

Chapter Four

The jolt Shashanna felt as she reentered her body hit her harder and more violently than what she had ever experienced. This was the first time, at least since she was a novice, that she had ever had left the *Chien* this abruptly though.

Placing one hand against her brow and one against the floor, she staggered unsteadily to her feet to run to the door. She didn't care that running is prohibited. All she cared was getting to Allorana. However, she knew in her gut that it was too late.

Her eyes darting frantically as she tore open the doors; she saw no sign of her daughter. She was not on the stairs. She was not even in the forecourt of the temple. Running to their home, half-hoping that by some miracle, she had returned there, yet knowing it was a false hope.

Grasping the pillows and the furniture, she overturned everything in the vain hope of seeing any trace of her daughter.

However, she was not there.

Returning to the foot of the steps, Shashanna examined the ground in the forecourt. She saw an impression of a body in the soft soil. At first, she thought it was Allorana's collapsed body, however looking closer, she saw that it was too large to be that of her small child. That, and there were animal hairs scattered in the impression. "A Thing." Shashanna murmured. *Was a Thing involved in this? Was that who the traitor in their midst?* For there was no doubt in Shashanna's mind there was one.

Hearing a noise, she turned.

"Sh-shi-ips." Shashanna strained to see who was talking, but all she could see were shadows in the trees. "s-shhh-shi-ips. I-i-I s-a-a-aw the s-s-sh-h-h-i-i-p-p-sss." A Thing stepped out from the gloom of the trees. "A-a-ll-ll-or-ra-nn-nn-a a s-se-en-nt m-me t-to-o y-y-ou-u." The Thing panted. Obviously frustrated at how slow and painful it was for her to talk.

"Did you betray her? I will know if you lie!" Shashanna was so beside herself, she forgot her usual tolerance and sympathy for these beings.

The Thing cringed back and forcefully shook her head. "A-all-o-o-r-r-a-an-n-nnn-a k-ki-n-nd to m-me. L-l-i-i-i-ike h-h-errr."

Shashanna breathed a sigh, though it was not one of relief. She also did not relax her guard. "Did the ships take her?" The Thing nodded, (obviously) glad to answer something that did not require speech. "Do you have a name?" The Thing shook her head. "I didn't think so." Shashanna looked toward the coast. "They're gone, aren't they." She half-whispered. She knew the answer. She felt it in her bones. Her daughter was gone. How long gone, that she did not know.

Together, they ran through the trees to the coast. The villagers and Ariki were already there, though nobody had bothered coming to the temple.

"Ariki!"

Ariki blanched, and then bowed. "Shashanna! We thought you were gone! We thought they took you as well! I was sure of it...your vision...."

Shashanna waved it off and anxiously asked, "They have Allorana. Who else do they have?"

Ariki followed Shashanna's gaze as she looked out to sea, trying in vain to see any glimpse of ships or sails, but they were long gone. "They have Eno, Conny, Wasia, Leniia and even little Tonia. Do you mean to tell me, they were after Allorana all along?"

"Yes, especially if they took Tonia. She is the only one that Allorana is completely confident with. They had this planned.

"Do you think it is...?"

"I am sure. Also the king. He was always jealous of the power that my abilities afforded you. You, and in turn, Mu Kung and the rest of the elders. So if he had Allorana..."

"But she is just a child. She is not that powerful, she has not fully entered her training even...has she?"

Shashanna turned to look at Ariki. "She is more powerful than any of us could ever have dreamed of, regardless if she has started her official training or not. She can do things that I could not do in my fifth year of training...or even my tenth. The gods have blessed her."

"Or cursed." Ariki murmured as he again looked toward the sea.

"Yes, or cursed." Shashanna agreed softly. "Ariki, we must go after them."

"Yes. Look around you. Do you see any of the men?" Shashanna looked closer. Ariki was correct, in her worry and haste, she had missed it. The only people on the shore were the women and children. "The men are getting the ship ready. Choose the women you need to take with you. The rest of us, since the village will be so depleted will go stay with our families. We cannot leave the village as is." Ariki looked around at the people sadly. "It may be this is the end of our village, my dear. I don't know if this is what they intended, but it is what has been achieved. I cannot ask you to leave your child, just as I cannot ask the rest of the villagers to let their women go. We must go after our loved ones. But, this may very well be the end of our village."

Shashanna did not say anything. She had not foreseen any of this. It may have been for this very reason for that cloudiness of the vision. She would not have been able to bear bringing this news to her village. There had not been time to prepare anyway; the vision had been utterly useless.

Ariki grasped Shashanna's hands. "If you bring back our families, you must get them here, and you must get word to us, so we can all come home. However, if you cannot, find some way to let us know so we can know to let the dream of our homes fade, and we can find peace elsewhere. You must promise me that."

"I will do what I can, Ariki. With the help of the village, I hope to bring everyone home safe, but if it be the will of the gods..."

"Yes, if it be the will of the gods." Ariki spat and dropped her hands.

"Ariki, I cannot tell you what to do, and I cannot tell you to have faith, but I will not believe that the gods won't look after us. But, above all, we must look after ourselves and our loved ones. *You* must look after our loved ones. I will do what I can while I am gone, and with those under my protection, but--"

"Rest assured, my dear, I will do what I can for our people too. Just do what you can to bring everyone home as safe as you can." Shashanna nodded. "Now go. Go see who can be of use to you."

"Ariki, I will make sure Talania stays, the children will need to continue their studies. They need at least some constant in their lives."

Ariki nodded. Shashanna watched as he left, heading in the direction of their docks.

Shashanna, and the silent she-wolf beside her, walked to the women and children. They were standing huddled together, and had been watching her and Ariki.

As they neared, they began talking in one jumbled mass. "Who were they? Why did they take them? Where is Allorana? Are you going after them?" They inundated her with these questions, among many others.

Shashanna raised her arms and, slowly, silence descended. She lowered her arms again and looked at all the expectant faces before her. Some were openly crying, though some were too afraid to. Most were angry...and rightfully so.

"The men who took our loved ones were the Atlantean's. We do not know why they took them. I wish to the Gods, that I did know. I saw them come, in a much-clouded vision, but only a matter of hours before they landed. There was no way to prepare. I did not even know who they were after." Shashanna could not bear to look at any of the faces, especially those of the children. Turning her gaze to the open water, she scanned hopelessly for a sign, but there was none.

"I am going after them to retrieve them. I do not know why they took them; nevertheless, I refuse to let them keep them. Regardless if they had Allorana or not, I would still go after them." She looked at each of the women and children briefly in the eye before looking away once again. "It is more than a duty. I love them just as much as you do and I will avenge them and bring them home."

Looking to the ground, she whispered. "I have failed you. All of you."

Silence.

She did not look up...She did not want to see the looks on their faces. She knew she would see concurrence there. Her people were wise, kind and loving, and there is a limit to their tolerance, and this was it. Pride had blinded her to the possibility that something was wrong that morning. Even five minutes ago, she still would not admit anything was amiss. Now at these women and children, she knew she had failed. The most powerful priestess of the gods had failed. It did not matter how much power, it mattered what you did with it. It mattered how you used it, and somewhere along the way, she had missed a crucial turn, and she had to find her way back to that point, though she did not know if she could find her way back.

"You are the only one that can help us get them back." Shashanna felt Taylor touch her arm. "Regardless of how we got here, you are the only one that can help us get them back." Shashanna looked at Taylor. She was one of the younger women, a virtual child still. A child of thirteen, yet she was a good person to have at your back. A little sedate, she took her learning very serious, yet she was the first to have a ready joke, even at the expense of her. Shashanna tilted her head to the side. Possibly, a good choice to take along. They might need some laughter along the way. She will have to ask Taylor's mother if she could come along. The danger might be a little risky though....

"What do the rest of you think?" Shashanna turned to the rest. "Do you trust me to get them back? Can we withhold judgment of whether I am still worthy to be the priestess of our community--?"

"If we still have a community!" A voice rang out from the back. Shashanna could not tell who it was, though she could hear some of the women murmured in agreement.

Shashanna nodded solemnly. "--can we withhold judgment until I return with our families?"

They looked around at each other. Some blankly, confused and traumatized by the days' events. Others helping to build the momentum. The noise level was growing with each passing moment.

Allie stepped forward. "Bring our family's home and we will go from there."

Shashanna bowed her head. "Thank you." She could barely speak above a whisper. She did not know what she would have done if they had not had agreed to let her go. Ariki had given her permission, but without the support of the village, she would not have been able to make a move. They could have left without her. They could have imprisoned her for her actions...or rather, her inactions. Being priestess set a different set of laws she had to obey, and adhere to....

"I need to take some with me. I would like to start out with volunteers first and go from there." She paused and looked toward the pier. "We cannot move until the ship and supplies are ready, but we need to be ready to go..."

Shashanna looked at Taylor and Allie...Allie was Taylor's mother. She was hoping they both would join, but she would not suggest it...at least, not to begin with. Her lips curled in the first faint grin she had had since her talk with Allorana

She did not have to. Allie was the first to step forward. "You are not leaving without me. Tonia is my sister's child, and I will bring her back." Taylor stepped up next to her mother. "What do you think you are doing?" Allie asked her.

"Going with you." Taylor said.

"Oh?"

"I can't stay." Taylor said. "Father is one of the crew you are going with. I won't be foisted on anyone else. So I am going. Besides, Allorana may need me." Taylor smirked.

Shashanna barely hid her smile. After the two of them volunteered, eight more women joined. The rest chose to stay behind to help the village remain a semi-whole as they go to join with their neighbor's, and to keep the children from feeling any more disconnected.

Shashanna sent the women and Taylor to their homes. They needed to gather their belongings that they would need for the journey. Before she went to do the same, she looked on at the remaining villagers as they huddled together. Each was looking forlorn. Out of the hundred and fifty, give or take, that now comprised their community, there were now around hundred. Most of the villagers were now women, and many of them elderly or children.

Shashanna's gut tensed in fear for her people. For the ones they are leaving behind, and for the ones that she is taking with her. How many of them would endure? How many of them would struggle to maintain a hold on their sanity *Why?* She thought at the gods. *Why did this happen? What did we do wrong?* However, she knew they may never know.

"Wait here for me." Shashanna bid the she-wolf. The Thing nodded and watching Shashanna walk away from her fearfully. S sank to the sand to wait for The priestess's return.

Feeling more dejected then she has ever felt in her life, Shashanna turned and hurried to the temple to gather supplies for her, and Allorana--for when she had her in her arms again.

When she returned to the coast no more than an hour later, the men had the supplies on board and the ships ready. The women were waiting by their belongings ready to go as well. Everything was ready. Giving hugs and kisses, shedding tears and shouting farewells, the ragtag group of sailors and women boarded the ship and set sail toward Atlantis on the course they hoped would be the one that the Atlanteans had taken.

The sun had lowered far on down the horizon by this time. So busy, they had not even noticed. Nor had they noticed the hint of darkness that was not dusk on the horizon....

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Shashanna joined the women down in the hold. It was damp and uncomfortable. But there was nowhere else for them. The crew had their bunks and the captain had his quarters. Normally there was no place for the women. If women did go, it was typically only one or two on a missionary expedition and special arrangements were made where the captain slept with the crew. But with so many of them...there was no way the captain was giving up his quarters, even for women he knew.

Besides, even for a cabin as spacious as the captains, there was no way eleven women (and a Thing) would fit in there, and after they had rescued Allorana and the others? Impossible. So, the hold it was: with the stores and the animals.

Oh yes, mustn't forget to mention the animals.

The stench.

The noise.

The mess.

But to go and rescue Allorana and the others, Shashanna would do more than live months with an animal if she had to.

Luckily, unlike several of the other women, she had thought to put her belongings in an animal-skin bag instead of a wood trunk. She tied it to the wall above her hammock to keep it off the wet floor. *That should keep it relatively dry.* She thought. She could hear the other women grumble around her. *And it is just starting.* She thought sadly. *Maybe, if it gets too bad for them, they can get off somewhere soon and find a way back home. If they chose to return home.*

"Shashanna?"

Shashanna turned. It was Taylor. She hadn't heard her come up behind her.

"Yes, dear?"

"It is going to be bad, isn't it?" She asked, already holding her stomach.

Shashanna nodded. "Yes, it probably will." She looked at the girl. She was getting pretty green around the gills. "If you massage like this," Shashanna took Taylor's hand in hers and holding the skin where it formed a web between the thumb and forefinger, she did a firm, deep massage, "when you start feeling sick, it may help." Taylor thanked smiled, thanked her and walked away.

The she-wolf had a hammock directly below Shashanna's. She was curled up in a ball on it, already miserable. Shashanna was going to leave her on Lemuria, but the Thing had refused to stay behind, refusing to name her owner's even. *I will have to deal with that when we get back.* Shashanna thought with a sigh. *In the meantime, what am I going to do with her?* She looked at the she-wolf, pity and exasperation warring in her. *Hopefully it is affection for Allorana, and not something more sinister. Though, Shashanna tilted her head to the side. Maybe it is better to keep her with me if that is the case.*

Looking around, she slipped away to go up on deck. She climbed the ladder and went through the entry to the next deck. Seeing the crew, she just nodded and continued her way up until she reached the open air. Walking to the rail, she took a deep breath, clearing the stench of the animals out of her lungs and taking the fresh scent of the salt into them.

Amazing, they had only been out to sea only a couple of hours, and the scent of animals was already so pungent that you could taste it. She could only imagine what it would be like after days, and weeks. Gods forbid what it would be like after months.

Looking up into the star riddled sky; she spotted the constellation Draco almost straight overhead, but slightly to the North-West as they sped through the rapidly darkening night. The

waters were already an almost inky black, reflecting Draco's stars. Eerily enough, only Draco's stars only appeared thus brightly.

Feeling, more than hearing, someone come up behind her, she turned her head. The deck reverberated with each of his steps. "Collax." Shashanna greeted the captain.

"Priestess." He nodded his head as he joined her. He, too, looked up at the sky. "A storm is brewing. A bad one."

Shashanna jerked her head toward him. "On top of everything else...a storm?"

Collax nodded. "It will be here in a few hours time. No one will sleep tonight...We are already preparing." Collax waved his hand toward the crew that was on deck. "You should probably warn the women." Shashanna nodded her thanks and turned to go, but Collax restrained her with a hand on her arm. "Priestess...The Atlantean's having probably already greeted this storm." Shashanna could not fully tell, it was too dark, but she thought she could see worry in his eyes. She opened her mouth to question him, but he had already left her.

If Collax, a seasoned seaman, was worried about a storm, what was happening to her daughter out there?