

TETHERED
SPIRITS

T. A. HERNANDEZ



*This book contains varying degrees of the following:
Mild language, violence, depictions of death, references to self-harm and
suicidal ideation, exploration of trauma and mental illness, discrimination,
torture, imprisonment, terminal illness. Please read safely and responsibly.*

TETHERED SPIRITS

Copyright © 2021 by T. A. Hernandez

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means without the express written consent of the copyright holder, except in the case of brief quotations for the purpose of reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

The Sanita Street Publishing name, imprint, and logo are trademarks of Sanita Street Publishing

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, companies, events, institutions, or locales is completely coincidental.

Cover art and design by T. A. Hernandez

ISBN: -



PART I

THE MAN WHO
COULD NOT DIE





AMAR

WHAT DID SHE WANT WITH US?

Amar dipped his quill into the small pot of ink at his side and let his gaze drift across the pages of the journal in his lap. The pale light of dawn and the dying embers of a campfire illuminated his hastily scrawled words, and he read them over again. Even after pouring all his thoughts onto paper, and even though he'd pondered the question ceaselessly in the four days since the altercation, he was no closer to finding answers.

He scowled and swept his shaggy black hair away from his eyes. What *had* the Visan girl wanted with them? She'd attacked out of nowhere, without provocation, and all he had for clues were the memories of her face and the fight that had followed.

And, of course, the fact that she was a Tarja, which was especially unusual considering there were no natural born Tarja among the Visan people—at least, not as far as Amar knew. She must have formed a Bond then, sharing her life with the spirit of a dead Tarja in order to gain magical power. It wasn't a common practice, but seemed the only explanation for her magic, given her heritage.

But then, that detail was also an assumption. She looked Visan and wore Visan clothing, but she might have had some Kavoran or Atrean blood as well.

None of that provided any clear motive for her assault, though. She hadn't even seemed angry that night, just single-minded in her focus. Amar had no idea who she was, and Mitul and Saya hadn't recognized her, either. But if she didn't have some kind of personal vendetta against any of them, why had she attacked?

He glanced across the remains of the campfire. Mitul and Saya lay on the ground a few paces apart from each other, their breaths slow and even in sleep.

He should probably wake them. The dull light of morning was already seeping into the sky behind the greenery of the forest, and Saya would be impatient to get moving.

A fond warmth spread through Amar's chest as he watched the young warrior sleep. If not for her, he might have been taken captive that night. Their assailant had cornered him in a cave where they'd taken shelter from the rain, trapping him inside some sort of magical barrier. Mitul had never been much of a fighter, and it was only because of Saya's quick reaction to the attack that Amar had been able to break free. Together, they'd driven away the Visan girl, but it had been a hard fight. They were lucky no one had been hurt—or killed.

The thought sent a shiver down his spine. He picked up his quill again and set it to the page.

I have to protect them.

After all, neither of them would even be here if not for him.

Maybe that was it. He frowned at the line above the words he'd just written.

What did she want with us?

Us. What if it wasn't about *all* of them, though? What if it was only about *him*? What if the Visan girl, like Saya, had only tracked them down because of what Amar was?

It sounded a little egotistical...but maybe not. Saya had tracked him down after hearing about his unusual condition—something she thought might be useful, once they learned more about it. What if the Visan girl had the same idea? She *had* gone after Amar first that night, trapping him in that barrier like she was trying to take him prisoner.

What did she want with us? Amar jotted down two more words. *With me?*

Across the campfire, there was a shuffling in the grass as Saya stirred and sat up. Amar corked his bottle of ink and stored it, the quill, and the journal back inside his pack.

Saya frowned up at the rosy dawn sky, then turned her golden-eyed gaze on him. "You didn't wake me to take my watch."

He shrugged. "I wasn't tired."

"I don't believe you."

Amar put some more kindling on the glowing embers. He coaxed the fire back to a low blaze while Saya shook Mitul awake.

"Morning already?" Mitul said, sitting up. He yawned and twisted his neck until it cracked, then combed his fingers through his long graying hair and beard. The creases at the corners of his eyes deepened as he smiled at Amar. "Sleep well?"

"Not with you snoring all night," Amar replied with mock gruffness.

“Ha! You’re one to talk,” Mitul shot back. “Your snores were as loud as a roaring tiger during my watch. I was relieved to wake you so I didn’t have to listen to it anymore.”

Amar flicked a chunk of bark from the forest floor at Mitul’s chest, but it hit Saya instead. She sighed and muttered something under her breath in her native tongue, then stood and began packing up her belongings. Mitul followed suit. Amar, already packed, started to reheat last night’s rice and lentils over the coals for their breakfast.

“Your haseph markings are looking pretty faded,” Mitul said to Saya. “Thought you might want to know before we reach Tarsi.”

“Thanks.” She took a small bone container from her pack, sat cross-legged in front of the fire, and opened it. Inside was a layer of an earthy red paint roughly the same consistency as clay. Saya wet her fingers with some water from her canteen and dipped them into the pigment, mixing it until she was satisfied. Then she swept her long brown hair behind her shoulders and raised a single index finger to her face. With practiced precision, she traced over the blotchy remnants of the lines already there.

“Better?” she asked, turning her face toward Mitul and Amar. The familiar, deep red markings were stark against her bronze skin—two lines below her right eye, a half-circle curving around her left, and another straight line down the center of her chin.

“Better,” Mitul said. Amar nodded his agreement.

“How much farther is Tarsi, anyway?” Saya asked.

“Not far.” Mitul picked up his saraj and cradled it lovingly in his arms. He began to softly pluck at the seven strings over its rounded body. Rich, fluid notes filled the air as he slid his fingers down the neck of the instrument. “We should be there this afternoon.”

“And how confident are we that this Tamaya will have the information we need?”

“Very,” Mitul said with a grin. “This is the most promising lead we’ve had in a long time. Don’t you think, Amar?”

“I guess.”

“Oh, come on. You have to be more excited about it than that. Good fortune won’t find you on its own unless you send that hope out into the world. Believe in the possibilities!”

Amar only grunted in response. Mitul was always spouting off poetic nonsense like that. It would have been unbearably obnoxious, except that he genuinely meant it. His optimism was usually enough to pull Amar out of his more cynical thoughts, but not today. Today, his stomach was a mess of knotted

coils, the same way it always was whenever they met a Tarja from the ever-growing list of names in his journal. Even if he'd shared Mitul's beliefs about sending hope and positivity into the world, it wouldn't have made a difference. He didn't have much hope left to give.

But he couldn't tell either of his friends that. Not when they both still depended so much on the promises of that hope.

He took the food off the fire and divided it onto three copper plates Saya held out. She took one for herself and carried a second to Mitul. He set down his saraj to eat, and in the silence left without his music, the knots in Amar's stomach only tightened further. He tried to distract himself with his own breakfast, but his appetite was already gone. After all the dead-end leads they'd already chased down, he wasn't sure he could take another disappointment.

Still, it wasn't like he had any better options. He could keep up the chase and hold onto the belief that Tamaya or some other Tarja could tell him what he needed to know, or he could resign himself to an eternity of confusion and struggle and loss.

Faced with such a bleak alternative, he had to keep going, even if he no longer held anything more than the faintest flicker of hope.



They arrived in Tarsi that afternoon, a small but busy city carved out of the forest, where commerce thrived and traders often stopped to barter with local merchants. They immediately went in search of Tamaya, but hours later, they were still no closer to their goal. No one seemed to know where she lived, or if they did, they wouldn't say. Most people refused to even talk to them, not if they weren't buying something. The answer to such a simple question should have been free, as far as Amar was concerned.

A headache pulsed between his temples as he led the others to the end of the crowded market street. The shouts of merchants hawking their wares and buyers negotiating for better prices still echoed in his ears, but at least here, the noise was subdued enough that he could hear himself think. It was a sweltering hot day typical of Kavoran summers, and Amar's arms felt heavy as he lifted them to wipe sweat from his brow. The shade of a nearby building offered little respite from the heat, but at least it was something.

"Where to next?" Mitul asked, his voice as chipper as ever.

Amar sighed. They were getting nowhere like this, and as annoyed as he was by the idea of paying for information, maybe that was what was required to get this over with. The trick would be to pay as little as possible.

A trio of laughing boys darted past, and Amar's hand shot out to grab the last one by the shoulder. Ignoring the uneasy look Mitul gave him, he spun the

boy around and fished a single brass jitaara out of his pocket. He held the coin up so it gleamed in the sun. "Want it?"

The boy's eyes went as round as the coin. He glanced over at his friends, who were watching from a safe distance.

Amar loosened his grip on the boy's shoulder and rotated the coin in his fingers. "Well?"

After another moment's hesitation, the boy nodded.

"Good. I'm looking for a Tarja woman. Tamaya Takhar. Can you tell me where she lives?"

Round eyes widened even further, and the boy shook his head.

"Why not?" Amar's voice came out in a deeper growl than he'd intended, and the boy took half a step back, as if he were afraid.

"I'm so sorry." Mitul flashed an apologetic smile. He put a hand on Amar's wrist and shot him a pointed look. Amar shrugged and backed away. If Mitul really thought he could do a better job of getting the information they needed, let him try.

Mitul crouched down so he was eye level with the boy. He held his hand over his shoulder until Amar dropped the coin into it. And then, without even making the boy answer the question, Mitul pressed the money into his tiny palm. Amar swallowed the protests beginning to form in his mouth. Now the kid was going to run off, and they'd have nothing to show for the coin they'd given him.

But the boy only stared at the coin, his mouth hanging open. In a city like Tarsi, it was probably the first time anyone besides his parents had ever done him a kindness without expecting anything in return. His little brows furrowed as he shifted his gaze back to Mitul.

Mitul smiled at him with the same genuine warmth that seemed to charm everyone he'd ever met. "It's very important that we speak to Tamaya," he said. "No one else here has been able to help us, but you look like a responsible, helpful child. Would you please be so kind as to tell us where we can find her?"

Again, the boy glanced at his friends, but they stayed where they were, cautious and silent. At last, he said, "She doesn't like us talking to outsiders about her."

"Ah, I see," Mitul said. "Well, we wouldn't want to upset her, but it really is very important that we find her. We wouldn't even have to say it was you who told us. You wouldn't be in any trouble."

"I can't," said the boy, then sheepishly added, "I don't even really know where she lives."

"You don't know which house is hers?"

He shook his head. "It's not here. It's far, I think. In the woods somewhere."

“That’s very helpful, thank you. Do you know anyone else who could tell us where to find her?”

The boy cocked his head to one side, thinking.

Amar crossed his arms. This was a waste of time. The child clearly didn’t know anything useful. Most likely, he was just trying to come up with a way to get another coin from them. From all Amar had seen, everyone in Tarsi was more concerned with their own prosperity than they were with basic courtesy.

“I know someone!” the boy said, a gap-toothed smile splitting across his face. “Come on, I’ll take you to her.”

He darted away, into the crowded market street. His friends bolted after him, and with a sigh, Amar followed. He kept a close eye on the boy’s yellow cap as he wove between the people crowding around stalls and carrying baskets full of newly purchased goods.

Amar nearly lost him around a corner, but he caught a glimpse of one of the boy’s friends squeezing through a narrow side street and chased after them. He wasn’t sure if Mitul and Saya were even still behind him, but if they couldn’t keep up, he’d find them later.

After a few more quick turns around wood and thatched-roof houses crammed together, the boy and his friends abruptly halted in front of a two-story structure with a sign over the door that marked it as an inn. A small pen and shelter for animals was attached to the side of the building, and a few goats and several chickens wandered the area. A bent figure crouched underneath the low shelter, gathering eggs from a small coop into the basket at her feet.

“What are we doing here?” Saya asked as she and Mitul came to rest beside Amar.

He shrugged. The boys approached the fence and called to the person inside the pen. “Kesari!”

“Is that you, Pujit?” She twisted around and smiled at the children, hazel eyes gleaming in the sun. Black hair hung around her face in thick waves that landed in jagged edges against her shoulders. She couldn’t have been older than fifteen or sixteen, and her voice carried a faint accent. Atrean, maybe, though she looked as Kavoran as Amar with her inky hair and brown skin a few shades lighter than his own. The heavy frock coat she wore certainly seemed to be of Atrean make, though it was absurd for anyone to be wearing such a garment in this heat.

“I hope you’re not here to distract me again,” the girl went on. “Your mother still hasn’t forgiven me for—” Her gaze shifted to Amar and the others, and she stood up quickly. “Oh, you brought company. I’m so sorry. If you’ll follow me inside, I can fetch the hostess for you.”

Pujit laughed. “They’re not here for a room, Kesari.”

The girl raised an eyebrow and bent to brush the dirt off her knees. A lantern hanging from her coat swung forward as she did so, causing the flames inside to ripple and flutter.

Amar frowned. What kind of person carried a lit lantern in broad daylight?

“They’re looking for Tamaya,” one of the other boys said.

Pujit nodded and flashed the coin Mitul had given him. “And they gave us money. Maybe they’ll give you money, if you help them.”

Amar let out a huff. It always came down to money, and they were running short on it as it was.

“Well in that case, I thank you for bringing them to me,” Kesari said. She reached deep into her pocket and pulled out a small pouch that jangled when she shook it. She plucked out a single brass coin for each boy and handed them over one by one. She ruffled Pujit’s hair as his fingers closed around the money. “Run along, then. Go buy yourselves something yummy.”

Chattering delightedly amongst themselves, the three boys headed back to the market street with their prizes clutched in tight fists.

“So,” Kesari said, returning her attention to Amar and the others. “You’re looking for Tamaya?”

“We’ve been looking for her all day,” Amar grumbled. “No one here will tell us anything.”

She stooped to pick up her basket of eggs. “She doesn’t like to be disturbed, and the locals don’t like to get on her bad side.”

“Why?” Mitul asked. “Are they afraid of her or something?”

“Sort of. She’s easily the most powerful Tarja in this region, and one of the most powerful healers in all of Kavora. Someone whose good graces you want to remain in, especially if you might need a favor from her someday.”

“But you can help us find her?” Saya said.

“For a price.”

Saya’s lips pressed together in a thin smile. “Of course.”

Kesari shrugged. “A girl has to put a roof over her head and food in her belly somehow.”

“And you’re not worried about getting on Tamaya’s bad side?” Amar asked. “Everyone else seems to be. Why not you?”

“Oh, I’m not from here,” Kesari said. “Just a traveler passing through, like you.”

“Then how do you know where she lives?”

Kesari shrugged. “I’m persistent. It took some time, but I found her home. I’ve made the trip there several times now.”

Amar reached for his coin pouch. “How much do you want? Tell us where

she lives, and we'll be on our way."

"It's better if I take you. Make sure you find it all right."

"Fine," he replied shortly. Maybe he shouldn't be so quick to trust a stranger—especially one as odd as this girl—but they'd wasted enough time already. "How much?"

"Twenty jitaara."

Amar bit back a retort about extortion and counted out the coins. It was nearly everything he had left, and Mitul and Saya didn't have much more. With a grudging twist in his stomach, he dropped them into Kesari's waiting palm. "Lead the way."



ALEIDA

IT WAS NEARLY SUNSET BY THE TIME ALEIDA AND VALKYRA RODE INTO Tarsi. Despite this, the market street was still noisy and crowded as vendors called out reduced prices and promises of quality in an attempt to make a little more coin before nightfall. Aleida slowed her horse from a gallop to a walk and patted his sweat-dampened neck. “Good boy. We made it.”

The horse only let out a soft snort in response, probably too tired to do much else. Aleida slid off his back and wrapped the reins around her hands. She’d pushed him hard this afternoon, hoping to reach Tarsi before nightfall. Her quarry couldn’t be too far.

All they had to do now was find him in the teeming mass of people that packed the street ahead.

“Where should we look?” she asked Valkyra.

The small, furry dragon pulled her tiny claws free from the shoulder of Aleida’s tunic, where they’d dug in to allow her to maintain her perch even with the horse’s jostling strides. She uncoiled her tail from around the base of Aleida’s neck and stretched her white, silky body before responding. “Start asking around. Maybe one of the vendors saw them earlier.”

Aleida squeezed her way into the crowd with the horse following along behind her. He was easily the largest animal in the market, and their passing disrupted the natural flow of foot traffic. More than a few people cast irritated glances in their direction. Several times, their expressions only darkened further when they saw who was leading the horse.

“No shame, dear,” Valkyra whispered in her ear. “Not for them.”

“Not for anyone,” Aleida finished.

She held her head higher and set her mouth in a firm line. Let them stare.

Let them take in the sight of her ash brown hair and pale blue eyes shining against even paler skin—features that immediately marked her as Visan. Features that so often drew confusion and even hatred into the gazes of the Kavorans around her. But she could handle their stares along with their judgments, so let them judge.

No shame.

Besides, the fact that foreigners were a rarity here could work to her advantage. The things that made Aleida stand out in Tarsi were the very same things that would make her quarry stand out, too. The man who couldn't die had the same black hair and deep brown skin as these people, as did the musician. But their other companion, a Sularan warrior, was as much an outsider here as Aleida and would have drawn just as much attention.

A stern-faced old woman met Aleida's gaze for a moment before shifting her attention back to her work. Chickens squawked in cages lining the wall behind the woman. Others hung by their necks from the top of the stall, already plucked and ready for cooking. The smell of blood pressed against Aleida's nostrils as she approached the stall.

"Excuse me," she said to the woman. "I'm looking for some people who may have passed through here. There's a young man and a Sularan woman, both about my age. The Sularan wears red paint on her face. They would have been with an older man, perhaps forty. He carries a saraj."

"I haven't seen anyone like that," the woman replied. She turned around and grabbed a struggling chicken from one of the cages. "Good fortune to you, though, and goodbye."

Her response was so quick and rushed Aleida doubted whether she'd really paid attention. "Please, if you could just think about it for a moment. The older man may have played some music in the street, or—"

"Are you going to buy a chicken?" The woman turned the point of her knife toward Aleida, her other hand still clutching the flapping bird by its legs.

"I—well, no, I only—"

"If you're not going to buy anything, you should leave. Your horse is blocking my stall."

Aleida opened her mouth, but Valkyra's feathery wing brushed against her cheek before she could speak. "Come," the dragon said. "Let's ask elsewhere. There's no sense wasting any more time here."

Aleida shot the woman a parting glare before tugging on the reins and trudging forward.

The other vendors were no more helpful, and some even less so. One man spotted Valkyra and, presumably thinking she was an ordinary pet dragon,

grabbed Aleida by the wrist and led her to the back of his stall where several of the creatures sat in cages. Like Valkyra, they were furred and feathered, with long necks and horns curving gracefully behind their heads, but they were brown and gray and black instead of white. Aleida told the man she didn't have the money to buy one and wasn't interested in breeding hers, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. At least, not until Valkyra bit his finger. Aleida ran from the stall so quickly she almost left her horse behind.

Irritated by this encounter, she continued down the street, repeating her questions with even less patience than before. Everyone she talked to quickly dismissed her. All they seemed to care about was money. Unless her quarry had handed some over to one of them, they'd probably stared right past him and his friends.

The sun sank lower, and Artex painted a sunset of peachy oranges and rosy pinks in the sky. It was gorgeous, the kind of sunset that deserved to be watched and admired until it faded into night, but Aleida didn't have time. So much time had already slipped away from her, and she was still no closer to finding the man who couldn't die. She had to keep going.

Still, she spared a moment to offer a silent prayer to her god. *Please, Artex, help me find them.* As an afterthought, she added, *And thank you for the beauty you're sharing with us this evening.*

"Are you sure you don't want to rest?" Valkyra asked.

"Not yet," Aleida replied.

"You've been pushing yourself so hard these last few days. You must be exhausted."

"I'm fine." She would have to be. And besides, whatever fatigue she felt now was nothing compared to what Tyrus was going through.

"We can always start fresh in the morning. If it turns into another fight, you'll need your strength. We're outnumbered."

"I said I'm *fine*." This was her chance, so close she could almost feel it in her fingertips. She wouldn't let her own weakness be the thing that held her back. For Tyrus' sake, she couldn't afford that.

The merchants were starting to pack up their wares now. If there were any answers to be found here, she was running out of time to find them. She approached the closest man, who was packing fresh vegetables into a handcart. "Can you spare a moment to talk? I'm looking for some people. Maybe you've seen them. There were two men, one about my age and one older. And a Sularan woman with red markings painted on her face."

The man continued his work, not even so much as acknowledging Aleida's presence. This was a waste of time. He wasn't going to tell her anything. She

pulled on the horse's reins, ready to walk away.

"Wait," the man said. He met her gaze for the first time, a greedy glint in his dark eyes. "Nothing in the markets of Tarsi is free, you know. Not even information."

"Are you saying you've seen them?"

The man clicked his tongue and rubbed his thumb and forefinger together like he was holding a coin. Aleida sighed and reached for the small bag under the hem of her tunic. She counted out five jitaara—more than a quarter of the money she had left—and passed the coins over to the man. He counted them quickly and raised an eyebrow as if asking for more, but Aleida stared back at him coldly.

"They were here earlier this afternoon," he said. "Three of them, just as you described—a Sularan woman, a young man of about the same age, and an older man carrying a saraj. They were asking about Tamaya Takhar."

"Who is that?"

"She's the best Tarja in this region. People say she drew all the waters out of the Mayuka River to flood the enemy's camp during the siege of Jakhat."

What could the man she hunted possibly want with such a powerful Tarja? Aleida pushed the question to the back of her mind and voiced a far more important one. "Where can I find Tamaya?"

The man flicked one of the coins Aleida had given him into the air and caught it again. "Seems you're trying to get more information than you paid for now."

Something cold and desperate uncoiled inside Aleida's gut and slithered into her heart. She dropped the horse's reins and took two steps closer to the man. Annoyance flickered in his eyes as she invaded his personal space. He opened his mouth, but Aleida's hand shot out and closed around his throat before he could speak.

A frosty chill rose within her like a tidal wave, and she took a deep breath to quell her anger before channeling *altma*. The magical energy flowed through her Bond with Valkyra and into her limbs, lending her extra strength, which she used to shove the man against his cart. She brought her face to within mere centimeters of his. His eyes were wide, his lip quivered, and his pulse raced beneath her fingertips like a frightened rabbit.

Valkyra's tail lashed back and forth against Aleida's shoulder, and she leaned in to whisper in her ear. "That's it, dear, stay in control."

The man's eyes darted to Valkyra and back to Aleida in sudden understanding. "Your dragon—it's not just...you're Bonded. You're a Tarja."

"Let's try this again," Aleida said evenly. "I asked you a question, and you're going to answer me. Where can I find Tamaya?"

The man sputtered and continued to squirm beneath her grasp. "I can't. She

doesn't like outsiders. If I make her angry, she—"

Aleida drew on more *altma*, this time channeling it into an electric jolt that tingled in her fingertips. It shot out in tiny, blue sparks to shock the merchant. He whimpered in pain, and Aleida's conscience winced, but she didn't heed it. She couldn't afford to, not when she was closing in on her quarry. No shame. No guilt. Not for anyone.

"Right now," she said, "you're making *me* angry. And you don't want that, do you? Tell me where she is."

"East," the man rasped. "Outside the city."

Aleida let go of his throat so he could speak more easily. "Go on."

He coughed a few times. "Follow the road until you cross over the creek. There's a narrow trail that leads up into the hills. When you reach the falls at the top, go east again, through the trees. Her house is in a clearing not too far in. It's a long trek on foot. If you hurry, you might catch up to the people you're looking for before they get there." He looked up at her with pleading eyes. "Tamaya never has to know I sent you."

"If you're lying to me," Aleida hissed, "you'll have bigger problems to worry about than Tamaya." She took hold of the horse's reins, mounted, and wheeled him around to head east. Everyone they passed stared, but now their expressions were full of fear rather than disdain. They backed away and pressed themselves against each other as she rode by.

A gentle whisper brushed against Aleida's conscience. She shouldn't have used her magic to intimidate the man like that. He was only trying to make a living, like anyone else. And for that, she'd hurt him. She'd damaged another one of Artex's most precious creations simply because she'd been too impatient to come to an understanding with him.

We are all children of the Artist, beautiful works created by His hand. It's our duty to treat each other accordingly. Mama's voice, a memory as clear as still water in Aleida's mind.

Guilt floundered in her chest like a fish dragged out of the sea. Torturing a man for any reason wasn't something the girl she used to be would have done. It wasn't something that girl would have even considered. But between the invasion of her homeland, her parents' deaths, Tyrus' illness, this pursuit—somewhere along the way, she'd let it all turn her into a person she barely recognized.

But that was who she'd had to become to survive. The girl she'd been before never would have been able to claw and fight and scrap for not only her own life, but her brother's as well. The girl she'd been before would have given up on saving Tyrus long ago, as soon as the hunt became too difficult. The girl she'd been before would have put all her trust in ideals that offered nothing but vain

hope and quickly shattered comfort to those foolish enough to cling to them. The girl she'd been before was weak, and Aleida hated her.

A small part of her also mourned that girl's passing.

Valkyra shifted on her shoulder, settling back down into a relaxed, sprawling position. Her claws hooked into the fabric of Aleida's shirt. "You handled that situation well. I sensed your anger, but your power was perfectly controlled."

"I scared him."

"Was that not the objective?"

"It was. But I shouldn't have hurt him."

"Oh, my darling, you only did what you had to do." Her voice was as soft and soothing as the fur that brushed against Aleida's cheek. "There's too much at stake to waste time on other people's comfort. You saw the way they looked at you. Do you think he would have hesitated to force answers from you if your roles had been reversed?"

"No."

"Then don't let it trouble you. Focus on what lies ahead. What will you do when you catch up to the man you seek?"

Aleida set her jaw, recalling the disastrous outcome of their fight four nights before. The musician had never been a threat, but she hadn't bargained on going up against a Sularan warrior, and the man who couldn't die was a better fighter than either she or Valkyra had anticipated.

This time would be different, though. This time, she wouldn't give any of them a chance to fight back. "I'll take them by surprise," she said to Valkyra. "And then I'll kill them all."

She urged the horse into a gallop. A short stretch of road and some hills were all that now stood between her and the man who couldn't die. Only once she had used his power to save Tyrus' life would she finally allow herself to rest.

Thank you for reading this preview of Tethered Spirits! If you enjoyed it and would like to continue the story, you can preorder the book now at your favorite online retailer. When you preorder, you can also submit your receipt at tabernandez.com/tethered-spirits for some fun preorder perks, including the first six chapters of the novel and a deleted scene.

Preorder at books2read.com/tethered-spirits