

Book Two of
The Adearian Chronicles

Revelations



Shannon M. Harris

SUMMARY

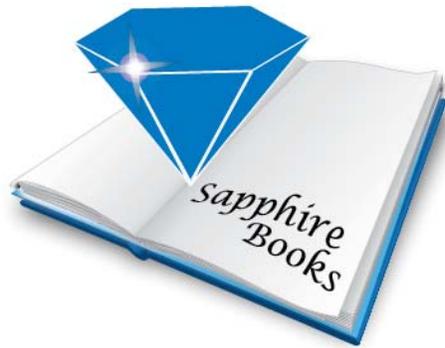
What would you do if you were faced with finding and saving the one person who held your heart, but you only had two weeks to do it?

When the unexpected happens and Lanis's world is turned upside down, her and Elson have no choice but to align themselves with two people from a strange land. With new enemies at play, and a Goddess that seems to have forsaken them, Lanis relies on the only people she can; her friends. To fight the demons that plague her daily, she has to separate her love for Anya, from the task she must perform. On top of the unknowns, she is gifted a small black book that changes the way she sees everything and everyone around her. As her world starts to crumble, Lanis must face her fears and the nightmares that invade her dreams. With the hours ticking away, she must come to terms with the fact that she might already be too late.

THE ADEARIAN CHRONICLES
BOOK TWO-REVELATIONS

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The Adearian Chronicles - Book Two - Revelations

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Dedication

My Girl's.
They keep me sane.

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Present day Adearian

Manight

Two weeks before The Festival of the Goddess

Queen Isabel relaxed against the rails of the ship as the rocking of the waves settled her nerves. Being on the open water always brought her comfort and a sense of peace. She made a mental note to do this more often, whether she had the time or not. Since leaving Candor, both her excitement and her fear threatened to overwhelm her, even more so since the Captain had informed her they would reach Manight within the hour. The last time she set foot there, some twenty-eight years ago, she vowed never to return. The invitation from Queen Abigail, concerning the Festival, came as a complete surprise and somewhat of a shock. She debated with herself for months until finally deciding to turn the invitation down, when her daughter, Victoria, expressed her opinion in favor of going. Vic, as she was commonly referred to, wanted to see if all the hype concerning Manight was true. For Vic's benefit, Isabel had accepted and she would keep telling herself that. It didn't have anything to do with the fact that her pulse had quickened at reading Abigail's words written on the invitation.

She didn't dread many things, but she did dread the moment she laid eyes on Abigail again. When she was a teenager, her father had allowed her to study at Shara's University, even though she wasn't an Item Sorceress. Compared to Candor's teaching style, Manight's was one-sided, but she wouldn't trade her time spent there for anything, especially her time with Abigail. In the past thirty-five years, she often thought about her, but never allowed her memories of their time together to invade her life. Old memories, for everyone's sake, should always remain buried. She smiled and leaned into the rail as a cool breeze swept over. Her life turned out exactly the way it should have and if given the chance to go back and change it, she wouldn't. She loved her husband deeply and Vic was a testament to that love. His unexpected death a few years back almost broke them both.

She pushed off the railing, ran her hand through her long auburn hair, and blew out the breath that she was holding. Her eyes swept the estate and the surrounding shoreline. The sight of the cliffs and the jagged coastline never failed to take her breath away. From where she stood, she could make out the stone wall that enclosed the estate and the top of the Castle. She did a double take and squinted into the distance when movement at the top of the cliffs caught her eye. There was clearly a struggle taking place, but they were too far away for her to make out any specific details. After a few minutes, she gasped and stepped forward when a body fell over the side of the cliff and bounced off the rocks to the sand below. She shivered and rubbed her arms when a second body fell over the side and disappeared into a gray fog.

"Mom." Vic leaned against the railing beside her. "What just happened?"

Isabel couldn't believe what she was seeing. "Magic."

"I know, but I didn't think magic was allowed within their borders, and shouldn't the guards be on the lookout for bandits this close to the Festival?"

"It's not supposed to be allowed, and yes, they should be on the lookout." She bit her lip and kept her eyes glued to the cliff, cringing when a third, then a fourth body fell over the side. After a few minutes, she could make out two people walking into the forest. The Mages that the royal estate employed shouldn't have allowed whatever had just happened. "It shouldn't have happened and I hope it

doesn't take the guards long to discover the bodies." She turned to Vic and squeezed her hand. "We will have to keep all our senses alert during our time here. Even the Royal Mages shouldn't be performing that type of magic inside their borders. Whatever is going on, I'm afraid we will be in the middle of it." Deep in her gut, she knew what had just taken place was one of the reasons Abigail had invited her here.

Vic grinned and bounced on the balls of her feet. "Really?"

Isabel looked at her daughter. Really looked at her. Where had the years gone? Before her stood a twenty-four-year-old, confident woman. From the short, fiery red hair, to the heart melting dimples, she was the spitting image of her father. She couldn't get annoyed at her enthusiasm, because she was the same way when she was her age. "Don't get too excited. We are here for the Festival and the reading. Nothing more. We are guests and as guests we will stay out of and away from Castle business." Maybe the more she said it, the more she would believe it.

Vic planted her hands on her hips and cocked her head. "Mom, really. When have we ever shied away from anything?" She shook her head. "I told you this would be a new adventure for us. Something we could do together. Besides, I brought plenty of notebooks to catalogue our time here. How often do we get to visit another country? Surely," she winked, "I will have something interesting to write about."

Isabel nodded and leaned against Vic, content to stand beside her and watch the port draw closer. One day, Vic would be Queen and she hoped she never lost her playfulness. Even with being blessed with magical abilities, Vic had walked the one path no one expected; she had become a teacher and taught the youngsters the basic elements of magic. She was well liked and loved in Candor, but Manight was not Candor. They would not put up with what they would consider reckless behavior. She would have to keep an eye on her. Whatever was happening in Manight would only lead to trouble. Her eyes closed of their own accord and she took a deep breath when she sensed the shields. "Brace yourself." Crossing through the shields never ceased to amaze her. It was an extraordinary feat how the Mages accomplished it. A moment later, she stiffened and concentrated on the magic swirling around them. The shields were strong, but there was a disturbance within them.

"That's all they have?"

Isabel opened her eyes, wrapped an arm around Vic's waist, and pulled her close to her side. "I told you that our magic was different than in other parts of Adearian, but do not believe for a second that their magic isn't as powerful as ours is. It's just different. You know they have strict regulations in place. It is virtually impossible to break through their shields." She stopped talking when Vic frowned and a dozen different emotions crossed her features in a matter of seconds. "What? Victoria?"

Vic sighed and took a step away from her. "I...I...there's something I haven't told you." Isabel reached for her, but Vic took another step back. "I wasn't completely truthful with you about why I wanted to come here."

Isabel's heart pounded in her ears and she gripped the rail to keep herself steady. They had always shared everything and for Vic to keep something back scared her more than she wanted to admit. "Talk to me."

Vic turned away from her and looked out over the water. "Do you remember about a month, month and a half ago when I excused myself early from dinner? I said I wasn't feeling well."

It was odd at the time, because Vic never excused herself from dinner, but she hadn't thought anything about it. Maybe she should have. "Yes, I remember."

Vic rubbed her hands down her arms. "I felt something." She ran her hands through her hair. "It's hard to explain. I felt." She touched her chest. "I felt someone call me. She needed my help. I felt everything she felt. From the searing heat, to the pain, and the bones breaking." She shook her head. "It

was hard to breathe. It was hard to do anything. I didn't know if I would be able to break the hold her emotions had on me. It was like she was projecting onto me." She frowned. "I don't see how that's possible. I thought the only way to project such strong feelings was through a blood link." She sighed. "My questions didn't keep me from helping her, though. I went into the study and pulled Dad's book of spells from the bookshelf. I knew the distance between us was great. It didn't dawn on me until we passed through the shields that I'd already pushed through them once before."

Isabel stiffened. That was the last thing she had expected to hear. "What are you saying?" Why was this happening now?

Vic shook her head. "Mom, you know what I'm saying. I was in your office when you received word that someone attacked Princess Jalen. It was the day after I shielded someone. A woman. It was me. I shielded her." She held her hand up. "I don't know how, but I did it." She shrugged. "It just came naturally. I was pulled to her." She grasped Isabel's hand. "How did I do it and what does it mean?"

Isabel kept her features neutral, but her stomach was churning. Vic was right. Projecting usually only worked on blood relatives or those you deeply cared about. She couldn't explain to Vic what had happened to her, not on this trip. Maybe not ever. Some things were never meant to be brought into the light. She squeezed Vic's hand. "You saved her life. Everything else will fall into place. Some things don't need an explanation or can't be explained. Just be grateful you were there when she called out." Vic didn't look convinced so Isabel decided to change the subject. "You want to meet Jalen? Is that the reason you wanted to come here?"

"Yes."

Isabel nodded. "That shouldn't be a problem, but let's keep everything else between us. No one is to know what you did for her."

"Why?"

"Victoria, you know that if the wrong person found out what you did, you would be putting your life in danger. I won't take that chance with your life." She bit the inside of her cheek. "The magic you defeated must have been powerful?"

"It was. I honestly didn't think I would be able to fight it."

"But you did." Isabel smiled.

Vic grinned back. "I did, but it drained me."

"Performing powerful magic will do that." Vic was one of the most accomplished sorceresses for her age. There were many others more powerful than she was, but she had an incredible ability to focus her attention far better than most. Whoever had tried to kill Jalen would be looking for whoever shielded her and she would make sure Vic had a guard at all times. "We will not disgrace Queen Abigail, Manight, or Candor by practicing our magic within the city."

"Mom, you're the one who gave me a crash course on how to put our own shields in place so we could still use magic in our rooms."

"I am, but at the time I was your teacher, now, I am your mother. Please do not do anything foolish. I cannot stress enough we *are* only guests. While I know I could get us both out safely if need be, I don't want to have to make that choice."

Vic reached both of her arms out, grasped her right wrist with her left hand, and bowed her head as a sign of respect for the crown. "I would never do anything to disgrace you, my Queen, the crown, or Candor. I would do anything for you and our people."

Isabel sucked in a breath. Her little girl wasn't so little anymore. "Lower your arms and raise your head." She ran her finger down Vic's cheek. "I know that. I wouldn't know what to do if anything happened to you."

"Good thing you won't have to find out." She waved her hand in the air. "Enough of that mushy stuff. A girl can only take so much." She laughed.

Isabel squeezed Vic's hand. "We should prepare. The port draws near and according to you, our adventure begins."

Vic pulled her close, squeezed her tight, then pushed her to arm's length. "I can hardly wait." She winked.

Isabel turned back to the shore when Vic disappeared below deck. Vic's confession certainly was unexpected and hopefully wouldn't bring any unwanted attention their way. Secrets long held needed to stay that way, and she prayed they didn't play a part in what was or what would happen in Manight. Some secrets deserved to stay buried.

Lanis leaned back against the door, crossed her arms across her chest, and eyed the Jester, who sat at the table. His brown trousers, white shirt, and black cape were forgettable, but the smirk on his face spoke volumes. If she didn't already know what he was capable of, she would have never believed him to be a Rogue. Did he really know where Anya was, or was he playing games with her? After everything they'd been through, to be blindsided by Anya's kidnapping felt like a punch to the gut. Given the chance to do it all over again, she would have never opened the letter from the Ramden Council. But, in the end, it hadn't been her choice. Anya knew she would never say no to the Council, but she would have said no for Anya. No one's life, not even hers, meant more to her than Anya's. The very thought of someone besides herself touching Anya fueled her hatred ten-fold and she would make sure everyone involved paid with their lives. She pushed away from the door, stepped over the body on the floor, and sat down across from the Jester. "What do you want?"

The Jester leaned his chair back and laughed. "You know, it's funny. Seeing you in front of me now, I don't know what she sees in you." He spat. "You're nothing special."

Elson stiffened beside her and she held her hand up to hold him back. The Jester laughed and cut his eyes to Elson before bringing them back to Lanis. "What do you want?" Lanis repeated.

He cocked his head and stood. "I want what everyone wants. But in this instance, Lanis Welsh, Protector and lover to High Priestess Anya, I don't want anything from you, but I do want something for the both of us." He stared at the body on the floor before retaking his seat.

"She asked you a question, twice," Elson said. "She deserves an answer." He picked up his sword. "If you know where our High Priestess is, you need to tell us."

"Well, my, my," the Jester said. "What a big and strong, dare I say, protector you have." He laughed. "Too bad he wasn't the one put in charge of guarding Anya." He looked at the body and back to Lanis. "Is he the man you put in charge of Anya?"

"He is." Lanis was fast losing her patience, but, for Anya, she would keep her temper in check.

"Good." He nodded then wrung his hands together. "I don't trust many people," he said, looking at them both. "But I do trust one unconditionally and I will stop at nothing, as long as it is within my powers, to see that she is safe. I will not tell you how, when, why, or where Anya and I met. I will only tell you that I also wish no harm to come to her, but it is not within my power to save her. When she begged

me to save her, I told her that that was the difference between you and me. I cannot go against an Oath I have signed, but that you would stop at nothing to save her.”

“Wait a minute.” Lanis stood and clenched her fists by her sides. “You’ve seen Anya and she begged you to save her and you said no.” Anya never begged for anything. She was always the strong one, the one taking care of everybody else, and the one everybody could count on. What did they do to her?

The Jester stood so fast his chair toppled backward and he pushed the table against the wall. “I did what I could. I live by my Oath; you don’t. I did what I could and I could only do that because of loopholes I put in my contracts. I did what I could for you along your journey because of Anya and I am doing all this because of her. If it weren’t for her, I would have already killed you. Do not try my patience. You will lose.”

“You already tried and failed to kill me once.” She waved her hand between them and sat back down. “And we both know you wouldn’t try something here.” They were wasting time. “If you know where she is, tell me, so I can save her. You’re right; I would do anything for her.”

“Even give up your own life.”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation.

He turned away from her and leaned back against the wall. “Because that’s what it might take. It will not be easy to get to her. I only had so many options and I chose the one that would keep her alive the longest. I don’t know what they did to the cell she’s in, or who was in it before her, but she is fading far quicker than she should. Believe me when I say it wasn’t easy keeping her alive.” He ran his hands through his hair.

She rubbed her neck, looked to Elson, and nodded. He sat down on the bed. “Where is she?”

“First things first. I notice that you’re missing someone. Did she get lost along the way?” He smirked.

“She isn’t of any concern to you. Answer my question.”

“You are no fun at all. Tsk, tsk.” He shook his head and frowned. “I really don’t know what she sees in you.” He shrugged.

Lanis tilted her head back and bit her lip when it dawned on her what his problem was. He was in love with Anya. “Get on with it.”

His smirk vanished as quickly as it appeared. “I cannot help you. What I am about to tell you is the only help you’ll get from me. There is someone that will help you, but you have to get to her first and it won’t be easy.”

Great. That’s all she needed, another obstacle. Why couldn’t anything ever be easy or at least not life threatening? “Who?”

He shook his finger at her then looked at it in disgust. “Pity Manight doesn’t allow its citizens to use magic.” He shook his hands out. “Where was I?”

“You were about to tell us who we have to see,” Elson said.

“No. I was about to tell Lanis who she has to see. You, my friend, will not be going with her.”

“We’ll see,” Elson muttered.

Lanis couldn’t believe everyone was being so calm. It was disturbing on a whole new level. “Can we get on with it?”

“Queen Isabel is visiting Manight to partake in the Festival and she’s staying in the Castle at Queen Abigail’s request. You need to get in and talk with her. She will be able to help you, but you will have to be honest with her. She doesn’t like surprises.”

“What can she do?” Elson said. “She can’t practice magic in Manight.”

“No, but she can practice magic inside the Castle walls. Where do you think the Mages are that protect Hadmore’s borders and more especially Manight’s? The Royal Estate is the only place in Manight that allows magic.” He addressed Lanis. “Be careful; she doesn’t take well to strangers. Candor is a lot different from Manight. Do not play games with her.”

Lanis frowned. “Let me get this straight. First, you want me to get into the Castle, then you want me to find Queen Isabel and talk her into helping me, but she can be hostile. How do you purpose I do that?”

The Jester shrugged and his eyes strayed to the body on the floor before coming back to Lanis. She couldn’t decipher the look in his eyes. “You need her to help you.” He ran his hands through his hair. “What I did to Anya will take a very powerful magic to cut through it and that type of magic cannot be found here.”

Lanis’s stomach dropped. “What did you do to her?” How could this get any worse?

“They have her in a small cell in the center of a Holders outpost set back inside a cave. You do know who the Holders of the Spheres are, don’t you?” He looked first at Elson, then Lanis. “He does; do you, Lanis?”

If they had her, this situation was far worse than she could have ever imagined. “I know some. I know they worship Damrek.” She shook her head. “I know they are searching for the seven spheres. No one knows much about them or where their hideouts are. I know there is a Book of Damrek, but I’ve never seen it. Have you?” she asked Elson.

“No.”

“I have,” the Jester said. “To me, it’s just another book, but to them it’s their whole life. Lanis, do not underestimate one’s love for their God, even if it is a false one.”

“Oh, I won’t.” She leaned forward in her chair. The Jester looked deep in thought, but he also looked nervous. “So you’re telling me The Holders of the Spheres have her.”

“Yes and you have to understand that what I did, I did for Anya’s safety. I enclosed the room she’s in in an enchantment. A very powerful spell. Isabel will be able to help with that. No one can enter the room and no one can leave.”

What? “Is this a joke? How am I supposed to get her out if no one can enter and leave the room?”

“I did it for her safety. I left a two-week supply of food and water. That’s all I could do for her. It is up to you to save her. I told her you would be coming for her. Was I harsh in making that statement? Would you abandon her now, Lanis? After everything.”

“Of course not.”

“Where is she?” Elson said, standing.

“Follow Laramore’s border until you reach the ocean. From there, travel along the water until you come upon a large rock formation littered with several cave openings. The cave you need is the one with a small sword etched into the stone. There aren’t any shields guarding the door, but beware, some of the most feared fighters belong to the Holders guards. They will not think twice before killing a stranger. Stay on top of it.”

“Well, isn’t that fantastic. Is there any other obstacles I should be aware of?”

The Jester smirked. “Oh, there’s plenty, but nothing you’ll hear from me.” He sobered quickly. “Do take my word. You will need Queen Isabel’s help.” He sighed and glanced at the body on the floor. “For a favor, I can contact somebody who will get rid of that body for you.”

It wasn’t her ideal situation, but she would work with what she had. “All right.” What was one more favor to owe?

He clapped his hands and laughed. "Perfect." He bowed before her. "Anya awaits you, my Lady. Do not tarry. Time isn't on your side."

Lanis dropped her head in her hands when the door shut behind him, and the quiet inside the room washed over her. Anya needed her and she would stop at nothing to find her.

Dimitri's footsteps were purposeful and steady as he walked down the long, familiar corridor of the Castle. He tensed, but made direct eye contact with the guard heading his way and nodded as he moved past him. This was not the time to draw suspicion upon himself. Instead of entering the door at the end of the hall, he glanced both ways to make sure no one was coming his way, then opened a door set into the wall, to his left. It took a few seconds for his eyes to become accustomed to the darkness, but he knew the layout of this hallway by heart and his steps were sure. He had no trouble finding the brick that was raised from the wall. He knocked twice on the wall, pushed the brick backward, and walked through the open door. The two oil lamps that hung from the ceiling cast the room in a warm glow. His steps faltered when he came face to face with the two occupants in the room: High Priest Lantor and his Protector. This was certainly unexpected, considering he was supposed to be meeting the Jester. He kept his face neutral, walked to the cabinet set against the wall, and poured a glass of water. "Can I pour you a glass?"

"No." Lantor shook his head. "My apologies for meeting you so unexpectedly. A mutual friend alerted me that this meeting would be taking place and I took the opportunity to come and meet the man who single-handedly tracked down five of the seven spheres." Lantor clapped softly, then sat in one of the three chairs in the room. He crossed one leg over the other, clasped his hands together, and rested them on his knee. He smiled. "I must say, it is quite the feat what you've accomplished. Five spheres. Remarkable."

Dimitri grabbed a vacant chair, moved it across from Lantor, sat down, and held his glass loosely between his hands. It was a bit of a surprise that the Jester knew about the spheres, but it wasn't unexpected. What was a bit unsettling was the fact that he told Lantor about them. That they even knew each other, and possibly worked together, could aid his cause in the future. High Priest Lantor was a powerful man. He would have to be careful how he played this.

"I have to applaud your efforts," Lantor said. "I've been trying to locate just one sphere without any luck. Tell me, what would I have to do to acquire one?" He ran his hand along the arm of his chair. "What is your price? I am sure you know well enough, in your line of work, everyone has one."

Dimitri stood and swallowed the last of his water. "The spheres are not for sale." Lantor may be High Priest to Novak, but not a lot of people in Manight worshipped Novak. Dimitri would have been more impressed if Tothos, First Priest to Shara, had come to him for a sphere. "Was there something else I could help you with today? I hate to know you came all this way for nothing." He crossed his arms.

Lantor spread his hands out in front of him. "If one wants to know the answer, they must first ask the question." Lantor stood and clasped his hands behind his back. "Tell me something, Dimitri. How are your beautiful wife and daughters?"

Dimitri clenched his jaw and forced himself to stay calm. Lantor was obviously goading him, but he wouldn't let him walk all over him either. "My wife and daughters are fine. You have some nerve to come here and threaten my family."

Lantor chuckled. “No need to get so uptight. A family is a beautiful thing. I only brought them up to remind you that you are not only playing with your life, but also theirs.” He ignored Dimitri’s glare. “What can you do with only five spheres? You’re still missing two.”

“Like I said. Is there something else I can do for you?” Dimitri sat back down and rested his hands in his lap.

Lantor nodded, leaned back against the wall, and slipped his hands in his pants pockets. “I propose an alliance. It would be a mutual agreement, and I will use all of my resources to help you find the last two spheres.”

Dimitri didn’t believe for one moment that’s all Lantor was after, but he needed time to figure out his real agenda. He knew others were looking for the spheres, and he’d heard talk over the years, but he’d never heard Lantor’s name mentioned. The only way he would get out of this meeting was to agree with his terms and figure the rest out later. “I agree to your terms, but keep in mind we still have to locate Damrek’s Cave.” His heart sank when Lantor grinned. He knew where the cave was. Now, he had to play along, if only to find the cave. On the flip side, just because Lantor was using him didn’t mean he couldn’t do the exact same thing to him. He smoothed a crease out of his white shirt. “If I may ask. Why do you want the spheres? You don’t worship Damrek.”

“No one really knows what will happen when all seven spheres are brought together. I’m curious, that’s all.” He walked to Dimitri and held his hand out. “I take it we have an agreement.”

Dimitri stood, ignoring Lantor’s outstretched hand. “We do.”

“Excellent.” He pointed at Dimitri, then opened the door. “Have a good day.”

He knew once he acquired the last two spheres, Lantor would kill him for them and he didn’t intend to die anytime soon. He left the room and headed back to his office. Once this was over, he would be glad to be out from under the Castle, and in turn, out from under Queen Abigail. He groaned when he shut his office door and his eyes landed on the man sitting in his chair. What more could go wrong today? The man knew he was never to meet him where someone could see them together. It was amazing to him what some people would betray their Queen and their country for. “What can I do for you?”

The man stood. “I know who shielded Princess Jalen.”

Dimitri grinned and rocked back on his heels. He might have taken a step back talking with Lantor, but this could be the turning point he had been looking for. The grin quickly vanished when the man told him who it was that shielded her. Getting rid of her was a task he wasn’t sure he wanted to undertake. To shield someone from that great a distance took the skills of an accomplished sorceress. For now, he would bide his time, and wait for everything to play out.

Isabel regarded the woman standing in front of her with a mixture of disgust and disdain. Upon her and Vic’s arrival a short time ago, she had been informed Abigail wouldn’t be available until the next day and that Lady Sara wanted an audience with her. Vic, wisely, kept her mouth shut when Isabel had sent her to their rooms to put their shields in place. Sara had been adamant about a private meeting, but Isabel had waved off her request. Barnet, one of her personal guards, along with four of Sara’s guards, stood along the back wall of the large sitting room.

Isabel couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled up in her when she first entered the room and her eyes latched onto the rust colored couches and chairs that were arranged neatly in the middle of the room. Countless memories of her and Abigail cuddling on the couch bombarded her mind, but she quickly

buried them and focused on the present. Her eyes swept the rest of the room; everything was the same except the tiles on the enormous fireplace along the main wall. Abigail had always been a creature of habit and extremely sentimental. It brought her more comfort than she wanted to admit to herself that Abigail had left this room nearly the same as when they were teenagers. She inhaled. Even the lavender that permeated the room was the same.

She kept her expression neutral, but her stomach was churning. If it had been anyone else who had requested the meeting, she wouldn't have given it a second thought, but this was Sara. She didn't trust her when they were younger and she didn't trust her now. Sara's long blond hair hung loose around her shoulders and her sky blue eyes held the same haughtiness Isabel remembered. The white silk dress and blue chiffon over-layer she wore was tailored to perfection and Isabel knew that the ruby that hung around her neck had belonged to Abigail's mother. Isabel didn't believe in wearing your wealth as a way of showing others your value. Her father had taught her to show her integrity through her actions and that's exactly how she raised Victoria.

She slept easier every night, knowing what type of woman Vic had grown into. When the time came, Vic would make an exceptional Queen. Sara, on the other hand, made it no secret that Maya, her second born, should be Queen when Abigail stepped down. But, according to Hadmore doctrine, the heir was always the first-born. In most kingdoms that would be a problem; however, Hadmore had put strict guidelines in place hundreds of years ago that guaranteed the first-born would be acceptable. Jalen, their first-born, was Abigail's heir and for all intents and purposes, she would make a fine Queen.

Isabel picked up her glass, took a tentative sip of the amber colored wine, and looked at Sara over the rim. After a few tense seconds, she lowered it and cupped her hands around the elegantly carved glass. "What can I do for you, *Lady Sara*?"

Sara smirked. "Really, must you stoop to such levels, Isabel? I find it odd that you would come to our Festival of the Goddess." She sneered. "You don't even worship Shara."

Isabel set her glass down on the fireplace mantle and gave Sara her full attention. Something seemed off about her, but she couldn't put her finger on it. The air around her was disturbed. She wasn't one to play it safe, but she would tread lightly. "That is true. I don't worship Shara, but I couldn't pass up opportunity to hear the Prophecy read and by no one other than the High Priestess of Malora herself." Isabel picked up her glass again and saluted Sara. "What is a Queen to do?"

Sara walked to the corner table, poured a glass of wine, and took a sip. "The finest wine my tongue has ever tasted."

"I don't know." Isabel shrugged. "I'm partial to our wine in Candor."

"Then why don't you go back?" Sara spat. "No one wants you here."

Isabel smirked and fingered the rim of her cup. She knew she shouldn't, but Sara always did rub her the wrong way. "I wouldn't say that. I can name at least one person who will be happy to see me."

Sara's knuckles turned white on her wine glass. "You had your chance with her. She is mine," she ground out.

Sara was right; she did have her chance with Abigail, but life had worked out the best for everyone involved. She wouldn't trade the thirty-five years she spent with her husband for anything. A part of her would always belong to Abigail, but fate paved its own road for everyone. She was a magic bound One Sorceress and she wouldn't have given that up for anyone, not even for a life with Abigail. Being a One Sorceress allowed her the opportunity to study from various universities and gave her the ability to learn a wide variety of spells and ways in which to enchant numerous items. To be given the gifts of several areas of magic wasn't rare, but it presented opportunities to her that she couldn't pass up. She would have

never been able to stay in Manight, not with their strict policies on magic in place, and Abigail would have never moved to Candor, because she was the only heir to Hadmore's throne.

"Sara." Isabel sighed. "I loved Abigail a lifetime ago. Life worked out the way it was supposed to for everyone. I have an amazing daughter and had a wonderful husband. You have two daughters, a son, and you have Abigail. If I recall, from our youth, you have everything you ever wanted. Abigail will always own a piece of my heart and I won't apologize for that. The past is exactly where it belongs." She lifted her glass. "This is a time of celebration." Isabel managed to hold back a flinch when Sara threw her glass into the fireplace and it shattered. Isabel held her hand up to keep Barnet back.

Sara's eyes locked onto Isabel's brown ones. "The past never goes away. Things always have a way of coming back into the light." She smirked and crossed her arms. "It amazes me how so many people thought they could keep such a secret."

Isabel stiffened, but kept her composure. There was no possible way Sara could know her secret. Numerous precautions had been put into place to ensure the past stayed where it belonged. If it were up to Isabel, no one would ever know the truth. She placed her glass on the mantle and faced Sara. "Tell me Sara, what have you been doing with your time lately?"

Sara paled for an instant, then moved away from the wall. "Stay away from my family." She turned on her heels and headed toward the door, but before walking out she turned back to Isabel, a smirk plastered on her lips. "I may only be a Lady, but I am *her* Lady."

Isabel frowned. Sara always did have to have the last word. She hadn't intended to strike a nerve with her question, but that's exactly what she'd done. Now all she needed to do was find out what Sara was up to. It may not be her place to, but now she was involved, whether she wanted to be or not. When the last of Sara's guards walked out of the room, she turned to Barnet, who had walked up next to her. "Barnet, I need you to find out everything you can about Sara. Where she goes, what she's been up to, when was the last time she left the city, and I need the information as fast as you can get it to me."

He didn't even blink at her request. "Of course, my Queen."

Vic was right; an adventure did await them, just not the type she had expected. She would have to be careful how she spent her time while she was here. There was too much at stake and she wouldn't be the one to upend things.

"What just happened?" Elson asked, dragging the body to the furthest wall away from them. "Is he even telling the truth?" He washed his hands in the bowl by the window, pulled the table away from the wall, then sat down in the chair the Jester had vacated.

Lanis pushed back from the table and stood. "We don't have a choice but to believe him." How could she have been so stupid to leave someone else in charge of Anya's protection? She ran her hands through her hair and fought the urge to pick up a chair and slam it against the wall. If Anya died because of her lack of judgement, she would never be able to forgive herself. "I have to find her."

Elson stood and pulled her into a quick hug before pushing her to arm's length. He waited until she made eye contact with him before speaking. "We will. She may be your love, but she is my High Priestess and I will do anything within my power to find her. You are not alone." He squeezed her shoulders, then moved back to his seat. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I know. It's just..." She bit her lip. "If I would have been by her side."

Elson threw his hand up. “Stop. Don’t go there. It will eat you up inside. Trust me. I know. What’s happened has already happened. Now, it’s up to us to make it right.”

She scrubbed her hands down her face. “You’re right. No time for regrets.”

He nodded. “Regrets will only eat you up.”

He was right and she could see in his eyes the regrets he still carried with him. Anya needed her at her strongest. It was time to lay all her doubts, fears, and reservations to the side and figure everything out. “Once inside the Castle, it shouldn’t be a problem to get around, but it’s the getting in that will be the tricky part. The last time I had help, but what are the odds of that happening again?”

“Slim to none.”

“Exactly.” Lanis sat down opposite him. “We only have two weeks to find her and even on horseback who says we’ll make it in time?”

Elson grabbed her hand. “Nia hasn’t let us down yet and she won’t. She is always with us.”

How could he, after everything, still have such faith in her? She pulled her hand back and bit her tongue or risked saying something she would regret later. Where was Nia when Anya needed her? After everything that had happened, she wasn’t feeling very faith filled at the moment. The idea of Anya being all alone and hurting was tearing her in two. She’d made it in time for Jalen; she could only hope the same fate held true for Anya. But first, she had to get into the Castle. Queen Isabel was a wild card and one she wasn’t happy about playing. It didn’t make any sense, but she would heed the Jester’s words. The look in his eyes when he talked about Anya told her all she needed to know about him. He was in love with her and probably had been for some time. She had to believe his words; they were the only hope she had of finding Anya. “There is one good thing we don’t have to worry about.”

“What’s that?”

“We don’t have to get rid of the body.”

“There is that, but I don’t like the idea of you owing him. No offense, but what could he possibly want from you?”

Lanis laughed. “None taken.” The fact was, she didn’t want to think about what she would owe him. “We’ll see when the time comes.”

Elson smiled sadly. “Don’t we always.”

Lanis stood. “Okay. Here’s what we know so far. The Holders have kidnapped Anya. We know where she is and we know how long we have to reach her. We also know I have to get in to see Queen Isabel. Then there’s Rose. We don’t know what happened to her or where she is.”

Elson leaned back in his chair. “Your Protector mask is missing and we know Merek betrayed Anya. We still don’t know who is behind this whole mess.” He turned away from her, stood up, and started pacing.

“Elson, what is it?”

“I don’t believe in coincidences. Do you?”

“No.”

He leaned against the wall and slipped his hands in his pants pockets. “When High Priestess Anya called on me, it was for two Oaths. My first Oath, of course, was to keep you safe.” He rounded his shoulders, pushed away from the wall, and motioned for her to join him at the table. “What I am about to tell you must never be repeated again.”

“Okay.”

“I belong to a secret organization within the Army of Malora. I am a Soliret. When called on, it is our duty to track down and kill any member of the Holders of the Spheres. Most people would be

surprised how far their reach extends.” He ran his hand down his beard. “The second Oath I took was as a Soliret. I never thought I would be called on for such a task. It was both a surprise and a gift. High Priestess Anya told me a name and that after I got you to Manight safely that I was to find him and kill him.” He untied his hair and ran his hands through it, before putting it back up.

Lanis took that as a clear sign he was troubled. It didn’t come as a surprise to her that the organization existed. In all her years as a mercenary, she ran into tons of people and groups that shouldn’t exist, but did. Every country, army, and government had them, but they were never spoken of publicly. For him to tell her meant he trusted her, and also meant that what he was about to tell her probably wouldn’t be good. She didn’t know a lot about the Holders, but she knew there were seven spheres. What she didn’t know, and what others didn’t as well, was what the spheres would do when they were brought together. She, for one, wasn’t looking forward to that day. Magic had a way of bringing like-minded people together, but it also had a way of alienating the masses. “Go on.”

“The name High Priestess Anya gave me is of a very powerful and high ranking member of the Holders. He is said to have five of the seven spheres already and is actively looking for the other two. The thing is, no one knows where the original Book of Damrek is, not even this man.” He shrugged. “I know there are seven indentions inside the front cover of the book that fits all seven spheres. I don’t know how much you know about all of this, but the spheres, at one point, were said to have been spread across Adearian.”

“I know that, but why weren’t they found before now and destroyed? I am sure, that besides the Holders, other people have been looking for them.”

“Yes, I am sure they have been. Damrek’s magic was unlike anything anyone had ever known at the time. He obviously had something in mind when he created them and with the way magic has evolved since his time, who knows what will happen when brought together. For all we know, they could destroy all of Adearian.”

That wasn’t something she would think about right now. No one should be allowed that kind of power. She pushed back in her seat and rubbed her neck. Everything was happening so fast, she had to remind herself to breathe. “How do members identify themselves?”

“Nobody knows, and those that do aren’t telling.”

“Okay. First things first. Who is your Oath to find?” This entire Oath, journey, whatever it was, was far bigger than any five-hundred-year old prophecy. Even Anya couldn’t have seen all of this coming. Whatever was happening was far beyond their control and they were right in the middle of it. Anya had specifically told them not to enter into Laramore, but they’d disregarded her other orders; what would be one more?

“His name is Councilman Ramus and he is a member of the Queen’s Court.”

Lanis sat back and let that sink in for a minute. The man Elson was sent to kill was a member of one of the most respected Courts in the entire country. It would seem that everyone within the Castle had secrets. She leaned forward and clasped her hands together on the tabletop. “When that healer saved Rose in Vashta, it didn’t come without its cost. I traded Rose’s healing for an Oath of sorts. She wanted me to kill someone for her when we arrived here. I agreed.” She held up her hand to ward off his questions. “It seems my Oaths are never ending these days.” She laughed, then quickly sobered. “It wasn’t until I read the name that I knew I was in way over my head. I may be a lot of things, but I could never, would never, kill the woman she wanted me to. For one, I would never get close enough to her and two, I think it would be nearly impossible to do. I do hope that stuff she made me drink didn’t bind me to her in some way. In the future, I need to consider my choices before jumping in.”

“Who?”

Lanis bit her lip. “Lady Sara.”

He rested his hands behind his head. “What kind of mess have we gotten ourselves into?”

“But, we both know, there is more to Sara than she portrays to the public.”

“I know, but our focus can’t be on her right now, maybe not ever. Our main focus is High Priestess Anya.”

“She’s expecting me.”

“And see you, she shall. One way or another, we will find her and bring her back.”

“We haven’t had time to talk about Rose.”

“Right.” He grinned. “It seems we are up to here in it, aren’t we?” He held his hand above his head. “I don’t have any answers for Rose. Sometimes it would be nice to have some magical abilities.”

“The Mages might have saved her. We don’t know. Her stuff is gone; someone took it. Don’t get me wrong. I think it’s weird, but what hasn’t been weird this entire trip? Right now, we can’t be concerned about her. Plain and simple, if I had to choose between her and you, I would choose you. We can always hire another sorceress, but.” She turned away from him and stared at the wall. “I am kind of fond of you. I know in our line of work friendships aren’t known to bloom but ours has and it would bother me if something happened to you.” She ran her hands through her hair and turned to look at him. Being honest with someone other than Anya was new to her and she wasn’t sure she liked it.

He nodded. “I completely agree. It would bother me if something happened to you and that’s not because of the Oath. I genuinely care for you.”

She smirked and arched an eyebrow. “You do realize I am taken, don’t you? Not that you aren’t attractive, but— “

He held his hand up and grinned. “I understand.” His smile vanished. “I would do anything for you. You know that, right?”

This is what she didn’t want on this trip. She didn’t want to get attached to someone, but that’s exactly what happened. She couldn’t deny the pull toward him. “As I would you.”

He placed both of his hands on the table. “Good.”

Lanis laughed. “Yes. Now that that’s out of the way we have to figure out—” Her words were cut off when Elson jumped up from the bed and grabbed his sword. Lanis stood up and stared at the wall as a shadow started to appear. She pushed Elson back behind her when she realized what was happening. It only took a few seconds for a Veilshield to walk through the wall and appear before them.

“What the?” Elson said.

“Elson.” Lanis patted his arm. “Lower the sword. I know who she is, or I hope it’s the same person.” Lanis breathed a sigh of relief when Mattea lowered the hood. Her features were even more striking in the light than she first thought. Her black hair was cut short and her bangs swept her forehead. She had a series of small tattoos that ran along her right cheek. Lanis could make out a scroll and a sword, but couldn’t decipher the rest. The most distinguishing part was the fact that she wore all black, from her boots to her hood. Even the stitching in her clothes was black. The only color she could see, anywhere on her body, was one of the tattoos along her cheek was a pale blue. She tensed when Elson did and out of habit touched her whip. She looked between them and Mattea and, after a few moments, relaxed. “Elson, it really is okay. She’s the one that helped me with Jalen.” She couldn’t make out the look on his face, but he never took his eyes off of Mattea.

“You know what she is, don’t you?”

Lanis tensed and tried to cover her surprise. It was the first time she had ever heard something resembling hate in his voice. There was a story there and she would tread carefully. "Yes," she said softly.

"They are evil." He spit on the floor and Mattea took a step forward and let her hand, which held firmly to a black dagger, drop to her side.

Lanis stepped between them and forced Elson to look at her. "That may be the case, but whatever this is, we are not doing it now. I don't care what issues you have with them. Our only goal is to rescue Anya, who at this very moment, is waiting for us. I don't know why she's here, but I need her." She pleaded with him. He seemed to deflate before her eyes.

"Okay."

She nodded. "Okay." She turned and focused her attention on Mattea. She had already sheathed her dagger and looked relaxed. "Mattea, what brings you here?"

"I have come to fulfill a favor from an acquaintance." She pointed to the body on the floor.

Lanis blinked. "He really does seem to collect the favors, doesn't he?" Mattea ignored her, but kept her eyes glued on Elson. Lanis knew he wouldn't do anything, but Mattea didn't know that.

"Take the body and leave," Elson said.

Lanis glared at him when Mattea moved toward the body. "No, wait. I need your help."

"I don't make a habit out of helping people."

Lanis took a deep breath. What was one more? "I'll own you one." Mattea was her only way into the Castle.

"A favor?" Lanis nodded. "I will call upon you whenever I want and no matter the events, you will have to fulfill it."

She didn't have a choice but to agree to her terms. "Whenever and whatever you need me for."

"What do you need my help with?"

"I need to get into the Castle."

"Very well." She leaned over the body.

"Actually," Lanis said and Mattea straightened. "More specifically, I need to get into Queen Isabel's room."

Mattea pulled her hood up and easily lifted the body onto her shoulder, then walked back to the wall, with her back to Lanis. "Meet me at the same place as last time, before dawn. Don't be late."

Lanis felt a weight lift off of her as Mattea disappeared back through the wall, but she knew she had other things to worry about at the moment. Elson was rigid beside her. "Elson?"

"Don't." He held his hand up and frowned before setting his sword back on the bed. "I have issues with the Veilshield."

Lanis pulled up a seat at the table and waited until he sat across from her before going on. "Because of the army and Nia?"

"No." He laid his head back and stared at the ceiling. "The Veilshield killed my parents. My grandma never kept it a secret who killed them, she just never told me why."

"I understand."

"I know." He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I'm sorry for my behavior."

She waved him off. "Don't be. If it hadn't been for me needing her help, I wouldn't have stood in your way, but killing her wouldn't have made you feel better. That only works if you kill the person that has wronged you."

"I wouldn't have killed her. Her appearance just startled me."

"I get that a lot."

He looked pained. "I wasn't judging her because of what she can do; it was because of who she is. They're killers."

"So are we."

He turned to her sharply. "Not like them." He pointed to the wall.

"I don't know what they are. I don't listen to rumors. I go to the source, but I have a feeling she wouldn't tell me anything. Just as I would never tell my people's secrets to outsiders. I can remember every person I have ever killed. Their last words haunt my dreams and when I close my eyes, I relive their last moments over and over again. We all have our own demons we have to live with. Just as I am sure you've had to deal with persecution because of who you follow, I have had to deal with it because of what I am."

"I...you're right."

"Don't get me wrong. If your parents' killer or killers were in this room, I would help you kill them, but they aren't."

"No, they aren't." He scrubbed his hands down his face. "I need to stay focused. Tomorrow you meet Queen Isabel. I have to tell you, I am glad it's you and not me."

"At this point," she said, standing and heading toward the door. "It can't be any different than what we've been up against thus far." She pulled open the door when Elson stopped her. "What? I figured we could get something to eat, then go to bed early. It's going to be a long two weeks."

"I agree." He grasped the hem of her shirt and pulled it out for her to see. "I thought you might like to change first. I don't think blood is the right color on you."

"See," she said. "What would I do without you?"

Lanis was startled, but relaxed, when he pulled her into a hug. "I pray we won't have to face that, but let me make it clear. I will do anything within my power to keep you safe, even if that means giving up my own life."

"I..."

"Change. I am hungry."

She watched him walk through the door and couldn't help the dread that settled in the pit of her stomach. She would do anything for him, but she would never fall on her sword for him. The only person that held that privilege was a long way away and tomorrow would be the first step in seeing that Anya made it home safely.

About the Author

Born near Chicago, but raised in Southern Illinois, where she still lives, Shannon spends her free time writing. When she isn't writing, she enjoys binge watching fantasy, science fiction, or true crime shows.

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