

## Chapter One

*The Kingdom of Semar*

*Summer 1278*

“I’m not the kind of woman who should be avoided, lover.”

Nikolai Baudin sighed in frustration. He rolled his neck from side to side to release the tension and continued to stare out over the desert sands he loved, avoiding the softly accented feminine voice behind him. He stood in the remains of what must have been a beautiful temple, though to which gods he didn’t know. Carved limestone pillars rose in a semi-circle of decay, or lay broken on their side. Chunks of an altar, stained deep brown on one side, fell into ruins, and what must have once been a pool of water lay dry and dusty. Niko wondered, for perhaps the thousandth time, what happened to the city. What became of its people?

A warm breeze teased the ends of his hair and scattered the sand around his boots. The coming night promised to be a cool one, providing welcome relief from the baking heat of the day.

The woman, Helene Clalas-Mór, *tsked* behind him. “Not speaking to me? I thought you were a man, not a child.”

Niko felt her move up behind him and swung to face her before she could lay a hand upon his back. Once, her touch enflamed him. Now, it left him cold. “I’m not avoiding you, Helene. My days are filled with—”

“Duties. Yes, I know,” she said, blue eyes sparkling up at him. Her flawless skin gleamed in the fading light. “As king, it is your right to delegate those duties to the men beneath you. Why should you work harder than they? If you did, perhaps we could spend more time together.”

Helene’s hair caught the light of the sinking sun, causing the russet red locks to look ablaze. She circled him, swaying her hips and dipping a shoulder in a blatant display of seduction. A sheer green sash wrapped around her bared midriff and over one shoulder, highlighting the swell of her breasts under the tight blouse she wore beneath.

She trailed a hand over his shoulder. “I’ve barely seen you in three months, lover. Did you miss me?”

Nikolai stared into her upturned face and felt... nothing. Not a flicker of arousal or even a whisper of interest for her company. He captured her hand and held it away from his body. “No, Helene. I did not.”

A flash of anger blazed in her eyes for only a moment and was replaced with a feminine pout. She stepped closer, trying to brush her body against his.

Niko wouldn’t apologize for his directness. Sweet words of thanks for the time they’d shared hadn’t been enough to set her aside. Nor had his request that she stay out of his chambers and not seek him out. Or his suggestion that he’d already found another, which he hadn’t. They’d been lovers for months, but Helene demanded more. Something Niko couldn’t—wouldn’t—give. Ever. She seemed to turn a deaf ear to his desire to part company with her. That ended today.

His dragon rumbled agreement.

“I told you, Helene. We will not be together again. I cannot give you what you seek; you deserve more.”

She tugged her wrist out of his grasp. "I care for you, Nikolai. Don't do this. Don't waste what we've had. I can make you happy."

"No, you can't." He wasn't sure if anything could. A bone-deep emptiness filled him, settling like shadows in his soul as he moved through his daily duties and crept out like Shades in the dark of night when he tossed restlessly in bed. What unsettled him most was the knowledge that he shouldn't feel this way. He had his brother and the people they cared for. A kingdom to rule and friends. Lovers when he wanted them. Yet somehow, it wasn't enough.

Kiril, his second in command, suggested that he was missing a queen. Niko shuddered. He didn't need or want a wife. Someone who would come into his life only to leave him broken and alone, waiting to die as his father had. No, he'd never succumb to the lure of marriage.

Helene sputtered, bringing him back to their conversation.

"You're wrong!" she spat, lifting her chin and glaring at him. "No one can make you happy like I can."

He ran a hand through his hair and gripped the back of his neck. "Find someone else, Helene. We are done." He strode past her, his meaning clear.

"Wait!" she snarled and grabbed his arm. "I have given you months of my life and this is how you repay that kindness? You will regret losing me, Nikolai."

He studied her a moment, from the top of her fiery head, down over her perfect face and figure, to her little sandaled feet. "It is my hope that we can remain friends, Helene. But never again will we be anything more. It is best to accept that now."

"Do not dare tell me what is best for me, Nikolai Baudin. I decide what I want and I take it."

Her strength surprised him, reminding him that Helene was Fae. Except for her exotic beauty, she looked human. But with her hand clutching his arm, the difference between Helene and a human woman seemed heightened.

He easily broke her grip. “Then decide on another and do it quickly. I lose patience. Do not make me cast you from Semar.”

She blanched. “You wouldn’t dare. Not after—”

“Then make your choice, Helene. Another man or another kingdom, it matters not to me.”

He turned and left her standing in the midst of the temple, making his way through the courtyards and streets of Semar. She would find another. His lovers always did.

His people smiled and waved as he passed, asking after his health and wishing him prosperity. Once, the Kingdom of Semar had been completely deserted. Now it teemed with life. Men worked, either as guards or craftsmen, and women maintained the kingdom, doing everything from cooking to cleaning and sewing. They lived a simple life, and it brought him a small sense of contentment to know that the people under his protection thrived.

A scent caught his attention. Niko grimaced when he identified it. Baked ginger mingled with the hot desert air and turned his stomach. He altered course and ducked under the linen shade at the entrance to the baker’s shop. The man turned as he entered, offering Niko a short bow and almost dropping the tray of ginger cookies he held. Sweat beaded a swarthy face gone almost entirely bald and his clothes hung on his wiry frame. The baker set the cookies aside and rubbed his palms on his vest and apron, leaving large swaths of flour in their wake.

“My lord!” he cried, voice tinged with joy. “You are just in time.”

Nikolai nodded. "I could smell the ginger near the temple. I hope you made enough cookies for all our people."

The baker chuckled and stuffed the warm cookies into a bag. "The children love these so much, I shall be making them in my sleep tonight. Thank you for sharing the recipe. Never would I have put ginger into a cookie."

Nikolai accepted the sack and thanked the baker. He didn't comment on how he hated the cookies, or the recipe, or that even holding them in his hand brought to mind memories he wished to bury forever. Instead, he commended the baker on his skills and left the shop. Not three steps later, children swarmed around his legs.

He laughed as they crowded him, begging and dancing for cookies. Niko handed them out, eliciting promises that they listen to their parents and grow strong to protect and care for their people. This was why he dug out the recipe from his trunks for the baker. Not because he ever wanted to taste the ginger again, but because, in some small part of his mind, he wished these children would have the happiness in life denied him. With the last cookie gone, he tucked the sack into his pocket and strode the short trip to the oasis.

As he passed beneath the massive limestone arches that marked the front of the palace and city of Semar, he marveled anew at the tall trees and thriving plants that dappled the sands in green. The oasis always brought him a measure of solace. A couple of his lovelies played in the cool water, enjoying a respite from the heat.

Niko knelt at the edge, dipping his fingers into the placid spring. One of the women blew him a kiss and he chuckled. Though Nikolai didn't keep a harem, women gravitated toward him. People did. Men, women, and children came to Semar, looking for refuge from whatever hardships life brought. Nikolai and his twin brother Stefan gave them a home in exchange for

their fealty and hard work. Once, Niko and Stefan had needed sanctuary, and the goddesses led them here. How could he not extend the same to weary souls who also needed a home?

Speaking of whom, he hadn't heard from Stefan in some time. Perhaps he ought to reach out to his brother. His gut tightened at the thought. Tomorrow. The confrontation with Helene was enough for one day. He didn't relish a second.

Niko swirled his fingers through the water, looking at the shore of the lake. The waters sprang from deep in the ground, rising up and extending for half the length of his palace. It was the unusual sight of green plants and trees in the midst of the sand that led him and Stefan to this kingdom. Water was precious in any land, but in the desert its value outweighed gold. Here in Semar, the waters of the oasis were worth even more. For the goddesses had blessed the underground aquifers, touching those who drank its waters for extended periods with magic. The power differed from one to another, yet for most it enhanced the talent in their hands. Allowing craftsman to create objects of unending beauty or soldiers to fight with more skill. Or bakers to make the perfect ginger cookie.

Niko frowned, only now noticing where the water lapped at the shore. Was the oasis level lower than normal?

"If you keep taking lovers and then coldly setting them aside, the number of angry women in Semar will soon outweigh those who like you, Niko."

Nikolai snorted and glanced over his shoulder as his second in command, Kiril, strolled up to stand beside him at the water's edge. "You're one to speak."

Kiril laughed. "True, but I typically do not need to see a healer after parting company with a lovely woman." With his dark hair cut short, close-cropped beard, and deep golden skin,

Kiril was very popular with the women of Semar. The humor he typically displayed drew their notice, as did his muscled frame.

Niko's lips quirked. "Point taken."

"I just saw the beautiful Helene stomp toward the catacombs. Is she mourning the death of your love or planning your assassination?"

"Unlikely to be either. She often seeks solace there," Niko replied. "She will soon realize this is for the best. I can't offer her what she wants."

"You mean you won't. She wants control and wealth, both of which you have in abundance."

He shook his head. "She wants to be a queen."

Kiril visibly shuddered. "The people would never accept her. She's a strange bird. I don't trust her."

Niko often thought the same, even when they'd been lovers. She'd been amazing and inventive in bed, and that had drowned out any misgiving he'd had.

"However, if you desire a new beauty who doesn't plan to stay in Semar," Kiril added, "you might cast your eyes to the caravan. It's been spotted on the other side of the Great Dune. If you lavish your considerable charm and dashing good looks on a woman who is leaving anyway, perhaps you won't have to dig a dagger out of your back quite so often."

Niko stood and grinned at his second. "I find a sense of danger attractive in a woman."

"There's danger and then there's deadly. For a king, you might choose to learn the difference. Before it's too late and I lose my life saving yours." Kiril shook his head but couldn't keep the smile from his lips.

Niko slugged him in the shoulder. “Take your own advice in matters of the heart and leave me be.”

Kiril threw back his head and laughed, the lines around his eyes deepening.

“When will the caravan arrive?”

“Before the sun sets. They should have enough time to set up their camp and perhaps some of the tents before morning. Anything you plan to look for?”

Niko thought for a moment. The caravans came through only four times a year. It was a true treat for his people, and gave them an opportunity to trade their crafts and buy new items for their houses and families. He would assign some of his craftsmen to purchase more supplies needed for the restoration of Semar. To Kiril, he replied what was expected. “Perhaps something  
brunette.”

Kiril slapped him on the shoulder. “That is an excellent idea. Come, let’s celebrate with some of that fine brandy you own before I return to my duties.”

“Have you even begun your...” Niko trailed off as his body tensed. His *knowing* rose within.

“What is it?” Kiril stood rigid beside him, hand on the curved sword at his belt. Gone was the mirth and in its place the fierce, sharp warrior Nikolai trusted above all save his brother.

He focused on the *knowing*, letting the warning skim through his mind and body like a rushing wind. Danger, peace, fear, and fury mixed and tumbled through him with such speed that he could barely separate one emotion from the next. The *knowing*, or premonitions he received, weren’t always specific. But never once wrong.

Niko breathed and released the warning. “Something comes, my friend. Good or evil, I know not which.”



Kiril released his sword. “Must be another woman,” he muttered, and strode toward the gates of Semar.

Perhaps. Nikolai thought back to his confrontation with Helene. Or perhaps it was something else entirely. He cast one last glance at the water level of the oasis, then followed his friend back into the palace.

\*\*\*

Darkness was coming. She could feel it. Arianrhod Deatherage had no need to see the shadows as they snaked across the desert sands or feel the fading warmth of the sinking sun to know when it began and ended its descent. She had three hours before sunset and the caravan had yet to cross the Great Dune. Her brow furrowed as she shifted one of the rugs on the wagon. Would they make it to Semar in time? They must. Even if she had to ride ahead. She couldn't be around others when night fell.

“Aria, have you finished?”

The male voice cut into her thoughts like a razor-sharp claw. “Yes, Yuri, I have,” she said without turning, not wanting to explain the worry he would read in her expression.

“Good, good.” He hopped off the bench seat of the tilt cart and came around back to shift a few rugs himself. It made him feel useful, though Aria had moved the carpets enough to make the trek through the sand easier on their donkey. The joints in Yuri's hands began to swell two months ago and she knew that use of them pained him, though he refused to speak of it. Instead, he pretended that he worked as hard as she and Cyrus, and they let him keep the illusion.

She shooed him away. “It is finished, Yuri. Enough. We must hurry to catch the end of

the caravan before it arrives in Semar.”

He settled a large brown palm on her shoulder, giving it a small squeeze. “We sent Cyrus ahead. He will find space for us. Do not worry.” His eyebrows rose as he glanced at her, then amended, “But, yes. We can go.”

Aria turned away so she wouldn’t see the concern in his gaze. It still surprised her that after four years of travel together, he didn’t ask the questions she could see in his eyes every evening before the sun went down. When Aria disappeared into her wagon until morning.

“I cannot wait to see the great city of Semar. Is it true that it was found abandoned?” she asked as she climbed up into the seat of her wagon.

Yuri accepted the change in topic and took his seat on the tilt cart. “Yes. It is said that the Dark Dragon and his brother found the city with no inhabitants. They settled here.”

The Dark Dragon. Just the words brought wisps of a memory to mind. Golden eyes looking into hers with a faint smile. Dark, shaggy hair and straight teeth. Black scales and huge leathery wings. The images tumbled together, somewhere between dream and memory, and mixed with the scent of smoke and burning flesh. So much about that terrible day in Crevo was lost to her. Had she been rescued by a great black beast? Or was that only the fanciful imaginings of a child who’d just suffered the loss of her mother and the worst day of her life?

The answers drove her to Semar. A magical kingdom of mystery that people whispered of far and wide. Every village and town the caravan visited told tales of the Dark Dragon and his fierce warriors. Stories decades old of his war against Bin-Ra and the rescue of so many people from the brutal warlord’s reign of terror. Each pub told more fantastic tales, until the Dark Dragon himself became more myth than man.

Aria didn't know what she expected to find when she reached Semar. He would be much older by now. Seventeen years passed since that fateful day in Crevo. He wouldn't remember her, she knew, but she had to find him. The old seer said it was vital to her future. But more than that, Aria needed to look into the eyes of her rescuer and ask him why he sent her away. The people of Crevo who survived Bin-Ra's sword were taken to Semar as refugees. All except Aria. Had he known, just by looking at her, the wickedness that lived inside her? Had he sensed it even then and wanted her as far away from his people as possible? Her heart sank, as it always did when she pondered these questions. Yet she had to know. Had to see his reaction. Then, she would ask about the Archives. And maybe, if the goddesses were with her, she would be rid of the darkness within.

She flicked the reins to start her pony up the side of the dune, confident that Yuri's cart could keep pace now that she'd redistributed the weight of the rugs. "What of the people who now call Semar home?"

Yuri shrugged as he rolled along beside her. "I hear only that they find him. It is a city of refugees. A place where people can be safe."

Safe.

What would it be like to be sheltered and protected? To feel secure when the sun set and not worry if her cart was locked tight through the twilight hours. Or that the two people she cared for would never know how close they lay to death each night they took their rest.

Her heart surged with longing. What would it be like to be free of her curse? To have a husband and a family of her own? She would have a strong, understanding husband and a small cottage in a hamlet somewhere. Their children would be happy and well-fed, dancing around the dinner table like little imps. The boys would be handsome like their father and the girls as lovely

as Aria's mother had been.

*A beautiful dream*, she thought. One which would never come true. Not as long as...

"We reach the crest, Aria. Are you ready to see the great city of Semar?" Yuri broke into her thoughts once again.

She shook off the fantasy and locked it deep in her heart.

Yuri spurred his donkey on with a "het, het, het!" and a laugh of pure joy. "I will race you to the top!"

She chuckled and flicked the reins, her pony dutifully pulling her wagon to the crest of the dune. Yuri stopped at the top and she drew her pony to a halt beside him. The scene below caught her breath.

"It is beautiful, is it not?" he asked.

Beautiful did not begin to describe Semar. "It's breathtaking. Who could have ever abandoned such a place?"

Wide desert sands surrounded the lush beauty of green plants and the deep, still water of the oasis. The spring was bigger than she thought it would be. Behind the trees and flowering shrubs, a massive limestone wall surrounded buildings with carved arches and domed roofs. The cream-colored buildings spread into a sprawling city, with the Dark Dragon's palace at the center.

The palace rose in three levels of wide, arched windows, balconies, and domed roofs. Colorful curtains blew in the warm, slow breeze. As she watched, a man stepped out onto one of the balconies. She couldn't see his face, couldn't make out any more than the width of his shoulders and dark hair. The tilt of his chin marked him as a man of authority. Aria's heart beat as she gazed at him and wondered who he was. The king's son? A high-ranking guardsman? She

blew out a breath. What did it matter? She and Yuri had work to do.

Aria gazed once more over the rest of the city, watching as dozens of people went about their daily lives in the streets. More were outside the gates by the oasis, talking and gathering water. So many people...

Her hands began to shake as she clutched the reins, and a bead of perspiration slid down her spine. Choking fear clogged her throat. Fear of what she could do to them. Maybe spending the night on the dune would be better than being among so many. If something were to happen... if the lock on the wagon door didn't hold... the blood...

"Aria," Yuri said gently.

She snapped her gaze to match his and swallowed.

"All will be well. Do not fear. I am with you, and tomorrow we will make our fortunes. You will see."

She tried for a smile. Her lips trembled and she feared it looked more like a grimace.

"We are here in Semar. This is what you wanted, remember? To find the one called the Dark Dragon?"

She nodded.

"You've come all this way, girl. Do not let fear stop you," Yuri whispered.

Aria swallowed past the hard lump in her throat and nodded. Somewhere in the limestone walls below lay answers she desperately needed. She must find the Dark Dragon and his Archives. Only there would she find a way to reverse the magic that destroyed her life.

She scanned the sands for the rest of their people. Near the base of the Great Dune, donkeys and the occasional horse pulled the many tilt carts of the caravan toward the sprawling city. A few owners even had a precious camel for charting the sands that stretched as far as the

eye could see.

“Come, little one! Our fortunes await!” Yuri laughed, and started down the dune toward the oasis.

Aria spurred her pony after him.

The shimmering red sun hovered at the edge of the horizon by the time they reached the oasis. Aria’s trepidation magnified with each passing moment. She fairly leapt from the wagon bench and rushed over to Yuri to unhitch the donkey.

“You might wait until he gets down first,” a low male voice said against her ear. She felt the heat of his body behind her.

Aria glanced over her shoulder to see that Cyrus had joined them. His sandy blond hair glowed with copper in the setting sun and his eyes crinkled at his teasing. He moved around to the other side of the donkey to help her unhitch the cart, his stocky frame bending with ease to the chore. He was handsome, in a boyish way. A fine man. One who cared for any under his protection.

Cyrus looked up and caught her regard. He winked.

She hastily returned to her task and freed the tilt cart from the harness. Cyrus held tender feelings toward her. Aria brushed a strand of hair from her cheek and quickly turned away. She didn’t return his feelings, and something deep within her heart whispered that it wasn’t only because of her *Other*.

“It’s been a long journey,” she said to her companions. The edge of the orange sun dipped beneath the sands in the distance. “I must rest. Goodnight.”

Cyrus came around the cart and put a heavy hand upon her shoulder to stop her from leaving. His fingers massaged the muscle as he spoke. “At least your camp is already made. The

rest of us must still set up tents. You could help with that before retiring. Yuri is getting older.”

Her cheeks flamed from the chastisement. One she heard every time they arrived at a new location. She stepped out of his grasp and drew a deep breath. Urgency beat at her and she feared her next words to Cyrus would be more than unkind.

“Do not pester Aria. She is frail and tires easily, and I am not so old as that,” Yuri replied. “If a man can’t make his tent, he doesn’t deserve to sleep in it.” He unloaded a sack of cooking utensils and his tent from his cart.

Aria smiled her thanks at him. In the years they’d known one another, Yuri had become the father she’d never had.

Cyrus’ lips pressed into a firm line but he remained blessedly silent.

“I’m sorry,” Aria told him as she stepped out of his grasp and retreated toward her wagon.

“I still say your wagon is too extravagant to have here,” Cyrus called after her. “We do not know these caravanners well enough. It is like begging to be robbed.”

Aria heard Yuri respond but tuned him out as they squabbled behind her. She strode to her wagon, not wanting to admit that Cyrus was correct. Still, she had no other choice. If she were to travel with the caravans and make a living selling carpets with Yuri and Cyrus, then a wagon with a door that bolted was required. She’d had it custom built with all the coins she’d been able to save.

The wagon had a rounded roof and four sturdy walls. Two of the walls had windows to let air pass through, and a solid door secured the back. She’d had it painted green with little flowers around the windows. If this was to be her home for the next few years, she wanted it to feel like a pleasant place to be. But among the cream-colored tents and dry desert sands, it stood

out.

*Better that than the alternative*, she thought. Woe to the person who tried to break in to her wagon after dark. They would run screaming into the night.

Aria unhitched and fed her pony and, with a last glance at the sun setting over the limestone buildings of Semar in red waves, climbed into the back of her cart. She closed and bolted the door, then removed the scarf tied around her hair, shaking the locks free. She paid no heed to the long strands as they rapidly changed from silver-gray to black. Time was short.

She cracked open the windows to let in some fresh air, thankful that the desert would cool considerably overnight. A gentle breeze fluttered the blue and pink curtains, bringing relief from the stifling heat. Even JoJo perked his tiny head up, whiskers twitching. Aria smiled and stroked a finger over his small back.

JoJo's little pink nose twitched and he sent her waves of love, his tail wrapping around her pinky. She'd found the brown mouse when he was a baby, lost and alone. Through her magic, she'd picked up on his fears and followed it to the box where he'd been hiding. She'd taken him with her that day, and he'd been her constant companion ever since. The best friend she could tell all her secrets to.

Aria placed some grain and the plump strawberry she'd been saving for JoJo into the box he lived in. He reached out a front paw, laying it on her finger, then happily went for his food. As she stepped out of her gray linen outer dress, her thoughts once more turned to the husband and children of her dreams. If only she could be something different than she was. If only she was normal. Then maybe the family she'd always wanted could be hers.

Aria's shoulders slumped. That was not to be. She must be vigilant now, not fanciful. Dreams would not protect the people of Semar and the caravan from death. Only precaution.



She double-checked the bolt on the door. Satisfied with her preparations, she knelt amid the circle of symbols carved into her wagon floor. The chant was short, designed to be in case she was truly in a hurry. Tonight, she had enough time to stretch her tired muscles before the last rays of sunlight melted below the horizon. Blue light encircled her, holding her within. Aria prayed it was strong enough. The lives of the people of Semar and the caravan depended upon it.

Closing her eyes, she allowed her body a moment's rest. Sleep was not part of her life. She felt the wall of light surrounding her thicken like stone and relaxed further. Sending out a soft prayer to the goddess she was named after, she waited for the night to take her.