

Chapter 1

Though the congregation sang the hymn clearly, the words ran together in Arlyn's mind. She sucked in her breath and peered over her shoulder at the open door. Escape. Prickles played down the back of her neck. The chapel walls encircled her like the doom of a noose. Each word they sang pounded her temples. Arlyn dabbed at the sweat beading on her upper lip with the kerchief her husband handed her. Escape.

The open door silently summoned her, resounding louder in her mind than the collective voices of the congregation. Air. She needed it desperately. The need to leave her body and fly far from the church pulled at her resolve. She felt herself slipping, lifting. No!

Arlyn jerked back, determined to resist resorting to what she had been. If ever she were to be normal, a regular person, she could not give into her unacceptable abilities.

As Arlyn forced her hands onto her lap, strong yet gentle fingers splayed over her wrist, curling around her hot skin. Arlyn met her husband's eyes. If anyone could give her the strength she needed to resist, it was Daegal. He was good; he was pure. She absorbed the feel of his gentle fingers; toyed with the material at his wrist. Desperately she tried to concentrate on the warm flesh beneath her hand, the feel of the hard wood against her back, the feel of the cool stones beneath her feet.

She struggled to look in his eyes, which mirrored all she sought to be. Arlyn had always felt out of place in the little chapel, but the past few months had become unbearable. With every sermon came the heat, the nausea, the muscle cramps, and the hunger to escape.

Despite her husband's firm grasp, Arlyn rose. Face tilted toward the ground in shame and agony, she fled down the aisle and out the door.

The breeze pulled her into its comforting embrace, cooling her burning cheeks and drying her clammy palms. Arlyn ran to a nearby oak and leaned against the rough, sturdy trunk, feeling the bark with her fingertips, while hating herself for the shame she brought her husband week after week. Her conscience whispered for her to return to the chapel and endure the rest of the service, but a low, frightened emotion rumbled through her body in protest, rooting her where she stood.

“Arlyn!”

Arlyn met her husband's angry gaze as he strode toward her. Now, away from the church, she began to relax. She continued filling her lungs with deep, ragged breaths of fresh air.

Daegal stopped but an arm's length away from Arlyn. He looked frustrated and angry. "How can you see fit to abandon me again, to abandon God?"

"I haven't. I just feel... so ill in the chapel."

Daegal peered into Arlyn's eyes, felt her forehead and cheeks, and then crossed his arms. "Like always, I see no signs of illness."

It was true. As always, now that Arlyn was away from the chapel, she didn't feel ill. The turmoil inside her rested peacefully now.

"I don't know what to say to you anymore."

Guilt pecked at the edges of Arlyn's conscience as she took in the hurt in her husband's voice, the confusion in his gaze. She wanted to explain the panic, the physical horror she had to endure whenever she entered the chapel, but she couldn't tell him the truth, who and what she was. Someday, someday she would be as much of a person as he.

"I don't mean to disappoint you." How many times had she said that to him before? She had long ago lost count.

The tense corners of Daegal's mouth softened. He laid his large hand on Arlyn's shoulder. She relished the warmth of his fingers. "Then why do you keep fleeing the services? Why can't you honor God with me?"

"I—" Arlyn felt the ground vibrating against the soles of her feet.

"You what?"

Daegal seemed not to notice. Arlyn felt the tiny hairs on her arms and legs stand erect. The vibrations increased, shook her shins and pounded her knees. "I— Daegal, can't you feel it?"

"What?" Then Daegal turned toward the horizon, a crease forming between his dark brows. "Look there. What is it?"

She reached for Daegal's shoulder. As he laid his fingers over hers, she sensed the gesture would be the last tender moment they'd share.

The cloud loomed ominously close. Then a black horizontal line pushed forward out of the dust. Air raiders, odd flying vehicles, swooped toward them with incredible speed. There were twelve raiders, their black cloaks filling the spaces between them, doubling their appearance.

"Those must be the raiders we've heard about," said Daegal, placing his arm over Arlyn's shoulder. "The Devil's guards." He made the sign of the cross over his chest. "God in Heaven."

Beads of perspiration broke out on Arlyn's brow again. She watched the oncoming raiders, heart pounding, a voice in the back of her mind screaming a warning. Had they come for her after all this time? No, she would not, could not go back. Back where? She couldn't remember. She couldn't even make sense of those thoughts. There were still so many gaps in her memory.

The congregation filed out of the chapel, and men grabbed hold of their wives and children, heading in the opposite direction. Arlyn felt a tremor run down Daegal's side, and she pressed closer to him. Again the urge to flee her body ate at her conscience.

The raiders slowed as they neared. Villagers ran for cover, some hiding behind wagons, other retreated to their homes. Then the raiders lined up one behind the other and streamed forward. When they passed the chapel, the raiders separated, fanning over the village, felling hapless souls with swords as the people ran, tried to hide. They crisscrossed the village, stabbing the hearts of men, women, and children alike. Arlyn shrank back into Daegal's arms, but she felt no protection in them.

Daegal grabbed Arlyn's hand, leading her away from the main of the village, but there were raiders behind

them as well. It was no use, they couldn't escape without being chased down.

Arlyn felt her husband's hand shake with fear. Daegal turned one way, then spun around in another. One of the raiders was heading directly for them.

Bloody corpses lay like abused, abandoned dolls and injured people screamed. Two raiders herded the frightened spectators to the center of the village, while the other ten raiders checked bodies for signs of life. Swords brought death to the wounded.

One of the raiders grabbed hold of Arlyn, ripping her from her husband's grasp, and gesturing with a jerk of his head for Daegal to follow. They lined up the trembling survivors, shoulder to shoulder, and one of the raiders bade the people to kneel. Those who hesitated were forcefully shoved down onto the dirt.

Leisurely, the raiders circled them, and Arlyn sensed what was going to happen next. She gazed down at the boot prints in front of her as the men carved runic symbols into the dirt, and then she closed her eyes. The ritual seemed so familiar. As they spoke the incantations, Arlyn felt her lips moving in unison, then she pulled her lips into a thin line.

Arlyn tried not to think of Daegal beside her, tried not to think about...about what? She'd been through this before, but Arlyn had no time to contemplate further. Instead, she concentrated on what she had to do. With an effort, she cleared her mind of fear, of the desire to be a whole person, of the disappointment in not achieving that goal, of her anguish over Daegal. Slowly, she drifted from her body, easing away from it until she found herself looking down on the pitiful scene.

The raiders stood with eyes closed, their mental powers forcing the villagers into a helpless trance. Arlyn resisted their mental probing, the spells they had drawn into the dirt, the incantations they chanted.

She invisibly eased back as hunger gnawed at her. The rising human souls called to her like a warm repast. Flee! She knew she must get away before succumbing to her other side. But as Arlyn tried to head for the nearby woods, something dark and hungry turned inside her, pulled at her to return to the villagers. The farther Arlyn got, the greater the need to return became. By the time she forced herself behind a nearby tree, she felt her resolve begin to crumble. She needed to feed, feed the thing that prevented her from being a normal person.

“This body is empty!” she heard a voice yell. She could feel the raiders frustration and confusion. Would they search her out, find her helpless against her hunger, unable to resist temptation?

No, she would not succumb to her base desires. One day, even if it meant her death, she would be whole.

“How can this be, a woman with no life energy?”

The voice sounded strangely familiar.

“Kill the body, then,” said another. “And let’s be on our way.”

No! Arlyn fought the urge to rush them, to push them back and dive into the young woman she had been. What would become of her if they killed the body? She would have to resort to... to what? Images and blurred memories danced in her mind.

“Wait,” said one of the others. “She must be one of us.”

“Doesn’t matter much anyway,” said the first. “We have what we need.”

One of their own? Arlyn’s mind screamed in protest; she could not be one of them. She would not return. Return to what, to who? Whatever it took, she would not be one of them.

At the sound of the air raiders’ engines, Arlyn felt a tug, a yearning to follow them, but she resisted, waiting until the sound had completely vanished. Weak and fatigued from a hunger that seemed to have been follow-

ing her for centuries, Arlyn drifted back to the carnage that was now her village. Bloodied corpses lay motionless, the villagers who had been ordered to kneel were as still as the air itself. Arlyn hovered over the female body she had occupied. Now she must return. Now—or never.

She glanced at Daegal, his staring, lifeless eyes, and then pressed herself against the body that had housed her for...how long had it been? She couldn't remember any more.

Tired. Drained. Defeated. The body offered no resistance as she slipped back into place and let fatigue take over. For now, among the corpses, the murdered, she would rest.



Raynor stopped short as he stepped out of the cluster of trees and saw the village. He should have sensed it miles back. He had not. The only explanation could be Purloin Bane. He was too late.

Leaving his horse to feed on the lush growth in the open field, Raynor cursed Garrick and his Skall. Slain corpses silently greeted him first, then the sight he abhorred most: A dozen or so villagers kneeling in a row, their faces blank, their eyes staring ahead at nothing, hands folded neatly in front of them. He kicked at the runic symbols encircling them. He wandered if any of the villagers were missing, if a few of these people were now hosts to the vile creatures.

Passing an open hand before a young man's face confirmed the Purloin Bane had fed upon these people's memories, their thoughts, their emotions, and their souls. He sighed and rubbed his forehead, lost in frustration and hatred. Suddenly, a ripple scored Raynor's distress, a stirring that drew him down the line of people. He eyed the empty expressions, confused by the vibration of life he sensed. Never had anyone survived

Purloin Bane, yet he detected a consciousness not his own. It couldn't be. Yet...He knelt before a young woman, only now noticing that, unlike the others, her eyes were closed.

Her lids fluttered, blinking up at him in rapid succession. He saw and sensed her fear as she focused green eyes on him. Within his chest he felt her pounding heart; he felt her legs and arms trembling within his own limbs.

"By the Goddesses, you are intact," he exclaimed.

She snapped her eyes shut. Raynor felt her fading, felt her struggling out of his consciousness. A shield? No, something else.

He grabbed her arms and squeezed gently. "Please, I won't hurt you."

Her eyes remained closed, but she filled his senses again, her fear fluttering in his mind like a frantic butterfly in a storm.

"Tell me how you survived when the others did not?" He shot a quick glance again at the runic symbols he had smeared. How had she resisted the spells drawn before and the mental force of the Skall. He allowed himself a feeble grin, knowing one of Garrick's Skall had ridden away empty, frustrated, and probably furious. "Have you some kind of mental powers?"

She gazed up at him, frowning with uncertainty.

Raynor smiled to reassure her. "Where I come from people are revered for such talents. Please, tell me how you escaped the Purloin Bane?"

"You mean the mental force they used to take the souls of these people?"

"Yes," he said.

"I..." She balled the dirty cloth of her brown skirt and twisted it with trembling fingers.

"It's safe to tell me. What you have is a gift, not a curse. Please continue."

She replied in a soft voice, barely audible. "I fled."

“Yet, here you sit with the others.” Raynor gently pried the linen from her hands and laid her palm over his, extending his relief to her as best he knew how. The fearful pounding in his chest eased as her confidence in him grew. “You fled from them as you were going to flee from me?”

“Yes.”

“How did you escape the Skall?”

She shot a glance at the others. “They would have had me burned if they’d known what I can do. They’d call me a witch.”

“I will not, and they can no longer accuse you of anything. Please, tell me how you fled.”

She blinked, then said, “I can leave my body at will.” She paused, watching him closely. Raynor nodded. “They lined us up here, and one by one entered the people’s minds. So, I left my body, flew into the woods, and waited. When I returned, I found you looking down at me.”

Raynor smiled and patted her hand. “Twas the right thing you did. Can you go wherever you wish at will?”

She nodded tentatively. “I can, but only for short periods.”

“Those creatures who came and took the minds of your people must be found and stopped, but because of my inadequacies they have eluded me. Will you help a man of need?”

The woman nodded so faintly Raynor almost missed the gesture. He felt the hands in his begin to warm as he pulled the woman to her feet when he rose. The lacing down her gown’s bodice strained against the swelling beneath, and her skirts did little to hide her shapely hips. The frayed, dirty skirt hem barely concealed her knees, exposing slightly muscled calves.

“What is your name?”

“I am Arlyn, wife to Daegal.” She cast a pain-filled glance at the man beside her, and then brought her green eyes back to Raynor.

Gently, Raynor lifted her chin with the knuckle of his index finger. “You are safe with me. Come now.” He noted the woman followed him without as much as a backward glance, but who would want to look upon that carnage again?

His horse still nibbled at the lush growth. Raynor took his water skin from his saddlebags, filled it with fresh water from the stream, and handed it to Arlyn. As she drank long and hard, he wondered how long she had been kneeling in the dirt under the warmth of the setting sun. “I have people waiting, but ‘twill be in the thick of night before we reach them,” he said as Arlyn handed back the canteen and wiped the water from her chin.

He readied his horse, mounted, and then pulled Arlyn up behind him. “Sleep if you must, Arlyn.”



Through a maze of scattered images and a thousand different faces came the pungent aroma of smoke, the sound of a crackling fire. A corpse, charred and dangling, danced before Arlyn’s eyes, then another burnt body, and another, but with each came disparate spectators, varied settings, the sound of foreign languages. The grisly scenes changed from one to the next, until her mind spun with the horror of so much disregard for life. Then raiders charged her. Next, she rode beside them, laughing as they laughed, cavorting as though she were one of them. A twig snapped; Arlyn sat forward.

“All is well now, Arlyn.”

At the sound of that familiar voice, Arlyn forced her heavy lids open and found Raynor’s concerned face, a

full moon glowing at his back, his right side bathed in the orange light of a campfire.

“Twas just a dream,” he told her, but Arlyn knew better.

She pushed aside the blanket that had been draped over her. When Raynor stepped aside, Arlyn found herself staring into the dark eyes of a man across the fire. Everything about him was dark: his skin, his black hair, but the beaded headband that held it away from his wide, bronze cheekbones was colorful.

“Arlyn, this is Yuma,” Raynor said, gesturing to the man. The sleeves and sides of his leather trousers were fringed. “He is a healer. He is also a history reader.” Raynor sat on a nearby boulder. “We’ve only just arrived, so I’ve not yet had the chance to tell him who you are.”

Arlyn hoped he did not intend for her to explain, for she was no one, only a woman who wished to be something that seemed forever out of her reach.

“Yuma, I have here a survivor of the Purloin Bane.”

An expression of surprise briefly passed over Yuma’s features, but he covered his alarm with a look of stone. “A survivor? This woman?”

As his dark eyes focused on Arlyn, she felt his attention curl around her as though he had enclosed her in his arms. The gentle touch possessed a firm control of command. Arlyn pushed back with her mind, controlling her face so the two men would not suspect her sensitivity.

“Yes,” said Raynor. “Her name is Arlyn. She has been blessed with the ability to soul travel.” He smiled at Arlyn.

That invisible force holding Arlyn grew warmer yet. Those dark eyes did not merely study her; they probed, looking into her instead of at her. Arlyn tried to look away, managed only to get her gaze as far as the turquoise feather shifting restlessly at his earlobe. She felt

anger bubbling inside her at the intrusion. How long had it been since she sensed someone trying to read her mind? She couldn't recall.

"Yuma, you're frightening Arlyn with that solemn face of yours." Raynor leaned over and patted Arlyn's hand, but the gesture did little to lessen her unease. Yuma still mentally held her. She still pushed back.

Whatever information his mind had retrieved, the invisible arms fell away. Arlyn willingly met Yuma's eyes then and found a slight smile tilting the corners of his lips.

Raynor looked back and forth between the two. He laughed. "You see, Arlyn, he is not so frightful after all."

She forced a smile.

Feminine laughter snapped Arlyn's attention away from Yuma to a woman sitting on a log nearby. She wore snug fitting trousers, a broadsword at her side, a dagger, strapped to her knee-high riding boots.

"This is Rhianon," said Raynor. "She has many talents. Above all she is a Shielder, but she also serves us as woman-at-arms, a guide, and she has the unique aptitude for communicating with animals. She is the best falconer I've ever had." He pointed upwards at the tree behind her.

A hawk stared at Arlyn, its gold eyes as discerning as Yuma's dark eyes. She met Rhianon's gaze, saw something familiar in the woman's eyes, something she could not bring into focus. "You can talk to animals?"

"And they talk to me," the woman said, no friendliness in her voice or expression. "So you survived Purloin Bane, did you? Most likely they found you unsuitable and chose not to take you."

"Perhaps," said Raynor, "but they did not kill her or leave her an empty shell. Neither in my lifetime nor my father's has anyone survived Purloin Bane."

"No," Rhianon agreed. She squinted at Arlyn as though suspecting foul play. "So you left your body."

That does not explain why they didn't rip you free from your body, or why the spell didn't guarantee their success in consuming your life energy. Being in energy-soul form should have made you more vulnerable."

A shiver of fear slipped down Arlyn's spine. This woman understood too much.

"That would seem so," Raynor said, "but I didn't detect her life force until she returned to her body. It appears she is undetectable in her energy-soul form."

Rhianon's scowl deepened. Yuma rubbed his chin, a half-tilt to his lips. Raynor also visibly pondered the matter, staring into the fire. Arlyn shifted, uncomfortably under the scrutiny.

"At any rate," Raynor said, breaking the tense silence, "we should sleep well tonight, for we've a long ride back to the castle on the morrow."

Yuma rose first and methodically pushed dirt over the burning embers of the dying fire. Arlyn stared at what few stars shone through the bright light of the full moon. Leaving her body had exhausted her, but now, sleep eluded her.

Arlyn was still wide-awake when Yuma rose and strolled into a thicket of bushes. Next Raynor went, and lastly Rhianon awakened.

She stretched her long limbs. "You would do well to take your privy in the trees as well."

Arlyn took Rhianon's advice. When she returned, Rhianon was packing her saddle bag, and Raynor and Yuma packed the blankets, and then sat, waiting for a kettle of water to boil.

"I trust you slept well, Arlyn?" Raynor's smile was welcoming.

Arlyn nodded, taking pains to tread a wide path around Rhianon and her bird to the fireside. As she knelt and tucked her skirts beneath her, she felt Yuma's gaze tickling her mind with warm invisible fingers. She scowled at him, and then stared at the rekindled fire

and kettle, watching as steam began to rise. She would need to be on guard with him, always.

“Twill be a long ride today,” Raynor went on. “If you’ve a need to nap from time to time no one here will take offense. We understand what you had to endure yesterday, and you’ve our deepest sympathies.”

Arlyn believed Raynor spoke from the heart, but she doubted his companions shared his sympathies. “What of my village?”

“I’ll send men back to bury your loved ones as befits them. Christ’s People they were?”

She nodded.

“Rest assured then, your people will have a proper Christ’s People burial.”

“You sound as though you belong to another religion?”

“We, the Endowed,” said Raynor, “belong to many disparate beliefs. I have sworn my oath to the goddesses Oasis and Nervauna; Rhianon calls herself an atheist, and Yuma gives his allegiance to the forces of our native, albeit distant world Earth. Of the Endowed there are Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, People of the Trigods, to name only a few. The point is, we have one thing in common: We are gifted with powers of the mind of varying degrees and types, and we respect the beliefs of others and tolerate any religious denomination.”

Something about what Raynor said seemed familiar, yet all Arlyn could bring to mind was the recent past, the religious beliefs of the people in her village. “My people believed that all who have such powers, all people who are not Christ fearing people have been spawned by the Devil himself.” Arlyn tore off a piece of bread from the loaf Raynor passed her.

“Tis why we’re having such a hellish time uniting everyone against Garrick and his evil Skall,” Raynor replied. “If only the districts would set aside their religious beliefs and cull their anger into one force. We

could end the Purloin Bane forever.” Raynor’s expression darkened. “I promise you, Arlyn, your husband’s death will be avenged when I get my hands on those bastards.”

Arlyn swallowed the bread with difficulty. It sat with the weight of lead in her stomach despite her hunger. She had not thought directly of Daegal since Raynor had found her. This lack of mourning, of anguish she should be feeling, what Raynor assumed she was feeling, was disturbing. Normalcy seemed to be slipping even farther from her grasp. Emotions continued to be difficult for her to feel and express.

Meeting Raynor’s eyes, Arlyn saw the blue of the sky, the pureness of soul, the goodness of heart, very similar to Daegal. “I thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking me away, seeing to my husband’s burial.”

“No need to thank me, Arlyn. ‘Tis enough you managed to survive those evil bandits. You give me hope that the impossible is possible, and one day I will make mortals of Garrick and his filthy Skall and end their wickedness for good.” He drained the last of his tea. “Drink this brew Yuma has concocted for us, and then we shall head for home.”

I want to be moral, Arlyn thought. It was one of those thoughts that brought a sick feeling to her stomach, and clenched at her heart. “What brought you to our village?”

Raynor fingered the scrolled designs on his cup as he spoke. “We have just come from speaking with Bishop Donough. We warned him about the Skall and their leader Garrick. We imparted the need for all humans to ban together into one massive force. Alas, he called us the Devils’ servants and would hear none of our pleading. Needless to say, he would allow us none of his soldiers. His Christ’s People, he says, can fight off the Skall with their prayers.”

Raynor rose and finished the last of his bread. Hatred slid off Raynor's voice, and he took a gentler note with her. "Come now. Let us be on our way."

Rhianon wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and then handed the cup to Yuma. "We're taking this woman to Dembvey village?"

"No," said Raynor. "I said home, to the castle."

Rhianon cast Arlyn a venomous look. "You'll let her live there, knowing nothing of her past?"

Something in the woman's voice, the look in her eye sent of flurry of female faces flashing in Arlyn's mind, but who they were, she had no idea. She pushed the images back, and focused back on Raynor.

"I know she survived Purloin Bane," he was saying, looking Rhianon in the eye, his expression as implacable as his tone. "For now that is enough." He scanned the treetops until he spied Rhianon's hawk. "Send that bird back to the castle with a missive for Kerr and Tierney to travel to Bishop Donough's and inform him of what's happened here in his province. Perhaps between Kerr's civil persuasion and Tierney's undying charm, we'll get some results."

After writing a brief note, Rhianon rolled it, held the paper aloft, and grinned when her hawk swooped down, grasped the missive with sharp talons and set off to the castle. "He'll return to me before nightfall."

"Then let's be on our way."

No more was said, but Arlyn knew she had not heard the last of Rhianon's disapproval. She also suspected Yuma was none too happy with the arrangement either, for his scowl was deep and his lips were pulled tight as he mounted and rode ahead of them.