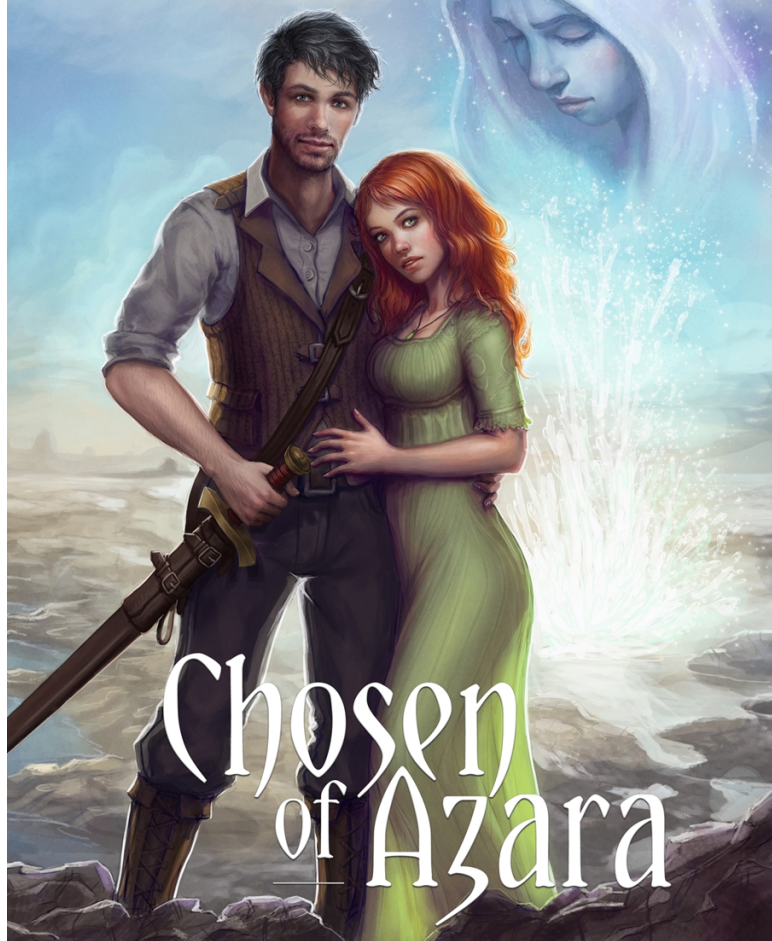


# Kyra Halland

A Novel of Tehovir



Chosen of Azara – Kyra Halland

## **CHOSEN OF AZARA**

A Novel of Tehovir

by Kyra Halland

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A previous version of this novel appeared on my website  
*Worlds Apart*.

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## **Chosen of Azara**

Juzeva, a princess of the magical land of Savaru, sacrifices everything to try to stop a war and instead finds herself caught in a web of evil and deceit.

Sevry, the last king of the war-ravaged land of Savaru, is tasked by the magical Source Azara with finding the secret that disappeared with Juzeva, the secret that can bring Savaru back to life.

Lucie, a sheltered young noblewoman, is unaware of her true heritage and the power she has to restore a lost land, until the long-dead king of a mythical land steps into her life and sweeps her away to adventure, danger, and a love that will change her life and the lost land of Savaru forever.

SAMPLE

## Part 1

### Juzeva: The Flight

#### Chapter 1

IN THE OCEAN cove at the base of the high cliffs where the Source Azara dwelled, waves crashed and sprayed amongst the red rocks. Juzeva stood on one of the largest rocks, droplets of water sparkling in the spring sun as they fell around her. The wind whipped her black hair across her face and icy-cold water soaked the skirt of her white wool robe, but she paid these things no mind. *Must this be?* she silently begged, her tears mingling with the ocean spray on her face.

*It must, my Daughter, though I wish it did not,* Azara answered. Juzeva heard the words clearly in her mind, though the Source did not speak in any human language; Azara's voice was in the roar and hiss of the surf.

*But I am sworn to your service!* Juzeva protested.

*You are also sworn to serve your land and people through me. If that service requires you to leave me in order to prevent a war that would utterly destroy Savaru, then that is what you must do.*

Azara was right, of course. Juzeva tried to push her tears and sorrow away, but she still caught her breath with a sob. *I wish I could be certain that this will stop the war.*

*Not even I can be certain of what the future will bring,* Azara said. *Too much depends on choices yet to be made. But, as far as I am able to see, this path offers the best chance for peace.*

*But, Mother, I am your Chosen! I cannot live away from you!*

*Do not fear, Daughter. Have you brought your vial with you?*

Juzeva took a crystal vial the size of her little finger from the pocket of her robe. *Yes, I have it with me.*

*Reach deep into my water and fill it.*

Juzeva stooped to lower the vial as far down into the churning water as she could reach. When she brought the vial back out of the sea, its facets sparkled with sunlight and magic. Juzeva inserted the stopper tightly, and added a seal of Source-power to keep the vial from leaking or accidentally opening.

*Hear me now, Daughter, the Source said. In that vial is my power in its pure form, enough to sustain your life for many years. There is also a small amount of power which the other Sources of our land have sent to me. If the worst should happen, should Savaru be conquered and its Sources defiled or destroyed, you or a daughter of your blood can use the water in your vial to restore life and magic to our land. Guard the vial well, and share this secret only with those whom you trust absolutely. To everyone else, the vial will simply appear to be the Source-token which you, as my Chosen, will need to survive away from me.*

Juzeva looked at the vial in her hand. She recalled being brought to the convent when she was eight years old and drawing Azara's power into herself for the first time. She had always been a sickly child, but the Source-power had given her a strength and vitality she had never known before, along with a sense of love and comfort that she had never even felt from her own mother. Juzeva had known, that first day, that she had come home. She was Chosen of

a Source, one of the rare people born perfectly attuned to the power of a specific Source, who could commune with that Source more closely than anyone else could, who was more receptive to its power, whose life depended on the power of that Source.

The vial held not only her life, but the life of the land of Savaru. The magic of Savaru's many Sources was woven all through the land, in its green hills, clear waters, rich mines and fertile fields, and in the lives of its people, who were hard-working and practical yet valued magic, music, poetry, and fine craftsmanship; who considered themselves wealthy but never flaunted their wealth; who held self-reliance as an ideal but never allowed anyone, friend or stranger, to go without a meal or a warm bed. This was her land; they were her people. She had been born a princess of the royal family, and was Chosen of Savaru's most sacred Source. Whatever her own will might be, a life lived without regard for her people, her land, would be devoid of meaning.

Juzeva took a deep breath and let it go. With it, she let go of her own desires and fears. She would do what must be done. At least she had the comfort of knowing that, through her Source-token, Azara would always be with her.

The vial's crystal stopper had an eyelet formed into it, with a narrow silver chain threaded through the eyelet. Juzeva clasped the chain around her neck and settled the vial beneath her robes. *I hadn't thought to ever have daughters or sons.*

*You will, Azara said. And perhaps they will be compensation for the sacrifice you are making.*

"My lady!" a husky female voice called down from the direction of the cliffs.

Juzeva wiped the salty moisture of tears and sea-spray from her face, and turned to see her servant Ysa making her way down the cliff from the convent. Ysa was tall and heavy, and moved awkwardly on the steep, rocky path. To spare her the rest of the walk, Juzeva waved to her, signaling her to stop and wait. “It’s time, my lady,” Ysa called to her. “They’re all here!”

Juzeva waved to Ysa again, then turned her attention back to Azara. *I will try to be brave, Mother.*

*Fear nothing, my Daughter, as long as you keep that vial safe and remember who you are. Go now, and remember that I go with you.*

The Source’s voice fell silent, though the song of the waves continued. Holding her long, sodden skirts out of the way, Juzeva picked her way across the wet rocks, then climbed the steep path up the cliff to where Ysa was waiting. “Hurry, my lady,” Ysa said anxiously. “Your lady mother seemed impatient.”

When they reached the top of the path, Juzeva laid a hand on Ysa’s arm to halt her for a moment. Ysa was breathing hard, even though she had only gone a short distance. Her black braid was thickly threaded with silver; she was no longer young, and Juzeva wondered if she would ever see her dear servant and friend again. In a low voice, she told Ysa everything that Azara had said. “Keep these things secret. If something happens to me, or if something goes wrong, tell the Queen or another member of my family. But do not tell anyone else. Promise me this, my Ysa.”

“I promise, my lady,” Ysa said.

For twelve years, Ysa had been not only Juzeva’s servant but also her closest friend and confidante, after Azara, and had kept her word and fulfilled her duties in all



things, even the smallest. Juzeva knew she could trust Ysa in this most important duty of all.

\* \* \*

AFTER JUZEVA CHANGED into a dry robe, Ysa led her into a room off the main hall of the convent. It was a pleasant room, with great windows cut into the red stone walls overlooking the Source far below. During the cold and stormy winters these windows were covered with wooden planks, but in spring and summer they were left open to let in plenty of the golden light of the northern sun. This had been Juzeva's favorite room in her twelve years at the Convent of Azara.

Now the room was filled with people both dearly familiar to Juzeva and strangers whom she had dreaded meeting. Juzeva's mother, Ilvana, Queen of Savaru, was there with her consort Ezdar, the father of her five children and High Priest of the Source Yzu. Ilvana and Ezdar came to Juzeva and embraced her. Her father seemed little changed, but her mother's ebony hair was more than half gray, and deep furrows had appeared around her mouth and between her eyes. The strain of threatened conquest by the Madrinan Empire had aged the Queen by ten years.

Juzeva's four older brothers had also come with their wives and children to witness her betrothal and bid her farewell. Juzeva's youngest nephew, three-year-old Sevros, nicknamed Sevry, clung to his mother's skirt and stared up at Juzeva with large midnight-blue eyes beneath straight black bangs. Though she had never met him before, Juzeva knew that the little boy already loved to sing, and that his parents hoped he would become a bard. He would never be King; he was too far down the line of succession for that.

But in Savaru, bards and kings were held in nearly equal esteem. There were also two plump infant nieces in their mothers' arms. As Juzeva embraced her brothers, sisters-in-law, and nephews and nieces, she found additional courage to do what had to be done so that those little ones could grow up in peace.

Griya, the Headmother of Azara Convent, was also there, though the proceedings had nothing to do with her. She sat silently in one corner, a quiet, authoritative presence in the tension-filled room. Ysa sat down next to her, and the Headmother gave her a comforting pat on the hand.

Juzeva turned her attention to the three visiting dignitaries on the other side of the room. "Juzeva, my daughter," Ilvana said, "here is His Gracious Majesty, Dansat the Fourth, Emperor of the Madrinan Empire." She indicated a heavy man with a red beard, clad in lavishly embroidered velvet and a minimum of light ceremonial armor. The Emperor had a rather genial, bored look about him; the acid in Ilvana's voice as she introduced him seemed to have been completely lost on him. Juzeva gave him a slight curtsy—as a princess, she was nearly his equal, and she owed him no more than that—and the Emperor nodded politely to her.

"This," Ilvana went on, "is his chief advisor, Sajur Golu. A high priest, I believe, of some Source or other in the Empire." The priest had a shaved head and wore a plain gray robe. He showed no reaction to the Queen's dismissive words; in fact, he gave no sign of having any thoughts or emotions at all. Juzeva gave him a brief nod. He stared back at her, and Juzeva's skin crawled as though he could see through her robes and skin and into her heart.

"And here is Idan, Crown Prince of the Madrinan Empire," Ilvana said. She gestured towards the young man

standing between the Emperor and his advisor. “Your future husband.” Prince Idan was tall and well-built, with red hair, a strong-boned, handsome face, and clear green eyes. His clothes and armor were less elaborate and more practical-looking than his father’s. Though he was young and handsome, his expression was grim.

This was the man she was to spend the rest of her life with, the man who would be the father of the children she had never planned to have. Fighting back a sudden urge to flee from the room, Juzeva curtsied to him.

The Prince stepped forward and bowed to her, then spoke in formal, carefully-pronounced Savarunan. “My lady Juzeva, I know this duty is difficult for you, as it is for me. We are both forced to give up our own desires for the sake of peace between our lands. But I promise you that from now on I will look forward, not back, in the hope that we can be, if not happy, at least content with our destiny.”

Juzeva hadn’t expected such a courtly speech. The Prince had clearly spent a great deal of time practicing it, and Juzeva found herself moved by the effort. If nothing else, she would be married to a gentleman. She bowed her head to him, grateful for his courtesy and thoughtfulness. “I thank you, Prince Idan. I too will do my best to make our union a successful one.”

She watched the Prince take his place beside his father again. Her gaze slid past Sajur Golu’s face just as the priest was hiding a look of deep contempt. Another prickle of revulsion or fear, or both, crept up her spine.

“Let us be done with this, then,” Queen Ilvana said. She and Ezdar moved to a table which stood beneath the great middle window, where a scribe waited with the marriage and peace treaties. The scribe began reading the documents out loud. Juzeva didn’t bother to pay close attention; it

made no difference whether or not she knew what they said. The terms had all been worked out already. She had had no say in them, and her opinion and consent had not been asked. The essence of the agreements was that, in exchange for a marriage-link to the Savaru royal family, which would bring with it a significant voice on the Queen's Council and a healthy portion of the profits from Savaru's rich fishing, farming, handcraft, and mining enterprises, the Madrinan Empire promised to not run its armies over the land. A bloodless defeat for Savaru, a quick and cheap victory for the Empire.

Emperor Dansat looked to his advisor, who nodded, then he and Queen Ilvana signed the documents. Idan signed next, followed by Juzeva. She scrawled her name on the six signature pages, three for each copy of the agreement, then looked up to see another quickly veiled look of contempt on Sajur Golu's face. From what little she had seen, it seemed that the Emperor looked to the priest closely for guidance. Why then, if Sajur Golu hated Savarunans so much, did he support this marriage? She would never understand the world of politics and rulers and treaties, a world that she was now being forced to join.

Sajur Golu and Juzeva's father signed last, as witnesses, then rolled up and sealed the two copies of the documents. "Well done, then. Very good," Emperor Dansat said in terribly mispronounced Savarunan as he took his copy from Ezdar.

Ilvana snatched her copy out of Sajur Golu's hands. "You left me no choice. What was I supposed to do, with eighty thousand of your troops ready to come across the hills? Well done, indeed! Selling my only daughter in exchange for the peace that should be ours by right."

The Emperor clearly didn't catch the meaning of Ilvana's speech, for he looked at her then at Sajur Golu with a bewildered expression. Prince Idan looked away, his stony face barely concealing something sad and angry. Juzeva felt an unexpected stab of compassion for him; it seemed that he was also making a sacrifice for the sake of this treaty-marriage.

But he was doing his best to be gracious about the whole matter, and she could do no less. She took her mother's hands in her own. "Do not fret over me, my mother. Everything will be all right. Remember, I'll still come home sometimes, to visit Azara, and to visit you, also. We may see each other more than we have since I came to the convent!" She forced a smile.

Ilvana caressed Juzeva's cheek once, then turned away. "Go. I can bear it no more."

\* \* \*

AS THE IMPERIAL party passed through neat villages set amongst the green hills, fields, and woods of Savaru, people gathered along the road to watch. "The Lord, the Lady, and the Maker bless you, Lady Juzeva!" they called out, tossing flowers to her, their good wishes mixed with a scattering of hisses and catcalls directed at the Madrinans. Prince Idan, speaking for the Emperor, had given the Madrinan servants, guards, and soldiers strict orders to ignore all such taunting, and the group passed through the villages without incident. Juzeva waved back at her people in gratitude for their well-wishes, praying silently that what she was doing would indeed ensure peace for them.

Juzeva and Idan were never left alone together; at the very least, the Madrinan maidservant who had been

brought along for Juzeva rode beside them, though most often it was Sajur Golu whose cold presence kept them from being able to talk and get to know each other better. Despite their chaperones, Juzeva did learn that, before the treaty was proposed and accepted, Idan had been about to marry his long-time sweetheart, the daughter of a high-ranking lord of the Old Madrin nobility. “Oдин and I have been in love since we were ten years old,” he said. “Her parents offered to let me keep her as my mistress after the wedding. In all honesty, I must tell you that I was considering doing so, but I know you are making sacrifices for the sake of peace between our lands, and I have no wish to dishonor your sacrifices by refusing to make my own. I’ll see that Oдин is settled in a good marriage as soon as possible, away from the capital.”

“Thank you,” Juzeva said, though she would have given anything not to be taking this other woman’s place at Idan’s side. She wondered why Idan would give up the woman he loved to avoid a war that surely would not have been costly or difficult for the Empire to win. Most likely, he was being given no more choice in the matter than she was. If he had refused to agree to the marriage, he might have been disinherited, or even banished or executed for treason.

Ten days of slow riding brought them into the low, rugged hills that formed the border between Savaru and the Madrinan Empire. After two days of riding through the border hills, they emerged from the pass into the Madrinan Empire. A vast encampment lay spread out a mile or so beyond the pass. It was strangely silent. Though the smoke of countless campfires rose into the sky, there were few men moving among the tents; Juzeva guessed a couple hundred at best. Certainly not even a thousand. Two small forts were positioned two or three miles to either side of the

pass, but they couldn't possibly conceal eighty thousand armed men plus horses, weapons, and supplies for an army that size. Even if they had been moved elsewhere recently, such a vast number of troops would surely leave some sign behind of their presence and movement. The eighty thousand troops with which her mother had been threatened were simply not there.

Sajur Golu had been hovering especially close the last day or so, but Juzeva was still able to mouth the words "Eighty thousand?" to Idan. He stared grimly down at his horse and whispered, "South."

Juzeva recalled the maps she had studied in her education at the convent. "South" in the Madrinan Empire meant three provinces, Olkorth, Meesrin, and Krieth, which had all been conquered with great difficulty in the last hundred years and still remained hotbeds of restlessness and rebellion. In addition, the unconquerable Krunabashai Desert, whose nomadic warriors were known for carrying out vicious and persistent raids on neighboring lands, lay southeast of the Empire. If the Empire's military was occupied with rebellion and raiders in the south, it couldn't afford to follow up on its threats towards Savaru.

Her mother had been tricked. Hot fury burst into Juzeva's heart at the realization. The camp had been deliberately set up to fool any observers in the border hills into thinking that it sheltered a huge army. And care would have been taken to make sure that no spies who infiltrated the camp would be able to carry their discovery back to Savaru. Half a dozen Savarunan spies had gone missing in the last several months; Juzeva could guess now what had happened to them.

She looked at the man riding next to her. She had begun to find his company pleasant, but now she felt only anger at

the deception that had been carried out against her mother, her country, and herself. Then Idan met her eyes, a sad, hard expression on his face, and her anger at him faded as quickly as it had come. He was sacrificing as much for this marriage as she was. He was a victim of the Emperor's lies and greed, just as she was. Both of them were being forced into a marriage that neither of them wanted, and all they could do was stand together and support each other.

\* \* \*

SAJUR GOLU LET himself fall behind the betrothed couple. Unless he was mistaken, they were starting to grow fond of each other, which was not part of his carefully-laid plans. Perhaps if he made sure that the Prince's doxy remained at court rather than being married off and sent away, that would create the desired antagonism between Idan and the Savarunan witch. He would not permit his plans to be thwarted.

Juzeva and Idan rode farther ahead, to join the Emperor. The Golu watched the three of them, and smiled.



## Chapter 2

**JUZEVA** LAY AWAKE in Idan's bed, her husband warm beside her, feeling an odd mixture of contentment and unease. In the three months since the wedding, respect and gratitude for his kindness had turned to liking, then to love. She hadn't spoken of her love to him, and didn't know if he returned her feelings, but he was unfailingly gentle and patient with her. Odine was still at court; the Emperor was having difficulty arranging a marriage that she and her father found satisfactory. After all, she had been expected to marry the Crown Prince, and her father was unwilling to accept any significant reduction in status for her. Every day, Juzeva was aware that the nobles at court who were connected to Odine's family, and even the servants who had liked and been loyal to the Prince's childhood sweetheart, all resented her. The whispers, the slights, the veiled and not-so-veiled insults, the "accidental" bumps and jostles, all let Juzeva know that she did not belong there and never would.

But, even though he was surrounded by people who openly disliked Juzeva, and even though Juzeva was sure that his heart still belonged to Odine, Idan was a kind and considerate husband. Juzeva couldn't help wondering, on the few nights when he neither sent for her nor came to her room, if he was with Odine after all. But even if he had kept his sweetheart as his mistress, he always treated

Juzeva with the greatest courtesy and respect, both in public and in private.

Courtesy and respect were not the same as love, though. Juzeva longed to tell him that she loved him, but she didn't want to put him in an awkward position if he was unable to return her feelings. She also wanted to tell him about the baby, but she wasn't absolutely certain yet, and she didn't want him to be disappointed if she was mistaken.

At the moment, she had more pressing concerns than how Idan felt about her, and right now, when she and her husband were relaxed and close in the privacy of his room, seemed a good time to bring them up. "My husband, I do not like Sajur Golu."

"Mmm?" Idan rolled over towards her. "No one likes him, Juzeva. I don't think he wants anyone to like him."

"I don't trust him. Could you not persuade your father to send him away, or at least to make him less important at Court?"

"He hasn't tried to...to...bother you, has he?"

Juzeva had to think for a moment before she understood Idan's meaning. "No, no. How could he dare? I am the wife of the Crown Prince. No, what I mean is, I feel as though he can see through me, into my soul."

The blue velvet bed-drapes, heavily embroidered with gold, shone richly in the light of the candles in the bedside lamps, as did Idan's flame-colored hair. Seeing him thus, so handsome in the candlelight, his face filled with genuine concern for her, Juzeva realized that her love for him was, after all, relevant to her worries about the priest, and that the time had come to speak of it. She gathered her courage. "My husband, you have been gentle and courteous to me, and I've grown to love you for it."

There, the words were out. Juzeva waited, holding her breath, for his response, but Idan's face remained neutral and he said nothing. She tried not to feel disappointed by his lack of reaction; she couldn't expect him to return her feelings, not when she had come between him and the woman he had loved since childhood.

She returned her thoughts to her concerns about Sajur Golu. From speculative looks and leading questions the priest sometimes directed at her, Juzeva was beginning to think that Sajur Golu suspected the true nature of the power contained in her Source-token. If he knew what she had in her keeping, he would destroy her to get it, even if he had to destroy Idan to get to her. But she couldn't tell Idan any of this. He trusted people whom Juzeva did not, and she couldn't take the risk that he might reveal her secret to the wrong person, even by accident. All she could do was try to warn him without telling him exactly what she feared. "The only thing I love more than you, Idan, is my country. And I'm afraid that the Golu sees this, and will somehow use my love to harm what I love most."

"Sajur Golu is my father's most trusted advisor, besides being Chief Councilor and High Priest of the Empire," Idan said. "I don't have the authority to take action against him, especially not without any proof of wrongdoing."

"He has done nothing wrong," Juzeva admitted. "But he frightens me."

"Then I'll do my best to see to it that he does not overstep himself, and that he is never allowed to come near you or do anything to upset you."

Then he kissed her, and the kiss became deep and passionate, and Juzeva forgot her worries about the priest as she wondered if perhaps Idan did love her after all.

\* \* \*

SAJUR GOLU SAT in Council with the Emperor, the Crown Prince, and their other advisors, feeling an uneasiness that he was not accustomed to and that he did not like. He always paid close attention to every word spoken, and everything that went unspoken, during the daily meeting of the Imperial Council. He used Source-power as well as his own superior intelligence and keen instincts to judge those who spoke and those who reacted and those who did neither. He needed to know who he could count on to support him, and who he couldn't; he needed to know how to persuade those who could be persuaded to join his side, and how to deal with those who couldn't. He had thought he had a good grasp of the inclinations of each member of the Council.

But in recent days there had been a disturbing change. Prince Idan had begun speaking up more often during Council meetings, and had even dared to question and contradict him, the Chief Councilor, on more than one occasion.

The Golu did not like this. Matters were less solidly in his grasp than he had thought. The Emperor's only other son was a mere infant, barely able to walk and talk yet, and the child's mother, the Emperor's third wife, had died in the bearing of him. If something were to happen to both the Emperor and the Crown Prince, Sajur Golu, as Chief Councilor, was the natural, though not automatic, choice for Regent. It was essential to his plans that he retain that status. But with the Crown Prince speaking up against him, there was a slight chance that others on the Council might turn against him as well. Even that small chance was

unacceptable. He would have to make his next move sooner than he had anticipated.

It ate at him that the Savarunans, an inferior people to the Madrinans in every respect, had been blessed with an almost unimaginable richness and variety of Sources, while he, a son of the Old Madrin nobility, gifted with a vast capacity and talent for magic, had to make do with Dar, the unimpressive Source in the cliffs behind the Imperial palace, and a bare handful of even more mediocre Sources scattered throughout the Empire. He had come up with a bold plan to make the powerful Savarunan Sources his, and he would not allow that plan to fail.

As he always did when others might see him, Sajur kept his face carefully clear of any sign of his thoughts. He noticed the Crown Prince staring at him across the dark, polished expanse of the Council table, and blandly returned the stare. It took Idan several more heartbeats to look away, but he finally did. No one could out-stare Sajur Golu.

There was just one matter that Sajur Golu needed to look into before moving forward with his plans, and he had the opportunity to do so as soon as the meeting ended. Princess Juzeva was walking in an inner garden courtyard near the Council chambers while she waited for her husband, who had remained inside to speak to some of the other Councilors. Sajur Golu approached her, his face set in a careful smile. “Good day to you, Your Highness.”

She responded with a slight, stiff nod. She was far too polite to ignore him as he suspected she wished to.

“I must say, Your Highness,” he said smoothly, “you are looking remarkably well, especially for a Chosen who has been away from her Source for over three months.”

The Princess made a slight, involuntary motion with her left hand, towards the crystal Source-token she wore on a

chain around her neck, then stopped herself. Sajur Golu kept his expression polite, pleasant, and neutral. “Ah, to be young again. Such marvelous strength and resilience. Good day, Your Highness.”

He bowed slightly and walked away, satisfied with what he had learned. Her movement, though almost imperceptible to anyone without his highly developed powers of observation, had confirmed his suspicion that her Source-token held something more than the usual few months’ supply of Source-power. He would have to be sure to get the vial for himself and learn its secrets before he was finished with the Princess.

\* \* \*

JUZEVA’S LEGS AND hands were shaking. She sat down on a carved stone bench in the shade of a tree, and tried to calm herself. How could she have let Sajur Golu fluster her into nearly giving away her secret? Idan had done his best to keep his promise that Sajur Golu would not be allowed near her, but Idan could not always be with her and Juzeva didn’t want to have guards and servants always hovering about.

She would have to be more careful. She would have to pretend to be weakened by the separation from her Source, and arrange to travel home to Azara soon. And she would have to accept the fact that avoiding Sajur Golu would sometimes mean being confined to her own apartments or allowing a retinue to follow her around. Though, what would be the good of a retinue of people who had no liking or loyalty for her? It was no secret that most of the people here at the Imperial Palace would just as soon leave her to the mercies of Sajur Golu.

“Juzeva!”

She looked up as Idan entered the garden. She stood to greet him, and he took her hand and kissed it. “I’m sorry I’m late. I had to explain the new procedure for selecting provincial governors to the Councilor from Krieth. I don’t think he wanted to understand. Either that, or he’s exceptionally obtuse and thick-headed even for a Kriethi. I hope you didn’t mind waiting.”

“I don’t mind, except that Sajur Golu found me.”

“He did? What happened?” Idan had her sit back down on the bench, then sat beside her.

“He commented on how well I’m looking.” Juzeva wondered if she was doing the wrong thing by giving Idan a hint about her real worry. “He seems to think that there is some special power in my Source-token. I’m afraid that he will try to take it from me.”

“He wouldn’t dare! Not when he knows you need it to live.”

“I’m sure you are right, my husband,” Juzeva said, though she didn’t believe it in the least. “Still—”

“Still, you shouldn’t come out alone again. I’ll speak to my father again about ordering Sajur Golu to stay away from you, and see that there is always a pair of servants or guards with you.”

“Thank you,” Juzeva said, though she doubted the Emperor’s order would do any good. Sajur Golu seemed to have his own agenda, and the Emperor’s wishes would only be of secondary importance to him.

Idan stood, bringing Juzeva with him. “We should go now. Grandmother is waiting.” They were to dine with the Emperor’s mother, a proud but generous woman who had readily and graciously accepted Juzeva into the Imperial family. Juzeva liked the woman, and was more grateful to

her than she could say. “Speaking of your Source-token,” Idan said as they walked, Juzeva holding on to his arm, “shouldn’t you be going back to Azara soon, to refill it?”

Juzeva’s whole being suddenly yearned for home, for the rich greens and browns of Savaru, the red rocks of the Aza peninsula, the blue of the sky, the sound of her native language, the voice and light of the sea. She longed to stand among the rocks and waves of Azara’s cove and commune with her Source again. “I’m still strong,” she said, “but it would be best not to wait until I’ve grown weak. Especially since—” Was it still too soon to tell Idan? She was so eager to that she really couldn’t wait any longer. “Especially since I’m going to have a child.”

Idan stopped and turned to face her. “You’re sure?”

Smiling, she nodded.

Idan pulled Juzeva close to him and kissed her. “You’ve made me very happy,” he said.

As he embraced her, Juzeva wondered if he was only happy because she was giving him the heir he needed, or if there was more to it. There was no harm in pretending, she decided, and closed her eyes, letting her own fragile happiness fill her with warmth.



### Chapter 3

**J**UZEVA WAS TOO excited to sleep. That afternoon, she had written and dispatched letters to her mother, Headmother Griya, and Ysa, telling them about the baby and her impending visit. To Ysa, especially, she had poured out her heart about the unexpected happiness she had found in her marriage. She longed for home, for the familiar sky and landscape and language, and to see her dear Ysa again, and to be in the presence of her Source. To make things even better, Idan had promised to accompany her for part of the journey north. Juzeva snuggled closer to her sleeping husband, warmed by his kindness and eagerly thinking about her return home.

The faint sound of the bedroom door opening startled her, and she sat up. “Milena?” she said, thinking it was her lady’s-maid. No one but one of her or Idan’s personal servants or guards would be permitted entrance to the Prince’s bedroom this time of night.

There was no answer. “Hello?” she tried again.

Beside her, Idan stirred. “What is it?”

Juzeva found herself unaccountably relieved that he was awake. “Someone’s in here, but they won’t answer me.”

Idan sat up and pulled the bedcurtains apart. “Who’s there?” he demanded.

Still there was no answer. “I’m sorry, I must have imagined it,” Juzeva said. They lay down again, and Idan pulled her over to lie with her head on his chest.

The bedroom door crashed open. “What’s going on in here?” the Emperor demanded.

Startled, they both bolted upright, and Idan opened the bedcurtains again. “Father?”

Emperor Dansat stood in the middle of the room with one of the guards who had been stationed outside the door of the Prince’s apartments. “The guard reported hearing a fight in here,” the Emperor said.

“A fight?” Idan said. “We’ve been—”

The guard shut the door and bolted it, then Sajur Golu stepped out of the shadows in a corner of the room, his hands outstretched.

“What—?” the Emperor shouted just before a burst of yellow light struck him. His body flew backwards across the room, crashed into the wall, and landed in a broken, crumpled heap on the floor. Idan pushed Juzeva off the bed just as Sajur Golu unleashed a blast of power towards them. Idan cried out; his cry ended in a horrible crushing sound. Tangled among the bedcurtains, Juzeva cowered, shaking, on the floor. Something warm and wet had landed on her face. She touched it, and her finger came away red with blood. She glanced up at the curtains; they were splattered with blood and gore. She squeezed her eyes shut against the sight and bit back a cry of horror and grief.

She had to get out of the room fast, without Sajur Golu or the guards seeing her. Quickly, she started crawling backwards towards the door to the bathing and dressing rooms, biting down hard on her lips to silence her terrified whimpering.

“Where is the woman?” Sajur Golu demanded.

“She’s in here somewhere, my lord,” the guard said. “You said you want her alive?”

“Of course, fool. How can she be blamed for the killings if she’s killed too?”

There was a loud banging at the bedroom door, then the sound of the door opening. “Your Highness—oh heavens!” a man cried out.

“The Emperor and the Crown Prince have been murdered.” Sajur Golu’s voice vibrated with grief and rage. “Murdered at the hands of the Savarunan witch. By the Great Source Dar, I knew we would curse the day we welcomed that viper to our bosom!”

One of the newly-arrived guards ran out into the hallway, shouting for help, as Juzeva slipped through the bathroom door. In investigating the workings of her new home, she had noted that the drains, down which the bathtubs, wash basins, and chamber pots were emptied, were just wide enough for a delicately-built person to fit through, and indeed the ones on these upper floors were equipped with rungs for use by the unlucky people whose job was cleaning and maintaining them.

The commotion in the bedroom continued as more guards hurried to the scene of the murders. Juzeva prayed that it wouldn’t occur to them or to Sajur Golu that a gently-bred lady would think of escaping down a sewer drain. She grabbed the linen shift she had discarded next to the bathtub earlier that evening and pulled it on. In the drain closet, she lifted the iron grate that covered the hole and set it aside where she could reach it once she was in the drain. Focusing all her effort, all her thoughts, on the need to protect her baby and her Source-token, Juzeva eased herself into the drain and climbed down far enough that she could fit the grate back over the hole. When the grate was settled in place, she continued her descent. The smell made

her gag, but she held her breath as much as she could and forced herself to keep going.

The ladder ended. Juzeva's bare feet dangled in the darkness as her hands held tight to the last rungs. Somewhere below, she knew, was the sewer that emptied into the moat. If she could get to the moat, and from the moat to the Aliandar River, she would be safe. She was Chosen of a water Source; water would protect her and save her. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and let go.

\* \* \*

ON A MOONLESS midnight, Sajur Golu and fifteen specially-chosen under-priests gathered around a stone altar in the cavern of Source Dar. The cavern was located high up on the rocky wedge of land that split the Aliandrin River off from the Aliandar, overlooking the falls where the Aliandrin tumbled away to the south. The Shrine of Dar stood atop the cliff, above the Source, but what was happening in the cavern tonight had nothing to do with the regular rituals that took place in the shrine.

In the two days since the deaths of the Emperor and the Crown Prince, Sajur had, as planned, been named Regent until Dansat's infant son came of age, and preparations for a retaliatory attack on Savaru had begun. War was inevitable. But conquest of the northern land and its Sources was no longer enough for Sajur Golu. The missing Princess's Source-token had to contain something more than a small amount of power from a single Source; otherwise, how could she have remained so strong for so many months away from her Source? Though the Princess had apparently disappeared into thin air, he was determined to find that Source-token and claim its secrets, its power,

for himself. So, while the Imperial Council, under the direction of the Regent, prepared for the invasion of Savaru, Sajur Golu also made his own private plans.

He had worked with these fifteen golus for many years. They were a select group from among the fifty or so underpriests in service to Source Dar, a favored group of men whom he had found to be open to his influence and sympathetic to his goals. He had flattered and rewarded them until they had given their loyalty and service to him rather than to Dar or the Madrinan Empire. They would serve him without question or hesitation.

Sajur Golu bestowed an approving smile on them. “My faithful friends and servants,” he said, “tonight we begin our quest for power beyond that which any man has ever before possessed.”

An excited murmur swept around the cavern, then died away. Sajur Golu picked up a long knife from the altar and, with a grander movement than was strictly necessary, slashed the underside of his left forearm. He didn’t flinch at the pain; rather, he welcomed it as a sign of his determination to achieve his aims. A few of the underpriests gasped—whether in shock or in admiration of his courage made no difference. He held his cut arm over a large black basin of water on the altar and let his blood drip freely into the water. Then, before he could grow light-headed from loss of blood, he stepped back and healed the wound with a touch of Dar’s power.

“Now, my friends,” he said, “who among you is likewise willing to offer his blood, his very life, to this cause?” He looked each of them in the eye in that way that made men feel as though he were seeing into their souls. As indeed he could, to an extent. He couldn’t read exact thoughts—an inability which he cursed every day of his

life—but he could sense fear, courage, resolve, doubt... Among his followers, he found awe, fear, astonishment at his daring, greed for what he offered. But no doubt, only pure belief in him.

Good.

One at a time, passing Sajur's knife around the circle, the other fifteen golus slashed their arms open. Some of them hesitated, fearing pain or, perhaps, the finality of what they were doing. But each of them added their blood to the water in the basin. Then Sajur himself, to reward them, drew upon the power of Dar and healed their wounds.

He faced his followers and spoke again. "We will none of us rest until the Savarunan witch is found and her secrets discovered. We will forego even the peace of death, unless I decree it otherwise." The sound of his voice echoing majestically around the cavern filled him with satisfaction. "This vow we have sealed with our blood. And now we will receive from Dar the strength to fulfill that vow."

His hands began to glow with the yellow light of Dar's power as he moved towards the back reaches of the cavern. The light revealed a naked man chained to the wall of the cavern: the guard who had been his accomplice in the murders of the Emperor and the Crown Prince.

The man cowered at the sight of Sajur Golu. "Please, Lord, not again..."

The Golu ignored him. Lust, the infliction of fear and pain and humiliation, the perversion of the natural carnal and procreative urges, all generated a rich, powerful energy, as powerful as that which could be obtained from any Source, and with certain properties that no natural Source-power possessed. That was how he had fortified himself for this night's work. But, after having already used the guard in that manner once, he would not receive the same benefits

from doing so again. “Unlock him and bring him to the altar,” Sajur ordered the two largest priests.

They unlocked the captive’s manacles with a word and a bit of power, and dragged him to the stone altar. The guard’s eyes widened when he saw the knife. “You promised—reward,” he gasped. “You promised—honor—”

“I always keep my promises to those who serve me well.” Sajur Golu smiled upon the man. “You will have the honor of being fed to Dar and becoming part of the strength which Dar will give to us.”

“But, my Lord—”

Sajur Golu grabbed the guard’s hair and pulled him backwards over the altar, then slashed his throat. Blood flowed and spurted into the basin, mingling with the blood of the golus.

Sajur let the dead guard’s body fall to the floor. He cupped his hands, dipped reddened water from the basin, and drank it. The other priests did the same, with only the briefest hesitation. The water was rich and sweet, ripe with fear, with pain, with life-force. Sajur Golu felt younger and stronger already.

And now it was time for the final, most powerful and dangerous step in the ritual he had devised. Source-power was made of the powers of the earth and the heavens. Blood contained another powerful magic, the force that maintained life. Some, who were weak enough to be constrained by such concerns, maintained that it was evil to take another person’s life-force for one’s own use, and that human sacrifice would defile or even destroy a Source. Sajur Golu refused to allow himself to be limited by such trifling concerns. He had studied many forbidden texts and had communed closely with Dar for many long days in order to learn the secrets of modifying Source-power to

make it even more useful. The combining of blood, the essence of life, with Source-power would give him and his servants mastery over death itself. “Feed him to Dar,” Sajur said.

The two large golus dragged the dead man to the fathomless hole in the back of the cavern that was the Source itself, and threw the body into it. Sajur Golu followed with the basin, and poured the rest of the bloodied water into the Source.

He waited, bracing himself... Ten heartbeats later, a blinding surge of magical power, in the form of Dar’s yellow light but with a bruised-looking tinge to it, exploded from the hole. The Golu let the onrush of power flow over him, his body absorbing the power that touched him, and he sensed his servants soaking up power as well. He felt himself expand with life-force and strength beyond what he had ever imagined. The feeling grew until, for a brief moment, he nearly began to fear that he must burst with the power he now possessed.

But the feeling soon passed. The burst of blood-enhanced Source-power faded away, most of it absorbed by him and his servants, the rest of it dissipating into the air outside the cavern. Though the flood had died out, he and his servants would remain forever changed by their new power. The time given him to fulfill his desires would not be limited to a pitifully brief mortal lifespan. He, and his servants, would have until the end of time.