

THE RISING

By Kristen Ashley

Part Three

The Dawn of the End

Chapter Eighty-One

The Schemer

Jellan

Underground Lair of the Beast

WODELL

He felt it, even in his weakened state.

The veil, it was growing strong.

The prophecy, it was advancing.

When he also felt he had company in this dark hole where they allowed him to go when they weren't using him or making him serve, Jellan curled deeper into himself, pressing his abused body closer to the stone wall.

He could tell them.

He could use his knowledge of the prophecy, his feel for the veil, to better his circumstances down in that dirty, cold, ugly hole.

"Hungry?"

It was *her*.

Marian.

The Mistress of the Beast.

His Beast.

That fiendish creature should be *his*.

Not *hers*.

The thing liked using him.

Perhaps Jellan could turn that around, gain control of...

She kicked him in the back, and Jellan tasted blood as he bit the insides of his mouth to stop from crying out.

He'd given them his tears. His pleas. His moans of agony.

They would have no more.

They would take no more from him than what they could force from him.

“I asked, *are you hungry?*” she demanded.

He needed to keep his strength.

“Y-yes,” he answered.

He heard something drop to the ground close to him and turned carefully, battling the pain that seemed to infuse every inch of his body.

He could not make out what it was in the dark, a joint of some animal, not very much meat, lying in the dirt.

He took it up anyway, thinking he had to plan.

He had to *plan*.

And he had to have strength to plan.

He had power.

He was a Go’En priest, for Bedi’s sake. A member of the Society of the Beast. One, if not *the* most powerful sorcerer in all of Triton.

He was born to master the Beast.

He was *made* to master the Beast.

He had to find a way.

He had to *plan*.

She started to move away, but he called to her, forcing timidity into his tone.

“C-can I ask you a question, Mistress?” he requested.

She turned, moved back to him, and he braced.

Like a woman, her moods were inconstant and sometimes volatile. He could not know if she’d kick him, call to the Beast and demand Jellan be used again or stroke his hair and coo to him.

In the end, he would lash her to the ritual ground, Jellan vowed it. He’d call the entire Society to have their way with her. He’d stand over and watch her take each cock and then he’d stand over her and watch her take each blade. And finally, when she was beaten and humiliated to the core of her soul and praying death would come fast, he’d give her that by drawing the final blade across her throat.

All of this looking right in her eyes.

All of this with the Beast at his back.

“What is your question, pet?” she asked.

So it was his benevolent mistress this time.

“I...the last quake, there was a demanding cry from the creature. I thought that he...I was not at that ritual, I thought that he—”

“Was calling to you?”

He nodded, gazing up at her but not meeting her eyes.

Fearful.

Submissive.

Beaten.

She needn't know he was none of that.

“He wasn't, he was calling out to me,” she explained. “He sensed me. I'd been visiting him. And he was tired of your vicious shenanigans. Thus, he was calling me home.”

“But, if he has no power down here, how does he make the earth quake? How did he call out like that? How does he pull you down? Me? The other women?”

“He has no magic, but he does have feelings. And just like everything with him, his feelings are stronger, more powerful, more sweeping than anything a mere mortal would have. They move the earth. When he makes the surface, if he should not get his way, they'll probably shake the heavens.”

Jellan shuddered at that thought.

“But how does he pull you down?” he pressed.

“He doesn't. I did that.”

He blinked up at her.

“I brought you,” she went on, “and your *brothers*, our girls. That is *my* power. He reached to me, but my magic gave him that power. And my power brings him to the surface. But once there, the merfolk's binds on his magic are erased. And once we feel the time is right, we will surface and make all of Triton bow to us.”

Not if the prophecy goes forward, Jellan thought. Not if the lovers wed, consummate their love, ally all kingdoms, learn their gifts and how to use them. If they do, he will not be banished back to this under-realm, you won't either. He'll be slaughtered. As will you.

“He...he would hum to me. After—” Jellan began.

She laughed an ugly laugh.

“This was considering what he’d do to you when I delivered you to him, not for any other reason, pet. Don’t get any ideas in that silly, stupid, villainous, despicable head of yours. It was not your rituals he craved. Not your seed that stirred him. It was knowing I would come to him soon, and when I did, when I found my way to this place, to *him*, I could bring you to him.”

So, the creature *did* want Jellan.

He wanted them both.

But he also wanted *Jellan*.

“You scheme,” she said disinterestedly.

He stiffened. “I-I don’t.”

“You do and feel free,” she allowed. “It will get you nowhere. But if hope keeps you performing to our standards...” She shrugged and let that trail.

Jellan thought for a moment before he decided to say quietly, “I honestly feel I could be of use to you. To you both.”

“Oh, but you are.”

“A *different* use,” he stressed.

Abruptly, she leaned toward him.

He pressed himself to the wall.

“I like your use,” she whispered, and he saw, even in the shadows, the flash of her malicious smile.

She then walked away.

And that was that.

So be it.

Once she was gone, as best he could, Jellan brushed the dirt from the joint before he gnawed on it, burrowing with his teeth to get all the meat, cracking the bones at their weak places to suck out the marrow.

He needed to keep his strength.

For she was right.

He did.

He schemed.

And he would find some way.

Some way to exact his vengeance.
Some way to be victorious.
He would make that happen.
No matter what it took.

Chapter Eighty-Two

The Hope

The Great Coven
Silbury Henge, Argyll Forest
AIREN

In the clearing of the forest, the first flash of light came before the first of the five standing stones.

The light was marine blue.

The witch Lena of Mar-el.

The next came and it was crimson.

The witch Nandra of Firenze.

The last was green.

Rebecca of Wodell.

And the witch who strode from the last flash did so speaking.

“I cannot be here, my queen is—”

“Rebecca,” Lena spoke softly, “We are so sorry. But we had to call to you.” She paused and finished, “Fern has been taken.”

Rebecca gasped.

“The gentry of Airen did not even know of the changes that would be made once Cassius was proclaimed regent,” Nandra said. “The moment he heard his son was to marry a Nadirii, Gallienus starting plotting. While they’ve been traveling, with great secrecy, the gentry allied their militias and created their strategy. When their spies noted the Firenz regiments camped close to Airen’s southern border, they knew all did not bode well for the continuation of their

regime with the heir to their throne soon to be wed do a Nadirii. Thus, they forged ahead with the first moves of their attack.”

“And it was Fern?” Rebecca whispered.

Both fellow witches nodded, but only Lena spoke.

“Cassius had her guarded, but he could not understand the fullness of their desire to capture and imprison her. They sent great numbers to be certain this was so. His man, Otho, perished during the effort to try to spirit her away.”

“Oh goddess, no,” Rebecca breathed.

“This as well as more than thirty other Airenzian soldiers loyal to their crown prince,” Nandra bit out.

“I did not feel the veil shift due to Fern—” Rebecca began.

“She is not dead,” Lena told her. “She is only taken.” She tipped her head to Nandra. “We believe they intend to try to use her powers. We also believe, as naught yet has moved forward with it, they do not know that she’s raised an army of her own. Fern’s army has just lost their commander...for the time being.”

“They further do not know that all nations have allied with Airen to quell such a revolt,” Nandra put in.

“I fear Wodell may not be able to join in that effort,” Rebecca said sadly.

Her fellow witches both nodded, their expressions just as melancholy.

“There were two prongs to their attack,” Lena went on, moving them from that subject. “Taking Fern and besetting Sky Bay. Cassius’s men are holding the Bay, but they’re under siege. They need reinforcements.”

“I am sure this will be forthcoming,” Rebecca murmured.

And it likely would.

“The Enchantments were attacked,” Nandra announced.

Rebecca blinked.

“The Go’Doan fools,” Lena mumbled.

“They didn’t—” Rebecca started.

Lena shook her head. “They were trounced by the Nadirii. But they used a unicorn horn and Melisse to bring down the shield.”

Rebecca’s back shot straight and her eyes shot daggers. “A unicorn horn?”

“The creature will be avenged,” Lena stated flatly, staring her sister right in the eyes.

This meant whatever glorious creature had been maimed for this vile effort *would* be avenged.

“And Melisse?” Rebecca asked.

“She holds to life, but barely. I have not seen good things,” Nandra answered.

“I told her,” Rebecca hissed, deciding to feel angry, rather than full of despair, for she’d had enough despair for one day.

“Melisse, like none of us, is perfect,” Nandra replied.

“And this is why Ophelia isn’t with us right now,” Rebecca remarked.

“This is why, amongst other things,” Lena responded.

Rebecca was confused. “But I have felt her strengthening.”

“I as well, but I urge you, do not put too much hope in that,” Lena advised.

They all knew.

What would be with Ophelia was not a possibility.

It was an eventuality.

“You have had much on your mind,” Nandra said, unusually gentle. “And much occurring in your realm. But,” she looked to Lena, bringing together their abbreviated circle, “there is hope. The veil strengthens. The lovers grow ever tied to one another. It is the first time I have felt real hope since the quakes began.”

“This is true,” Lena returned. “But something has occurred.” She looked amongst her two fellow witches as well, saying, “You both must have felt it.”

Rebecca shook her head.

“I felt something,” Nandra told her. “Though I did not know what it was. Do you?”

“The sorcerer who rouses the Beast, his energy is gone,” Lena said.

Rebecca, for one, had not felt *that*.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Can we be sure about anything we sense, see or feel through our craft?” Lena asked as answer. “But there is a great change, and it has naught to do with the fact that there have been less orderly quakes. The Beast is not gone, he is not asleep, he is...pacified. But he is the Beast. He has awakened. So he will not be pacified for long.”

“I do not like the sound of that,” Nandra muttered.

“I urge you, my sisters, in this time of despair, to hold on to hope,” Lena said. “Much swifter than I ever would imagined with these four, I feel their power building. This means we must protect them at all costs.”

“At all costs,” Nandra agreed.

Rebecca thought of what was happening in her home.

So when she repeated, “At all costs,” her words were full of sorrow.

As were the expressions of her sisters.

***The Dawn of the End* releases
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