was deep and regular.

“He drank a lot of broth and asked for some bread and meat,” said Denesia to her mistress. “He sleeps well as if he has no cares.”

“Tomorrow, I want you to stay with him on the supply wagon. Keep him out of sight. I don’t want anyone on the road to see him,” said Casia with caution in her voice.

“I understand, Lady Casia.”

The next morning dawned clear with a hint of coolness in the air, but Casia knew that the heat would find them soon enough as they journeyed on the unshaded dusty road. The wagons moved slowly forward with their ragtag group of people trailing behind and beside them. Some of the healthier prisoners assisted their wounded comrades. They met a few travelers on the road but no one who challenged them.

They made better time than Casia had anticipated. Near sundown on day two of their travels, she could see the gate of the Vallerius farms. No matter how many times she had seen it before, it was always a thrill for her to see home. There had been several times in her life when circumstances had drawn her away from these rolling hills. Her wish would be to live the rest of her life on this land she loved so much. Unfortunately the reality of war might again make that impossible.

Casia made certain that Denesia housed Segus and Emile in a separate more private area of the living compound. The fewer people who knew they had a prisoner from a royal Nevian family in their house the better. The walls had ears and Bellator’s spies were everywhere, perhaps even in the house of Valerius.

Cleetus greeted his daughter affectionately and thanked Vallo and Spathus for their work and loyalty. Then Cleetus and Casia went into his apartment, and he dismissed the servants.

“I watched you enter the gate, Casia,” said Cleetus. “I’m glad you’re safe and home, but sad there are so few prisoners.”

“Most of them were killed by the guards before we got there. I’m glad we went ahead to intercept them or more would have died before they reached our gates. Cleetus, one of the prisoners is from a Nevian royal house. He was severely wounded, but I was able to help him. He will fully recover. Perhaps he can use his influence in Nevia if you are unable to sway the senate to stop this senseless war. No matter what happens, Bellator cannot be allowed to rule. The results would be disastrous.”

“Can we trust this man to help us?” asked Cleetus.

“He and I became one. I know his heart. We can trust his word and his honor,” replied Casia. “I have no doubt.”

“I think we must plan for the worse. Everything I hear from the capital worries me. In two weeks, the Senate meets. I think we should send as many of our people north as possible. I want you to consider secretly going south by the mountain trail to Nevia to speak with the Nevian king. Either way the senate votes, we’re going to need a liaison in Nevia,” said Cleetus. “If the senate folds, Bellator will move quickly against us. The only thing that will protect us then is the sword.”

“Are you sure it’s worth the risk to even go to the senate meeting?” asked Casia. “Perhaps we should both go to Nevia?”

“I still have some hope that we can stop this madness. You know that my days on this earth are numbered. Without your power, I would have died a long time ago. The illness within me grows stronger. It’s a sad fate that I will not live as long as we had hoped. I know that my death will be especially difficult for you. The men in our family never live as long as the gifted women. You are one of the strongest of them all and will no doubt live to see some of your grandchildren die. I’m sorry for the burden you must bear. For my part, I want to die knowing that I have done all I can to avert war and the suffering it brings.... Mother. It has been a long time since I called you that even in private. I like the sound of it.”

“I like the sound if it too, Cleetus,” said Casia as she wrapped her arms around her son and allowed her tears to wash down her cheeks. “I like it too.”

They held each other for a while folding their love and pain together.

“I understand your decision. Although I would very much like to protect you, I know you are right. You should go to the capital and try to get the senate to stand their ground.

If you fail, I will do all I can to help Nevia defeat Bellator and obtain an honorable peace for our people,” said Casia. “I love you. I am tired from my journey. Good night. Let’s go to bed Aduro.”

The big white dog got up from his place in the corner and stopped briefly for a pat on the head from Cleetus before he followed his mistress down the stairs to their apartment. Casia was sad, and though Aduro didn’t know why, he could feel the intensity of her grief. He would sleep next to her bed and be there to comfort her as best he could.

The days passed quickly. Segus’s recovery was remarkable. Casia checked on him frequently monitoring his recovery and giving instructions about his herbal therapy, diet and activity.

Ten days after their return, Casia instructed Vallo to secretly bring Segus to the private reception room after dark.

“Be certain, Vallo, that no one sees you bringing him here. I don’t want a reason for any gossip,” said Casia.

“I understand, Lady Casia. You can’t be too careful these days. Spies are everywhere looking for a reason to accuse someone of treason, especially such a powerful someone as a member of the house of Valerius.”

“I freed you a long time ago, Vallo. I don’t thank you often enough for the love and loyalty that you have shown me and my family,” said Casia. “You could leave and go back to your own country.”

“This is my family now,” said Vallo. “Your honor is my honor. No thanks are needed.”

Casia was sitting on a bench in the family reception room when Segus arrived.

“Please sit and join me for a glass of wine. It is my favorite from our own vineyards,” said Casia.

“Thank you for your kindness,” said Segus tasting the wine. “I haven’t seen you alone since we arrived here. I’m glad to have the opportunity to speak with you and thank you again for saving my life. I’ve made a full recovery and may, in fact, be stronger than ever. They say the Gods have given you great healing skills. You pulled me back from the edge of death. Surely no mere mortal could have done this.”

“I’m pleased at your recovery. Now we may need your help, Segus,” said Casia choosing to ignore his comments about her healing skills. “My father will go to the senate next week and attempt to prevent them from declaring a state of emergency. Bellator wants to impose martial law. As head of the army, he would use his military power to wipe out

those who challenge him and his plan to attack Nevia. Bellator is drunk with his own power. He is an evil and cunning man who uses fear and greed as effective weapons to poison the hearts and minds of the people and the senate. Frankly my father isn't very optimistic that he will succeed in opposing him."

"Perhaps your father shouldn't risk a power struggle that he will probably lose. Come to Nevia. Together we can stop Bellator," said Segus.

"My father is ill. His days on this earth are numbered, and he feels compelled to do the best he can to prevent war even if his chance of success is slim. There was a time when we thought Bellator would be one of the great leaders of our people. Then, he was corrupted by those who only think of their own desires. When he was young, I was one of his teachers. I know the man through and through. I know how he thinks. If you can get me to the king and convince him that I'm truthful, I can help him defeat Bellator."

"You would fight against your own people?" asked Segus.

Casia took his hand in hers and looked deeply into his eyes.

"Only if the king would promise me that his goal would be to stop Bellator, end the war, and free my people to rebuild our country as an ally. When you were ill, I looked into your heart. You are an honorable man. Can the same be said about your king?" she asked.

Segus felt a strange connection with this woman. When her eyes pierced his, she not only looked into his heart; she looked into his soul.

"You may trust the king's word. He is an honorable man," he said without hesitation. "I would be a fool to try to lie to you."

Casia terminated their connection and let go of his hand.

"Can you get me to the king? Will he listen to me?" asked Casia.

"I guarantee it," replied Segus. "I have the king's ear."

"Good. We should leave going south by the mountain pass on the same day my father departs for the capital. Vallo and Aduro will go with us. Spathus will stay with my father for now. We want to keep our group small and initially travel at night to decrease the chance of detection before we reach the protection of the mountains. I assume you'll want to take Emile and several of your other soldiers."

"Only three others are in good enough physical condition for this arduous journey. Can the ones that are still injured go north with your people?" asked Segus.

“Of course,” replied Casia. “We’ll take care of them. Vallo will be in charge of preparations. We have horses from the mountains of Thuria. They have the strength and the hearts to make it across the mountains. Secrecy is critical. We know that Bellator has spies among us.”

Cleetus entered the room and slowly walked across to Casia and Segus. Although he still stood erect, the effects of his illness were apparent in the tautness of his skin and the obvious effort it took for him to walk.

“Segus, I guess Casia has already confided in you.”

“Yes, Senator. I’m sorry that this great burden has fallen on you.”

“Take care of Casia and heed her words. If I can’t stop this war, she can help you defeat Bellator and restore peace to both our countries. If I’m successful at the senate, we’ll have opened an additional avenue for trade and negotiations with your people. Either way, your journey will be worth the effort for both countries,” said Cleetus stopping to clear his throat. “I shall retire now. It has been a long day for me. Thank you for your help.”

“Vallo is waiting in the courtyard to speak with you, Segus, and plan for our departure. We’ll talk again soon,” said Casia as she took Cleetus’s arm and helped him into his apartment.

The next days were busy as Casia coordinated three different groups. The last people scheduled to move north to the meadow strongholds left at night. A skeleton crew concentrated their activities outside to make it seem like business as usual. Cleetus rested and prepared his speech for the senate while Vallo and Spathus gathered supplies for the journey over the mountains. By combining dried fruits and dried meat for the humans and Aduro and molasses soaked grain for the horses, they minimized the volume of supplies they needed. There were many springs on their route that would provide clean water for both man and beast. The horses could supplement their diet with grasses along their path.

The evening that Casia dreaded came quickly. She slept during the heat of the afternoon. Then she arose slightly after sundown and ate a light meal before going to Cleetus’s apartment. He was waiting for her to say goodbye.

“I love you, Casia. Do not weep for me. My life has been more wonderful than any man has the right to wish for. I’m sorry to have lost my wife when she was young, but my children are safe in the north. You can send for them when the time is right. They’ll return to our land and continue to care for it. There will always be adversity. But, I hope our family will have the strength and wisdom to stand for what’s right. Good luck on your mission. We shall be together again.”

“I love you and I’m proud of you, my son. I’ll meet you on the other side,” said Casia as she kissed him and quickly took her leave before her emotions overwhelmed her.

Casia and Aduro met their traveling companions on the far side of the river that marked the edge of the Valerius lands. The moon was almost full. If they traveled quickly, they could make the foothills before morning and reach the trailhead for their path through the mountains before noon. Cleetus would leave for the capital in the morning and reach his destination on horseback before nightfall. Casia prayed that a miracle would happen in the senate making her journey less critical. But, the dull ache in her heart forewarned her of a dangerous future.

The Thurian horses were incredible animals that had been bred for strength and endurance in the mountains. Casia enjoyed feeling the power and agility of her mount as he expertly picked his way along the rocky path near the foothills. Aduro moved silently beside her occasionally stopping to sniff the air to be certain unseen enemies weren’t near. If the object of their journey hadn’t been so serious, Casia would have enjoyed riding in the night with such companions.

The angle of their ascent increased noticeably as they moved out of the foothills and started up the mountain pass. About noon, they stopped at a small stream to water and rest the horses before tackling a more challenging part of their path.

“We have about three more hours of climbing before we reach a plateau area that has a good campsite and water for the night. We’ll rest there and get an early start in the morning,” said Vallo. “The weather looks like it’s going to hold. It’s a lot easier to make the descent when it isn’t raining or muddy.

“I’ve never been over this trail. It surprises me that we haven’t met any other travelers,” commented Segus.

“The trail is too steep and narrow for wagons. It is mainly used by smugglers with pack animals. With war threatening, most of them are staying in their strongholds safely out of the way,” said Vallo. “Hopefully we won’t have any company on this trip. If we do, keep your hand on your sword.”

After watering the horses, the men staked them where they could browse on the grass while the humans and Aduro ate and rested. After eating, the big dog lay on his back and enjoyed Casia’s touch as she carefully checked the pads of his feet for sores or stickers. Then Casia gently rubbed his tummy and playfully ruffled his ears just as she had since he was a puppy.

“You’re so spoiled, and I love you so much,” said Casia. “Curl up with me for a quick nap before we must start again on our journey.”

Casia lay down on a blanket behind a large rock which broke the wind, and Aduro obediently snuggled next to her. They fell almost immediately asleep knowing that Vallo would wake them when the time came to leave.

When Casia awoke, she thought about Cleetus who would soon be approaching the capital and settling into his apartment for the night. Traveling that long on horseback even with frequent rest stops would be exhausting for him. She was glad that Spathus and Dorius were with him.

She tried to clear her mind of worry as they remounted the horses and resumed their journey. They continued to make good time and reached their first night's campsite without any problems. Traveling at night on these narrow mountain paths even with a full moon wasn't an option. Vallo supervised setting up the campsite to provide the most protection from the weather and potential unwanted visitors. The men would take turns on guard duty throughout the night. Casia didn't worry about any surprises with Aduro by her side.

The morning dawned cool and clear with only thin wispy high clouds. Their campsite was protected from the constant wind that blew on this face of the mountain, but Casia could hear it whistle as it blew through the rocks. Vallo thought it was safe to make a small fire to heat water for a hot breakfast which they would appreciate as they made their way to the top and started their descent into the valley on the other side. Tonight they would camp about halfway down the north face.

The riders appreciated the talents of their mounts even more as the tough Thurian horses maneuvered their way through the rocks to the top of the mountain and then cautiously began their descent. Vallo had mentioned the importance of dry weather for this part of the trip. Even though Casia was known for her bold attitude and fearlessness, she didn't want to even think about making this portion of the trip with mud as an added factor. By the time they reached their campsite, it was still afternoon, but both riders and horses were exhausted.

"We have a few more hours of daylight, but we'll stop here until morning. Our horses need rest and food," said Vallo. "I'm happy to tell you that the worst is over. The trail flattens from here to the valley floor. I have a surprise for you. You'll need to lead your horses. Follow me."

Vallo turned and walked toward a wall of rocks and then turned sharply right behind a huge boulder just before he got there. A narrow opening in the wall allowed them to enter a small canyon about one hundred feet long with a small waterfall at one end and a lawn of green grass with a few small scrub trees.

"I found this grotto when I was on a hunting trip with Cleetus and Spathus several years ago. Just like home, is it not?" asked Vallo with a slight smile. "We're protected from

the wind here and can have the luxury of a fire after sundown when the smoke can't be seen from the valley."

"This is a nice surprise," said Casia. "I'm sure the horses agree."

"We won't even need to stake them if we move a rock or two in front of the opening. They can move freely in the grass and drink as they wish," said Emile motioning for his men to temporarily block the opening.

"They set up camp, fed the horses, and prepared a meal. Casia poured a glass of wine for each of them and rechecked Arduro's feet while there was still good light.

"You are a tough soldier, Aduro. Your feet look none the worse for wear after that difficult trail," said Casia to her companion setting out a bowl of food and water for him. Arduro ate all of it and lay down on their sleeping pallet for a nap. Casia sipped her wine and looked deep in thought as Segus came to sit by her.

"Thinking of your father?" he asked.

"Yes. The senate would have met this morning to discuss the possibility of war and martial law. The session is probably over. What can be done has been done," she said with a far away look in her eyes.

"Tomorrow we'll enter my country. How will we know the outcome of your father's attempt to sway the senate?"

"Spathus accompanied my father with instructions to remain hidden from the authorities once they neared the capital. He and Vallo have hunted many times in these mountains. Unless he was detected, he should already be retracing our steps," said Casia.

"I knew you would have a plan," commented Segus. "Once we reach the valley floor, we can be at the palace in two days. I'll send a messenger ahead to announce our arrival. I pray that Spathus will bring us good news. Try to get some rest, Casia. We still have a long trip in front of us."

Casia nodded her head in agreement but knew that sleep would be difficult for her that night.

At sunrise the next morning, Vallo climbed up one of the cliffs where he could look back toward the trail at the top of the mountain.

"Spathus moves with great speed toward us, Lady Casia. If we wait, he'll be here within two hours," shouted Vallo.

“We’ll prepare the horses and be ready to depart in two hours, but we will not leave without Spathus’s message,” said Segus to his men.

“Yes, sire,” said Emile who immediately started organizing the other men.

“Casia fed Aduro and took a few bites of dried meat and fruit herself. Then she pulled her cape around her and sat with Aduro at the base of a rock to wait for Spathus. Two hours seemed like an eternity.

When Spathus entered the canyon, he immediately dismounted and asked Vallo to care for his horse who was lathered and obviously exhausted from his effort.

Spathus ran toward Casia and fell on his knees before her. Casia knew to expect the worst.

“Forgive me, Lady Casia. My Lord Cleetus is dead. Because he dared to challenge Bellator, he was pronounced a traitor and hung by soldiers from the city gate. He was already weak and did not suffer long. I could not save him or recover his body. Dorius returned immediately to your home to evacuate everyone before the soldiers could get there and execute Bellator’s order for revenge. I came here as quickly as I could. I am so sorry. Forgive me,”

“There is nothing you could have done, Spathus. You could not have prevented this,” said Casia. “Help Vallo with your horse and get a fresh mount. We’ll be leaving soon.”

Casia turned and walked with Aduro toward the waterfall away from the group of men. She had been preparing herself for this possibility, but the reality of it was more painful than she could have imagined. A wave of grief swept over her, and she began to shake uncontrollably.

Segus had followed her. He spontaneously put his arm around her and brought her to his chest to hold her as she buried her head into his shoulder. He stroked her hair. The intensity of the moment dissolved the usual shield Casia kept around herself that would have prevented Segus from feeling her grief. They spontaneously melded, and he could feel the intensity of her pain...the horrible hollow feeling inside her...the loss. Then he felt her pain turn to anger and deep resolve. She bent back her head to look into his face.

“Bellator will *not* rule my people. I will stop him if it takes my last breath,” she whispered in a voice that Segus heard not only in his ears, but also in his mind.

Casia refused to wait another day before descending into the valley.

“I doubt Bellator knows where I am. But, we mustn’t take any chance that he could send troops to intercept us. The sooner we get to the Nevian capital, the better,” said Casia.

They could see fires in the distance when they made camp that night in the valley.

“From the number and location of the lights, that’s probably one of our military units, Emile,” said Segus.

“Ride ahead. Be careful not to get shot. I need you,” said Segus with a slight grin on his lips. “Find out who’s in charge, and let them know we’re here and need supplies and an escort into the city. I assume they think by this time we’re dead. Give them the good news.”

“Yes, Sire,” responded Emile. “I’ll be back by morning.”

Near dawn Segus approached Casia and Aduro who were still sleeping. The big dog uttered a low guttural growl as he raised himself to a crouching position.

“Aduro, it’s me,” said Segus quickly.

Casia rolled over with a knife in her hand.

“You might want to give us a little more warning, Segus,” she said. “I wouldn’t want you to get more wounds this close to home.”

“I’m sure that’s good advice, Lady Casia,” said Segus formally. “I wanted you to know that I sent Emile last night to let the military know we’re here and need supplies and an escort. I already talked with Vallo and Spathus. They know to expect them.”

“I want to talk to the king as soon as possible,” said Casia.

“Yes....Well, there is something I need to tell you,” said Segus just as a group of heavily armed men on horses approached their camp.

The men walked up to Segus and knelt in front of him.

“Hail and all honor to the King. Welcome home, Sire” said a young officer.

“I’m glad to be home,” said Segus. “Rise. Lady Casia and her guards, Vallo, Spathus, and Aduro are my guests. They will be treated with all courtesy and honor. Please take them to the palace so they may bathe and rest. I’ll join them shortly.”

Segus took Casia’s arm and escorted her away from the soldiers.

“As I was about to say....I didn’t want to tell you everything about my identity until we were safely in my country.”

“Well, you did promise me you had the king’s ear, Sire,” said Casia with a slight note of sarcasm in her voice.

“You knew?” asked Segus with a look of surprise.

“I suspected until Emile slipped and called you ‘Sire’,” replied Casia. “Then I knew. I’m ready to talk battle plans when you are.”

“I think I’d better let my generals, council of state and allies know that I’m still alive before we get down to specific battle plans. Bellator won’t be able to make any serious moves until after the fall rains. We have some time to prepare. Don’t worry. I want to defeat him as much as you do. If he defeats us, my people will become his slaves....That won’t happen.”

Casia and her companions were shown to a luxurious guest apartment in the palace. She and Aduro occupied the inner rooms which included a large bedroom, a bath with a deep bathing tub artfully made from stone and a sitting area which opened onto a walled courtyard garden. Vallo and Spathus had sleeping areas and a table and chairs in the outer ante chamber. The palace staff provided them with wine and platters of food. Maids brought huge containers of hot water to fill the bath for Casia and laid out clean, luxurious clothing for her to wear and scented oils for her skin. She thanked them for their courtesy and then sent them away. Although Casia couldn’t resist soaking in the hot bath, she certainly didn’t want their help. Then she chose the simplest pieces of clothing to wear avoiding the thin silk veils with gold trim.

“I don’t even know what to do with some of this *stuff*,” she thought to herself. “I’m not sure I could even walk with all this on.”

When she called Vallo and Spathus to discuss their future plans, the two men looked at her as if they had never seen her before.

“Lady Casia, I’m not sure we should even allow you to leave this room without us. Those clothes make the most of your beauty. I swore to your father to protect you,” teased Vallo. “You don’t want to end up in the harem.”

“Vallo, it would be entertaining to see what would happen to someone who tried to take dishonorable advantage of her,” commented Spathus. “She is beautiful just as the female leopard is beautiful before she shows her claws.”

In spite of her sadness, Casia had to smile at the sideways comments of her loyal guards.

“Thanks for the compliments, I guess,” replied Casia. “As for the harem, I don’t think the eunuchs would find me a compliant guest.”

The two men smiled at each other and Aduro barked as if he also got the joke.

“But, we have more serious things to consider. I need accurate maps of Nevia especially the border regions with our country. Find out if there’s a library with such information. I want to make our own three dimensional working copy similar to the one we did of our lands. I’ll probably also want you to scout to be certain the maps are accurate and fill in any missing important information. Spathus check to see that the horses are being properly cared for. I’ve heard that the Nevians are great lovers of horses, but I want to be certain they know what they’re doing.”

“It will also give me the opportunity to look at the layout of the grounds and talk to the stable help. They know all the rumors and will often share them with a fellow horseman,” replied Spathus.

“If anyone objects to your endeavors, tell them you have the permission of the king. Segus told me he would see me today after meeting with his advisors. I’ll fill him in on our activities.”

“Lady Casia, remember that he is king in this place and no longer your patient,” commented Vallo. “You may need to slightly change your attitude toward him.”

“Yes. That’s good advice, Vallo. I’ll try to remember that,” said Casia.

“In the mean time, I’ll strike up some conversation with the palace guards and servants. It’s amazing what you can learn from others who serve. We will both be cautious not discuss with anyone who our mistress is or where we come from.” said Vallo. “I would hesitate to think that Bellator has ears in this palace, but it is always best to be careful.”

“Yes. I may be more effective as an advisor for Segus if Bellator doesn’t know where I am. We’ll meet again to night to discuss what each of us has discovered,” said Casia.

Casia ate a light meal with Aduro and then went into the courtyard attached to her quarters. The garden had two date palms and stone paths around a central pool with floating plants. In one far corner was a small staircase which provided access to a covered walkway on top of the wall. Casia quickly climbed the stairs and looked down at the city below. From this vantage point, she could see the extensive palace grounds with several temples, a busy central market square, stables, and narrow streets lined with merchant stalls selling every kind of goods.

“These are a prosperous people,” she thought to herself. “I hope easy living hasn’t made them soft.”

There was no exit from her apartment this way unless she had ropes. It was probably a seventy or eighty foot sheer drop straight down to the stone patio below. However, there was only about an eight foot jump across to the roof of another walkway one story down and slightly west of her. She made a mental note to find out where that walkway led.

When Casia returned to her bedroom, a beautiful young Nubian woman was waiting for her with a message from Segus.

“The king wishes you to join him for dinner in his chambers this evening. I will return in about an hour to escort you, Lady Casia,” she said in a pleasant deep voice. “My name is Cassandra, and I have been assigned to serve you. Is there anything you require? A massage? Different foods or drink? Do the clothes we brought you please you?”

“Everything is fine. You’re most kind,” said Casia courteously. “I’m not used to dressing in silk. It seems as if it will be cold once the weather changes.”

“My lord, the king, has sent you another gift which should keep you warm,” said the young woman as she motioned toward Casia’s bed. Lying across it was a hooded cape of densely woven natural black wool lined in soft brown fur.

“I will thank the king personally for such a luxurious gift,” said Casia.

“He has also given instructions for the boot maker to come tomorrow to measure your foot. I will return within the hour,” said Cassandra as she backed out of the room slightly bowing as she went.

Casia brushed and restyled her hair. Then she draped a purple silk shawl over her shoulders and allowed it to fall over the dark iridescent blue top and overskirt she had originally chosen. Casia was sitting in the garden allowing herself a few moments of introspection when Cassandra returned.

“I will take you by the back way, Lady Casia. The king has made it clear that I am not to discuss your presence in the palace with anyone else.”

Cassandra seemed surprised when Aduro rose to accompany Casia.

“He always travels with me. The king will understand.”

Cassandra nodded her head and guided them down several narrow halls lit by torches. Then she knocked at a small wooden door which was quickly opened by a tall, dark haired, olive skinned man dressed in white linen.

“Good evening, Lothar,” said Cassandra. “I have the Lady Casia and her companion with me.”

“Yes. The king is expecting them,” he replied as he looked carefully in both directions down the hall. “Please enter.”

Lothar shut and bolted the door before he bowed slightly to Casia. “This way, Lady Casia.”

Lothar led Casia and Aduro through a small antechamber into a much larger room awash in pale light from the last rays of the sun setting in the west.

“Casia and Aduro. I am pleased to see you both. Please join me,” said Segus as he gently patted Aduro and then took Casia’s hand to lead them to a formal but intimate dining area on one side of the room. Aduro followed closely behind.

Although Casia was tempted to allow fate to take its course, she made certain to prevent any melding between them. Obviously Segus knew she had special abilities, but she wasn’t ready to fully expose her powers to him especially with servants in the same room.

“Please sit with me,” said Segus. “I hope you’ll forgive the need for secrecy. I think both of us agree that it is better if Bellator doesn’t know where you are. Already rumors are flying about a mysterious woman and her animal companion who are visitors in the palace.”

“We can’t hope to keep my presence a complete secret. But, the less people know the better,” said Casia. “Thank you for the beautiful cape. But Segus, I don’t need nor am I used to such luxuries. I want to keep focused on our ultimate goal of defeating our common enemy.”

“I promise you that I will not lose sight of our goal but, allow me to offer you at least some of the comforts that my position provides. You did save my life, and I will always be grateful. Also, I think we share an unusual bond that makes us friends. Is that not so?”

“Yes. That is true. We are friends, and our fates are intertwined. I’m also starving. You promised me dinner.”

Aduro barked as if he was also anticipating a share of the evening’s meal.

“So, I did,” said Segus. “Cassandra, we’re ready to eat.”

They had a wonderful meal of roast venison, freshly baked bread, dried fruits, and rice spiced with tumeric and nutmeg. Aduro ate part of the venison and then curled up to take a nap.

“This is my favorite wine from my vineyard,” teased Segus remembering Casia’s comments at her home. “Please enjoy.”

“It is excellent,” said Casia after tasting the wine. “I hope that someday we may taste our wines side by side when both of our countries are at peace.”

“That is a toast worth drinking to,” said Segus as he took a sip from his glass.

“Leave us,” said Segus motioning to Cassandra and Lothar who departed into the ante chamber and closed the door.

“I have a feeling you like to play games,” commented Segus rising from his seat and leading Casia over to a table lit by torches on heavy iron stands.

Casia glanced at the tiles which had been placed on the table in anticipation of their game.

“I’m hoping to take advantage of you by introducing a new game with which you may not be familiar. I only recently learned to play it myself. It’s from the East,” commented Segus.

“I’m sorry that I must disappoint you, Segus. This is one of my favorite childhood games. An old friend brought it back to my family a long time ago after a trip she made to the East.”

“Of course, I shouldn’t be surprised,” said Segus.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t want me to allow you to win just because we are now in your country and you are king,” said Casia with a hint of playfulness in her voice.

“Obviously not,” replied Segus. “Your move.”

## **End Part I**

### **May All Your Shadows Be Silver**