

THE STORYWEAVER SAGA • BOOK 1



THE  
PALE  
PRINCESS

D.K. HOLMBERG

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# THE PALE PRINCESS

THE STORYWEAVER SAGA: BOOK 1

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# CHAPTER I

## LAN

Thunder rumbled through a cloudless sky. Lan Varison glanced up, expecting to see storm clouds rolling in, as they often did at this time of year, but only the bright sun sat overhead.

“That’s not thunder, you dolt.” Sophie elbowed him in the side, drawing his attention back to her.

Though she was younger, her elbow found its way to his ribs, and her deep blue eyes met his almost level. Then she swiveled back to the road, sending her brown hair swinging. A hint of a smile was on her lips.

“What is it, then?”

She elbowed him again. “It’s like you’ve never heard horses before.”

Lan stared along the road, looking for signs of horses, but saw nothing. *Is she teasing me again?* Sophie loved to joke, but he often didn’t understand her jokes. The way her cheek pulled back, twisting the small scar at the corner of her mouth, made it seem unlikely.

“What horses sound like that?” Lan asked.

She twisted her bright orange belt and lifted the end of the fabric to her mouth to chew on it. “Those do,” she whispered.

He squinted. A trail of dust rose along the road, rising into the sky like a cloud. It was faint, barely more than a haze, but she had still seen it.

“That’s from horses?” he asked.

“And a lot of them, from the sound.”

The thundering grew louder, to where Lan could feel it within him. It stirred the dust around him, turning it into something almost alive. Another moment passed, and he noted light glinting off metal.

Lan’s breath caught. Armor.

Something caught his eye even more. A trail of black ran through the armor of the nearest rider. Even without seeing the pattern, he recognized it. This close to the border, everyone in Narith would recognize it by reputation, almost as much as Lan and Sophie would recognize it from the stories Nana told them.

“That would be the Taihg. What are they doing here?” Lan had never seen the elite soldiers of Reyash, and he had never expected to see them this close to their village.

Sophie shot him an annoyed look. “The Taihg wouldn’t have any reason to come through here. The border is leagues away.”

The soldiers approached quickly, so Lan grabbed Sophie and pulled her away from the road. She resisted—she always resisted when he tried to tell her what she should do—but he maintained a firm grip.

They stood off to the side as the soldiers passed. Each soldier sat stiffly in his saddle, sunlight gleaming off the metal. Dark etchings along their chest plates created a familiar pattern that drew his eye, and it was even clearer that they were the Taihg. One of the soldiers glanced over as he passed, but he quickly dismissed them and turned his attention back to the road, heading toward the village.

“Why would they be riding toward Halith?” Sophie whispered.

“They probably aren’t.” Lan watched the riders. They shouldn’t even be here, but then, Narith was a small country with little for defense other than the natural protection formed by the difficult terrain of its borders.

There was something impressive about the way they rode—a ferocity. Some claimed they were gifted with magic, while others claimed the swords they used were enchanted. All recognized the Taihg were practically unstoppable.

Sophie rounded on Lan, placing her hands on her hips in a mimicry of their grandmother. Lan didn't fear Sophie nearly as much as he did his grandmother. She was almost as intimidating as the Taihg.

“There's only our village along the road, Lannerdon. Where else would they be traveling?”

He glared at her. “The village *is* along the road, but there are many other places *beyond* it that the Taihg would more likely visit.”

“I bet they're going to Halith.” She started back along the road, forcing Lan to hurry after her to keep up. With her long strides, she made quick progress.

“You bet?” He arched a brow. “It sounds like you've been spending too much time with Lucan. I'm sure Nana would be thrilled to hear about—” He broke off as she elbowed him again, somehow managing to find a soft spot between his ribs.

“If you tell her anything, I might just have to talk to her about the way you sneak off into the forest and maim that poor tree.”

“You wouldn't!”

She shrugged. “Don't think you can keep your secrets hidden, Lannerdon,” she said, making a point of emphasizing his name even more this time. “I know where you keep that sword hidden, sneaking off with it each night. Where would you get a sword, anyway?”

Lan flushed. “I found it buried in Papa's shed.”

She snorted. “Papa wouldn't have a sword. He's a farmer. Can you imagine Papa attempting to wield a sword?”

Lan shrugged. “There was a time early in the war when everyone had to fight, even farmers. They were called up to



protect Narith on the chance that war spilled over its border.” Thankfully, it hadn’t. “Maybe it is from then. That was—”

“A while ago. I know the stories as well as you.” She looked toward the village in the distance.

From where they stood on the edge of the road, Lan could make out the tops of the nearest buildings, and he saw the trails of smoke rising from chimneys.

“That wasn’t what I was going to say,” Lan said. “That was back when our parents were still alive.”

Sophie’s face clouded. “They weren’t lost in the war.”

“They were. I know you don’t want to believe it, but they died—”

“Trying to get us to safety.”

“Because of the war.”

“You say it like they were fighting. They were running, like so many others. They weren’t like the Taihg. Had they been there...” She sniffed and fell silent, moisture gathering in her eyes.

Lan slipped his arm around her shoulders. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t bring them up.”

She shrugged his arm off. “You *always* bring them up.”

“Trying to pretend they’re not gone doesn’t bring them back,” he said.

She glared at him again. “You don’t think I know that?”

Lan didn’t press. Sophie had always had a harder time dealing with the loss of their parents.

She walked along the road, and Lan followed her, staying quiet.

When they reached Halith, any hope that he might discover what had brought the Taihg through the village faded. There was no sign of the soldiers.

Lan stopped at the edge of the village, staring. Halith was large for a village, having grown over the last decade because

of people moving away from the border, wanting to avoid the war, and away from the larger cities—those felt to be targets—for a quieter life. A safer life. It was what their parents had intended by bringing them back to their home village.

Halith was known for its weaving, though most of the village consisted of local craftsmen and farmers. Lan and Sophie's grandmother led the weavers and had been attempting to teach Sophie, but when weaves didn't go well, she would easily get frustrated and give up. Not Nana. She had incredible patience—at least with weaving. She would stick with the most complicated pattern, working through it until satisfied she had it exactly right. Lan was more like Nana, with her patience, than Papa and his tremendous strength.

“See?” Lan said. “They didn't come to Halith.” Scanning through the village, he didn't see any sign of the Taihg—no trail of dust and no reflection off metal. It was as if the soldiers had vanished. He tried to hide the disappointment on his face.

Sophie shifted her feet as she glanced at him, the small scar on her cheek twitching. “Lan... I'm sorry.”

He shrugged. The soldiers shouldn't have been here, anyway. That they were suggested a kind of danger the village didn't want. It meant the safety of Narith had changed. It meant the war was starting up again.

“I'm going to see where they might have gone,” Lan said.

As he turned, Sophie reached for his arm, and he pulled away quickly, not giving her a chance to stop him. He hurried through the village and didn't turn to see if she followed. Lan doubted she would. When they argued—even over things as minor as this—she rarely bothered to stop him.

The village itself was quiet. It was midday, and the rush of the early morning had passed. The farmers would be working in their fields, trying to complete the harvest and prepare the land for the coming winter. Weavers, like his grandmother, would still be working through the day's project. Others would nearly be through with activities for the day and be readying for the next.

Lan ignored the few familiar faces he encountered, avoiding the annoyed glares he received, typically from those who were close to his age. He and Sophie were given more freedom than most their age. Lan worked with his grandfather often enough, but he only needed so much help. Even though Lan would one day be expected to take over the farm, that wasn't something Lan wanted for himself.

Even with its growth over the years, Halith only had one street running through it, the forest bordering one end and the open plains the other. As he got closer to the forest, the scent of sawdust overpowered the lingering smell of the sweet breads from the bakery and smoked meats at the butcher's shop.

“Lannerdon? Is that you?”

He turned and smiled at Tenar Marlon, who'd been making his way along the road. The owner of the sawmill was an older man. His hands were twisted with age, and he had a milky sheen to his eyes, but he still had a sharp mind and ensured the trade for the lumber went in his favor.

“It's Lan, Master Marlon.”

“Ah, you don't need to call me Master anything. That is, unless you plan to take up my offer.”

Lan smiled at him. “I think Papa would be disappointed if I didn't take over the farm.”

Marlon clapped him on the shoulder, squeezing him briefly. “A shame. You've got the size to do well for me. I think in time I could train you to run it.”

“Not Jarmas?” he asked with a smile. The sawmiller's grandson was about the same age as Lan, though Lan and Jarmas hadn't always gotten along, and he wasn't all that reliable.

“Jarmas could work for you one day. You know how important the sawmill is to Halith.”

Lan had no idea what Halith would be without the sawmill. There were other industries, but none quite as valuable. “I know, Master Marlon.”

“Maybe Jarmas could take over Ilian’s farm.”

The idea of Jarmas working with Papa was too much for Lan to consider. “Papa wants the farm to stay in the family.”

Marlon waved his hand. “I think I might have to have a few words with him the next time we dice.”

“Is that all you do?” Lan asked, smiling.

“Maybe there’s ale to be drunk, but I would never share that with Persepha.”

Lan hid a grin. Nana knew quite well that Papa enjoyed sitting at the tavern and sharing ale with his friends, and she turned a blind eye to it. It was how he heard the gossip, the same as she did with the weavers.

“What are you doing in the village today?” What Lan really wanted was to know if Marlon had seen—or at least heard—anything about the Taihg.

“A meeting,” Marlon said, waving his hand again.

“What kind of meeting?” Lan could imagine him meeting with someone from the Taihg, but then why would they have met with the owner of the sawmill?

“Nothing very exciting, I’m afraid.”

“Have you seen—” He caught himself. Marlon was nearly blind, so he had probably not seen anything.

“You know I haven’t seen well for nearly ten years, Lan. I could use an escort back to the sawmill, if you don’t mind.”

Lan looked all around him before turning back to Marlon, nodding, and holding out his arm to the man. “Of course.” Papa would be disappointed if he didn’t.

“Good. Maybe by the time we get there, I’ll have you convinced to come work with me.”

Lan smiled, and they made pleasant conversation as they strolled through Halith. Every so often, Marlon would pause and speak to people they passed while Lan remained silent. Usually Marlon would recognize people long before they saw him, letting Lan know the man wasn’t nearly as blind as he

made himself out to be. By the time they reached the sawmill, Lan had heard enough about the operation of the business that he thought he could step in and do it—which was likely what Marlon had wanted.

The sawmill was an enormous wooden building standing beside the Ulsa River, which flowed around the edge of Halith. The sawdust was thick enough that Lan coughed as they approached, and sounds of activity came from inside. For all the pressuring Marlon did, Lan had never been inside the sawmill.

“Well, I will be sure to let Ilian and Persepha know how you assisted me today. We’ll talk again soon, I’m sure.”

Lan nodded, and when Marlon disappeared into the side entrance of the sawmill, Lan continued toward the edge of the village, relieved to leave Marlon behind.

When he reached the edge of the forest, he heard rumbling coming from within. Lan peered through the shadows but couldn’t make anything out within them. The sound wasn’t like anything he’d ever heard before. Was it the Taihg returning? The rumble *could* be from their horses. Likely Sophie would know.

The sound came again.

The deep, heavy rumbling sounded something like an animal, but what kind of animal would make a sound like that?

“What are you doing?”

Lan jumped and saw Sophie watching him. “How long have you been there?”

She sniffed. “Long enough to see you staring into the forest. What are you doing?”

He turned his attention away from her and stared into the trees again. At the edge of the forest, they didn’t rise nearly as high as they did deeper in, but they were dense enough to make it difficult to see far in.

“I heard something,” Lan said.

“Why are you here?”

“I walked Master Marlon to the sawmill.”

“I bet he tried to get you to work for him again.”

Lan didn't answer. Sophie loved to harass him, but he wouldn't give her the pleasure of a response.

“What'd you hear?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I don't know. It sounded something like an animal.”

Sophie pushed a strand of her brown hair back from her forehead and grinned at him. A dimple formed in the corner of one cheek when she did, a feature Nana often claimed was one of their mother's. Lan had memories of their mother, but a dimple wasn't part of them.

“You sound like an animal.” She pushed past him and headed into the forest.

“I don't think that's safe. If you'd heard what I did, you wouldn't be going in there.”

She cast a glance over her shoulder, her mouth puckered in a smirk. “I know *you* wouldn't. *I* would.”

“Darish take you, Sophie!” he swore, only earning another edge to her smirk. “What if there's—”

“A boar. That's likely all you heard. We've hunted them enough to know how to bring them down. Besides, Papa would love the meat. Are you afraid of a boar?”

Lan's brow furrowed. “No.” The word came out sounding petulant. As the older brother, he wasn't supposed to sound like that.

“Then come on. Let's see what you heard. It's probably nothing—”

The rumbling came again, this time much closer than before.

Sophie stiffened. “What was that?”

He grunted. “That was what I was telling you about. I don't know what it is. I only know that it's not a boar.”

She turned her attention back to the forest. “We need to find out what it is. Come on.”

Lan didn’t want to follow her into the trees—not seeking whatever made *that* sound—but he couldn’t let Sophie go without him.

When they were no more than a dozen steps into the trees, he saw movement and grabbed for his sister.

She spun. “Lan, what do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m trying to—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish.

There was another rumble, this one followed by a roar. He and Sophie were thrown back as fire exploded around him. Lan slammed into a tree, and his head banged off the trunk, sending him sagging onto the ground.

Lan attempted to look up, but his vision blurred.

Another roar burst from nearby, and heat burned his skin.

Lan reached toward his sister. She was near him, somewhere.

As he searched and found her hand, he squeezed. “Sophie...”

She squeezed back as whatever creature was in the forest roared again.

Lan dropped his head back, bracing for what would come.

# CHAPTER 2

## SOPHIE

Sophie gritted her teeth against the taste of ash. It stank, too, some strange odor she'd never experienced before, but foul enough that she wanted to be away from it.

Her ears rang, and everything felt off.

What had she been thinking, coming into the trees like this? Lan had warned her there was something out in the forest, and she had been too fool-headed to listen. Typical of her. And now they would die. Probably get eaten, too.

The idea of some creature chewing on her motivated her like nothing else. Her body hurt where she'd been tossed into the tree, and she tried to ignore it. Regardless of what Lan said, she *was* strong. She could deal with it.

The stupid rumbling came again.

If it was anything like the last time, there would be an explosion again. What kind of animal did that? None, that was what kind.

Which meant there had to be some other explanation.

They'd seen the Taihg riding through. Could the magical soldiers be responsible? Lan would probably just think them regular soldiers, but Sophie knew better. And they shouldn't have been here. Didn't Narith have peace with Reyash? The Taihg shouldn't be attacking.

Anger boiled up within her, leaving her heart racing and sweat beading on her brow.



Sophie gripped Lan's hand and dragged him back. She wasn't about to let the Taihg grab them. What would Nana and Papa do then? They'd already lost her parents. They wouldn't survive losing her and Lan.

"You have to get *up*," she urged Lan. Why did he have to be so stinking *big*?

"What is it?" Lan's voice was weak. Maybe he was more hurt than she had realized, and she needed to give him a little more time to recover.

The rumbling came again.

*Nope. No time.*

"We have to get going. I don't know what's causing it, but whatever it is, it nearly killed us." *How* was still a mystery.

Her ears continued to ring, making it hard to think. Her head pounded like when Lan had wrestled her to the ground to prove he was stronger. She still had a scar from one of those times.

"Sophie?"

She rounded on him, half expecting to need to drag him away from the forest.

Three strangely dressed people staggered out of the forest. They wore tattered clothing which was far too warm, even for the cool forest. The slender woman leading them had milky skin. She pointed a stick holding a crystal glowing a sickly yellow at them. The other two people stood off to the side, both large enough to subdue even Lan.

"Who are you?" Sophie asked.

"Sophie!" Lan whispered.

She ignored him. If it were up to Lan, they'd run back to the village and likely get blown up anyway. She was going to at least find out who they were.

"Was that you?" she asked when they said nothing.

The woman with the stick—maybe it was a wand, as Nana had told her about crones using wands to work magic—took a

step toward her. The crystal continued to glow, but was the yellow glowing a little brighter? Maybe it was only her imagination.

Sophie studied them a moment. The woman didn't look like a crone from the stories. They were said to have crooked fingers and hooked noses, but they were always powerful with magic. This woman was young enough to be Sophie's mother. Her fingers were straight, and they gripped the stick—wand—lightly, bobbing it in a steady pattern that reminded Sophie of Nana's weaves.

"You aren't supposed to be here." Sophie placed her hands on her hips and refused to step back. Lan stood behind her, stinking of fear, so close the heat from his body made her sweat. She was scared, too, but she wouldn't let these people, or that wand, push her around.

If the crone were going to do magic, she would have done so by now. The crystal might be glowing, but that didn't mean it meant magic. There were plenty of gems that glowed when left in the sunlight. That was what Nana's stories said. This was probably one of them, even if these people *had* come from the shadows of the forest.

"Who are you, child?" The woman hadn't taken another step, but her stick continued to move in the same pattern. The others barely moved, not reaching for either sword or bow.

"I'm Sophie Varison, and these are my woods."

"Sophie!" Lan hissed.

She kicked him. *Like it matters if I share my name with this woman.* Maybe the woman would think she was the daughter of the baron and run off.

"She's the right age," the woman said out of the side of her mouth to one of the men. "And she has the right temperament."

"Her skin is too dark," one of the men said. His voice was deep and rumbled like thunder. That wasn't the sound they'd heard, but if he shouted, maybe it could be.

“Dark here, in these lands. Others here where they should not be,” the woman said.

She pointed the stick at Sophie again, and the glowing increased. A hint of warmth came from it, and Sophie took a step back. She didn’t want to step away from the crone, but the hair on the back of her neck stood on end, and she’d learned to listen when her body alerted her like that.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded again, but with less confidence. She couldn’t take her eyes off the glowing stick. The yellow glow seemed to burn her, but maybe that was only the effect of the explosion.

“Yes. She certainly has the right temperament,” the crone said.

Lan stepped forward, putting himself in front of Sophie. “You aren’t going to do anything to my sister.”

Sophie recognized the uncertainty in his voice but was proud of how he stood up for her.

“Sister?” the crone asked, glancing over at the others.

“Perhaps this is a mistake,” one of them said.

“You see the crystal as well as I do. There can’t be any mistake.”

The man grunted. “There can be a mistake. You’ve brought us to nearly a dozen mistakes so far. Why would we think this could be any different?”

The woman cackled, finally sounding like a crone from the stories.

Sophie tried to take a step back, but something held her in place. It *wasn’t* fear. No matter how scared she might be, she wouldn’t let this crone see it.

Lan pushed her back, keeping his back against her. One hand reached behind him, and he waved at her, signaling for her to leave, but she wasn’t going anywhere without him. Whoever these people might be, they weren’t going to take her brother.

“Grab her, and we’ll sort it out later.”

“I’m tired of cleaning up your messes, Joahn. You’ve left enough bodies behind you.”

“There’s a price to pay in any war.”

*War?*

Sophie’s breath caught. Could they be from Reyash or Lorant?

Maybe that was why the Taihg were here.

One of the men started toward her, and Lan pushed her back, then brought his hands up. He was strong, but these men were bigger and seasoned soldiers.

“No, Lan,” she said.

“You should move, boy, or you’ll find out what happens when you oppose the Karell.”

The hair on the back of Sophie’s neck stood on end again. That was a term she’d heard before, in stories told by Nana. The Karell were powerful sorcerers and gifted with an arcane magic. They worked with the Taihg, so shouldn’t they be here together?

“Go,” Lan hissed.

Sophie couldn’t have gone even if she’d wanted to. Her body didn’t respond when she tried to take a step. Was it fear... or sorcery?

She couldn’t take her eyes off the crystal. If the crone *was* a Karell, then it definitely was a wand, and not simply a stick with a crystal attached to it.

Why had she been so stupidly stubborn? She should have run when she’d had the chance.

She’d just *had* to prove to Lan she was brave, so first they had been blown up, and now he was right *again* about running back to the village.

The crystal began to glow even more brightly.

Sophie's skin tingled like when she'd jumped into the forest lake and sat beneath the Enchanted Falls, where she had almost been able to believe magic was real.

"Come with me, girl."

The crone commanded her in a voice Sophie didn't think she could ignore. She *wanted* to ignore it, but how could she when it called to her, demanding that she move.

She took a step forward, bumping into Lan.

That cleared her mind enough for her to shake free of the confusion. She saw him holding his fists out, as if he intended to punch the nearest man, but Lan had never fought with anyone other than Sophie.

The other man approached from the opposite side, and Lan seemed to ignore him. She pressed her back to her brother's and kicked the man, catching him in the shin. He glared at her and flashed a dangerous smile.

"Next one will be higher," she promised.

"There won't be a next one," the man said.

"Try me."

"Enough!"

She glanced at the crone and saw her rippling.

There was no other way to describe it. The crone's skin roiled as if creatures crawled beneath it.

What *was* this woman?

More than anything, Sophie didn't want the crone to capture her. What would happen if she did? What could she do to fight? She wasn't big enough to fight these men, and Lan would be lucky to handle one of them, let alone both. And that still left the crone for them to deal with, assuming they couldn't just run away.

*That would be the smartest thing to do.*

Bright light surged, pushing back the darkness of the forest. With it came the same tingling she'd had before, this

time even more intense.

It froze her in place.

There was no doubting what was happening this time. Whatever magic the crone used, it held her, preventing her from doing anything, from fighting at all. She was stuck.

Was Lan trapped the same way?

It was *her* fault that they had been caught by these people. As usual, she had ignored her brother and rushed forward.

Why did she have to be so impulsive?

The crone stopped in front of her and looked her in the eye. The woman was shorter than Sophie had thought, and she had to look up to hold Sophie's gaze. She smiled at Sophie with a malicious edge. "Yes. You have a feistiness to you. That is what I've been searching for."

"Leave—me—alone."

It pleased Sophie that she could get those words out slowly and through her gritted teeth, but she practically spat them at the crone. She wasn't about to let her take her from the village without a fight.

All she needed was to get a leg to work. If she could do that, then she could kick.

The crone brought her wand up.

Sophie squeezed her eyes shut. *Please. All I need is one leg!* She prayed to Darish, the woodsman god. If anyone was able to free her from the crone, it would be Darish, wouldn't it?

The hair on her neck stood on edge again. The cold tingling swept over her. Goose bumps rose even higher. And her mouth went dry.

Sophie waited, but the expected explosion didn't come.

She tried kicking, and her leg moved slightly. Was she free?

She didn't take the time to find out and kicked as hard as she could.

Her leg flailed, but it *moved*, and it connected with the crone's leg.

The crone grunted.

The cold eased, and the goose bumps faded.

Heat surged through the air, this time much like what they had experienced before.

Had it been a creature they'd heard in the woods, or was it the crone and these men who had caused the explosion? When she opened her eyes, the crone lay on her back. The two men who had come with her had retreated and were watching the crone, as if waiting for her to get back up.

Movement in the forest caught Sophie's attention, and she stared at it, afraid that she would see some sign of a creature. Instead, she saw the shadowy forms of riders and felt another panic. The Taihg.

If they reached them, there would be no getting away.

Sophie grabbed Lan's hand. "Let's go!"

He let her pull him along as they raced along the path to the village and back to Nana and Papa's house. She wanted to get as far from the crone as she could, and as quickly as she could. Sophie offered another prayer to Darish, asking for him to make certain that she got back safely, but she wondered if she'd already used up his favor for the day.

# CHAPTER 3

## LAN

Lan chased Sophie along the path, branches grabbing at him as he ran. His entire body still ached from the explosion. His heart raced, and every so often he would glance behind him, terrified of what he might find, before hurriedly turning his gaze back in front of him.

What had happened there? That had to have been some strange creature—maybe even a dragon, like in the stories Nana told Sophie—but he'd seen nothing other than those three strange people. They couldn't have been Karell. Those were just stories Nana had made up. They didn't *really* exist.

The small house at the edge of the forest was empty when they returned. Lan leaned against the door, wanting nothing more than to stagger to his bed and fall into it, but first he had to make sure Sophie was safe. He *was* the big brother, something Nana and Papa told him all the time.

“Are you hurt?” His ears still rang, but not as badly as they had before. After the explosion, he hadn't been able to hear anything other than the steady ringing.

“You're asking me?” Sophie snapped. She stood on her toes at one of the windows and looked out, biting on her lower lip, as she always did when she concentrated. The top of her nose crinkled.

“What do you think? I want to make sure you're not hurt after what happened.”

She sniffed and turned to him. “Maybe I should be the one to ask you that.”



“What does that mean?”

She shrugged and turned her attention back to the window. “I appreciate you trying to help.”

“Trying?”

“We got away because *I* kicked the crone!” Sophie turned back to him as she snapped.

“Crone? She couldn’t have been more than thirty. Why would you call her a crone?”

“All magical women like her are crones. Haven’t you paid any attention to the stories Nana tells us?”

Lan snorted. “Apparently, not as much as you. Besides, most of those stories are nothing more than that—stories.”

Sophie said nothing for a while, staring out the window, and Lan pulled a chair over near her. The woman had wanted Sophie, so he wasn’t about to leave his sister alone until he was convinced the threat had passed. He thought the Taihg had appeared in the forest, and if they had, they would be with the Karell, but what if they weren’t the Taihg? Or what if the Taihg had attacked the Karell? The wand the woman had carried had felt so strange. Power had pressed through him, as if it had burned into his very essence.

“Did you see the way her wand glowed?” Sophie asked.

“I saw it.” He scooted closer to her and looked out the window with her. Where was Nana? It wasn’t uncommon for Papa to be gone at this time of day—farming or tending to the animals—but Nana was usually in the house, either baking or working on one of her weaves. Why would she be gone when they needed her the most?

“That was magic, Lan. That was a Karell.”

“They’re nothing more than stories.”

“Stories? All stories have some truth to them, unless you think everything Nana has told us is a lie.”

Lan sighed, shaking his head. “They’re not lies, but they *are* stories. Sometimes stories are only for entertaining.”

“And sometimes they’re for more.”

Why was he even debating this with her? “Did Nana tell you whether she had something going on today?” There were times when Nana went to meetings of the Weavers’ Guild, and she would travel up to half a day, but usually she made sure they both knew when she had those meetings. When she did, Papa would remain closer to the house.

“Nothing more than needing to go to the village for some supplies.” Sophie hadn’t taken her gaze off the window. What did she think she’d see? The Taihg had been in the forest, too. Lan was certain of it. They’d have seen him running. He thought he might want to be a soldier, but soldiers didn’t run. What could he have done differently? That magic had made him feel helpless.

He wanted to protect his sister, but how could he protect her when she was so impetuous? They’d nearly been taken by that woman—not a Karell, regardless of what Sophie believed—and he couldn’t imagine what would have happened if they hadn’t escaped.

Lan sighed and stood from the chair, then made his way to the kitchen. He found a cool stove. None of the pots were out, and a washbasin full of dirty water rested by the wall. Nana was never so careless with her kitchen. *What’s going on?*

He looked over at his sister. “I don’t think they’re going to come to the house for us.”

“You don’t know what they’re going to do, though, do you? We’ve heard stories about the Karell, and even about the Taihg, but like you said, those were just stories.”

“That wasn’t a Karell,” Lan said.

“You *saw* the wand, Lannerdon!”

He glared at her. “Stop calling me that.”

“Why? It’s your name.”

“You know how I feel about it.”

“I know how you feel about lots of things, *Lannerdon*.”

She turned and glared at him. It annoyed him when she made a face like that. It was probably why she did it.

“I’m going to make sure Nana knows that you nearly got us killed in the forest,” he said.

“You do that, and I’ll make sure that she knows about your battles in the forest. I think Nana would be quite interested to hear about how you take that old sword and go out to the middle of the forest and chop—”

Lan reached for her, and she ducked under his arm, grinning at him. He took a calming breath, trying to ignore Sophie and his frustration. She was the only person who could get to him in this way. “Would you stop? Do you think you need to do this after everything today?”

She had the sense to look at least a little ashamed. “I’m sorry. You’re right.” She turned back toward the window. “What do you think...”

“What do I think about what?”

When she didn’t answer, he leaned toward the window to see what had drawn her attention.

A line of horses made its way toward the house. Taihg horses.

Late afternoon sunlight reflected off their armor and made it shimmer. Maybe they really *were* magical. A nervous flutter raced through him. What if they had the Karell with them?

*Where are Nana and Papa?*

Lan looked over his shoulder a moment, then turned back to his sister. There wasn’t a place to hide here, even if he’d wanted to. And he wouldn’t be able to get Sophie anywhere safe, either.

“You need to get into the back room. Be ready to run—”

“I’m not going anywhere, Lan,” Sophie snapped.

*Why can’t she do anything sensible?*

“How did they find us?” he asked.

“That’s your question?”

“What do you think I should be asking?” he demanded sharply.

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe about what happened with the Karell.”

He was shaking his head when a knock sounded at the door. He got up with a start. He hadn’t even seen the Taihg dismount. “It wasn’t a Karell.”

“It was,” she whispered as he pulled the door open.

Lan stood in the doorway. The soldier in front of him was intimidating: sharp jawline, broad shoulders, and gleaming blue eyes. He looked exactly like what Lan had imagined a Taihg would look like, exuding confidence and a threat of violence. When Lan finally dragged his eyes away from the man’s face, they drifted to the long sword hanging at his waist.

“Where is the master of the house?” the soldier asked in a gruff voice that matched his scarred face and short hair. Even that was exactly as Lan had expected. He radiated danger.

“I don’t know. We only just returned home.”

He cursed himself. He shouldn’t have revealed that they had just returned. What would the Taihg think about the fact that they had been following them? What would they say about the woman and the two men in the forest?

“You’re alone?”

“We’re not alone.” Sophie glanced out the window before crossing her arms and turning her attention back to the soldier. “My papa is a great warrior, and he’ll be back any minute.”

Lan shot her a harsh look. “Our grandparents aren’t here. They should be any moment, if you would like to wait.”

“Grandparents? You don’t live here with your parents?”

“Our parents are dead,” Sophie said.

The soldier’s gaze drifted past Lan to his sister. “And how did they die?”

“Trying to get us here,” Sophie said.

Lan wished she would just be quiet. Why did she need to speak up and risk angering the Taihg? Nothing good would come of that.

“Why here?” the soldier asked.

Sophie stiffened, chewing on her lip a moment. “Because here is where our grandparents live. Why else do you think they would bring us here?”

“I can think of many reasons. The simple fact that you are so near the border would be one.”

“We’re not that near the border. There’s the entire forest, and after that there are the Palihj Mountains, and *then* we get to Reyash.”

“Would you *stop*, Sophie?” Lan said.

She made a face at him. “I’m just telling him what he apparently already knows. Why should that be a problem?”

“Because he’s a *Taihg*.”

The soldier chuckled roughly. “What makes you believe that, boy?”

Lan didn’t appreciate being called a boy. He was sixteen. “Our nana tells us stories,” he said, heat rising in his cheeks at the admission.

“What kind of stories?”

“The kind that helped us recognize what you were,” Sophie said. “You shouldn’t be here. Narith isn’t at war with Reyash.” They were situated outside Reyash, where they should be safe from whatever was happening there.

Lan scowled at her. Why couldn’t she just be quiet? Why did she have to make everything so difficult for him?

When he turned back to the Taihg, the soldier’s hand hovered near the hilt of his sword. *Great*. Now Sophie had angered him.

“Why are you here in the middle of the day? What responsibilities do you have in this village?”

“We don’t have any responsibilities. Our grandparents haven’t required them of us,” Sophie said.

“*Sophie!*” Lan rolled his eyes at her.

“Why have you not been required to work? Don’t all children your age take up a trade? I would imagine that on a farm like this, you would have many tasks.”

*Children? Sophie’s a child, not me.*

“I help my papa when he asks.”

The Taihg soldier studied them, and Lan’s mouth went dry. He stifled the urge to gulp. Maybe this was it, and they’d just go away. Then the soldier leaned forward and sniffed.

Something strange stirred in Lan. The armor seemed to become darker, as if the black of the markings intensified, becoming inkier. Then it faded. Lan rubbed his eyes. Maybe it was nothing more than his imagination or the throbbing in his head from the explosion.

“You were there, weren’t you?” The soldier straightened. Now his hand did go to the hilt of his sword. Lan couldn’t move, afraid that if he did, the soldier might attack.

“We...”

Sophie stormed up next to him and planted her hands on her hips as if to intimidate a Taihg.

“Tell me why a Karell was there,” the soldier said.

“It wasn’t a Karell,” Lan said. “She thinks too much about the stories our nana tells. She thinks they’re real.”

“How did you know she was a Karell?” the soldier asked Sophie.

Sophie let out a satisfied grunt. “See? I *told* you she was a Karell.” She turned her attention to the Taihg.

The soldier tilted his head, considering Sophie for a long moment. “You spoke with her?”

“I tried to get her to go away. I had to speak with her to do that. It’s the same thing I’m doing to you.”

Lan expected the comment to anger the Taihg, but it did not. A faint smile cracked his face, the first time it had softened.

“What did she tell you?” the soldier asked.

Sophie shrugged. “I was trying to keep my eyes off the crystal on the end of her stick—wand,” she hurriedly corrected.

“And this crystal. What did you see of it?”

Sophie glanced at Lan. “It glowed a faint yellow. That was all I saw.”

“Yellow?” The Taihg soldier glanced over his shoulder and mouthed something to one of the men mounted before bringing his attention back to Sophie and Lan. “You’re certain that you saw yellow?”

“I know my colors. I know I’m young, but I’m not stupid.”

“How young would you say that you are?” he asked, looming over her.

“I’m thirteen.”

“What did the Karell want with you?”

“I think she wanted to take me with her. I wasn’t about to go. I wanted to kick her, but I couldn’t move.”

The Taihg nodded. “She used her magic on you. That’s what I can smell.”

“You can smell it?” Sophie asked.

“There is a distinctive odor when the Karell use their abilities. It lingers for a time before dissipating entirely. Had I not come now, I doubt that I would have detected it.”

“Why did you come here?” Sophie asked.

“I detected... something else.”

“Yeah? Well, our papa and our nana will be here soon. You can talk to them about what you detected and what you need

from them.”

“That will not be necessary.”

“Why not?” Lan asked. They had come here seeking the owner of the house, and now they were willing to leave without speaking to Nana and Papa? Had they learned what they needed from Sophie and her big mouth? She hadn’t said anything other than that the Karell had tried to abduct them. That couldn’t be all they had come here for.

“Tell me again what you experienced with the Karell,” the Taihg said.

“I’ve told you,” Sophie said. “She waved her wand at me, and I couldn’t move. They were going to take us.”

“Both of you?”

Sophie glanced over at Lan, and he shook his head. They hadn’t wanted him. He didn’t remember much about the interaction, other than when they had been attacked, the woman had been much more interested in Sophie than in him. That was the reason he had stepped in front of her, determined to keep them from taking his little sister.

“Not both of us,” he said.

The Taihg stared at him for a few moments before a smile came to his face. “No. I doubt they wanted both of you. I imagine they focused on you.” He pointed a thick finger at Sophie.

“Maybe.” She bit her lip.

“Why is that important?” Lan asked. “Why are they here?”

The Taihg continued his study of Sophie. “They came for the same reason they keep sneaking into the kingdom. They came looking for the Pale Princess.”



# CHAPTER 4

SOPHIE

“None of what he’s said makes sense.” Sophie crossed her arms over her chest as she glared at Lan. Now that he’d gotten over his fear, he stared at the Taihg with the dreamy-eyed look he should have saved for his first crush.

“What was that?” Lan asked.

“I said that nothing he’s told us makes sense. Could they really be looking for the Pale Princess? Do you think she was here?”

Lan shrugged. “Probably heard one too many stories, just like you.”

She tried to punch him, but he moved away, so she only grazed his shoulder. He was lucky, this time.

“These aren’t stories. The Pale Princess is real, Lan. She’s the reason the war is over.”

“If you keep this up, *you’re* going to be the reason for the war.”

She lunged over and smacked his shoulder, eliciting a yelp. He deserved it. More than that, really, but it was all she was willing to do with the Taihg smirking in their direction. Where *were* Nana and Papa, anyway?

“Don’t be stupid,” Sophie said. “It suits you too well.”

“What do you want me to do? We just have to sit here and wait for Nana and Papa to come. Until then...”

Sophie sighed. Until then, they would just have to wait in the house with the Taihg. She didn't want to be in the same room with them for any longer than necessary. There was something uncomfortable about the way the soldier watched her, as if deciding whether they might be hiding the Pale Princess. In the stories Nana had told her, the Pale Princess had deep red hair to match her pale complexion, and she was powerful. Nothing like anyone Sophie had ever known. *And* she hadn't been seen since the war.

"I don't want to be here," she said.

"Then you may go."

She looked up to see the Taihg soldier standing over her. Did he hold something in his hand? She couldn't tell. It seemed as if his fingers glowed, reminding her of the light from the crystal the crone had carried.

*Not a crone*, she had to remind herself. *A Karell*.

"Where would I go?" she asked.

The man offered her a hint of a smile. "I thought you wanted to leave. Is that not what you said? You may go."

She decided to see if he was telling the truth, so she motioned to Lan. "Come on, Lan. They said we could go."

The Taihg shook his head. "Oh, no. I didn't mean your brother could go. Only you."

She faced him, her hands on her hips. She would do whatever she could to appear intimidating. It worked on Lan, but she doubted that it would work on a Taihg. "What do you want with my brother?"

He tipped his head to the side, considering Lan. Her brother didn't meet her gaze and tried his best to appear strong and confident. The idiot. Like he hadn't almost been killed by soldiers just a short time ago.

"He's got the right build for a soldier."

"Lan? A soldier?"

"Sophie," Lan warned her.

They were the Taihg, so they could take whoever they wanted, but she wasn't going to let them have Lan. If they did, it meant they would take him out of Halith and on to Reyash.

"He can barely lift a sword, and even if he could, he doesn't have any training with it."

The Taihg laughed. "I suspect he can lift a sword, and the training is something we can handle."

The idea of losing Lan left her heart aching. They argued, but he was her brother, the only other person who really knew what they'd gone through in losing their parents. It would be as bad as losing Nana and Papa.

"I can wield a sword." Lan studied the Taihg, his eyes wide.

Sophie had seen that look from him before. He wanted to go with the Taihg. He had always wanted to be a soldier, even if he never said it out loud. How could he have said it? He'd never leave Nana and Papa, and neither would she.

"I thought so," the Taihg said. "You have the look of someone who could be useful."

Sophie didn't like the sound of that. "What do you mean, he could be useful? He's to stay here and run the farm."

"Sophie!" He had a hard edge to his voice. She'd only heard it once before.

She ignored it. Expecting the Taihg to push her aside, she clenched her fists. Not even this soldier was going to push her around. Not today, not ever.

Instead, the Taihg eyed her with amusement. "You are an interesting one."

"I'm sorry, sir," Lan said. "She thinks she's older than she is."

*Sir?* Was he already trying to impress this stupid soldier?

"She's spirited," the Taihg said.

"I'm not spirited. I'm *passionate*." She glanced at Lan as she spoke, then stuck her tongue out briefly. Nana had called

her that often enough that she wore it as a badge of honor.

“She will come as well,” another man, standing in the shadows, said. Sophie couldn’t make him out, but he had been silent the entire time.

The soldier shrugged. “Since the Karell have decided you aren’t the Pale Princess, there’s always a need for palace help.”

“Help?” Sophie glanced from the soldier to the man in the shadows. Why wouldn’t he step forward so she could see him better? He could at least lower the hood of his cloak. “What makes you think I’d agree to be a servant? Besides, we’re not going anywhere. Our nana and papa are—”

“Dead,” the Taihg said.

Sophie blinked. “What? No. Nana went to the village, and Papa will be in the fields.”

The Taihg shook his head. “We tracked the Karell to this house because of the magic they used here.”

“And you said you smelled that magic on us,” Sophie said.

“That’s not the magic we followed.”

“No.” Lan moved away from the doorway and stopped at the window, his brow furrowing as he looked outside. When he turned back to the Taihg, he seemed to find a backbone. “They’re not dead. They’re off—”

“They’re dead, boy. Come, if you must, and I’ll show you.”

Sophie grabbed for Lan’s arm to keep him from going with them. There wasn’t any way for Nana and Papa to be dead. She’d just seen them this morning.

“He’s just saying that so you’ll go with him,” Sophie whispered. “Nana has told me about the Taihg, and about how they take—”

He jerked his arm free. “They’re just *stories*, Sophie.”

Lan followed the Taihg out of the house.

Sophie stared after him, debating whether she should—or could—follow. If she didn't, he might run off with the Taihg without her knowing.

She hurried after him, thinking that if nothing else, she could see what the Taihg thought to show her brother. This was a waste of their time, but Lan wasn't going to do anything but follow the soldiers. Even if there *was* something out here, it couldn't be Nana and Papa.

Watching the soldier with Lan, she worried that maybe they'd try to abduct him. She didn't believe that part of Nana's stories. The Taihg had magic, but she'd never heard of them abducting people and forcing them to serve.

She caught up to Lan and the soldier as they walked toward the field behind the house. Papa had grown wheat this year, and it was tall. They plunged through it on their way toward a pond near the back of their land. From there, she could see the edge of the forest. That was where Lan ran into the forest to hack at the trees.

She huffed. He still thought Nana and Papa didn't know anything.

Sophie let them stay ahead of her, let them think she wasn't going to come on their terms. It was better that way. When she neared, they were standing at the edge of the pond, looking down at a log.

Not a log. A leg.

The bloody end of it hung into the water, leaving a faint trace of pink swirling in the pond. It wasn't much, but she didn't need to have heard all the stories Nana had shared with her to know that it likely would have been a bloody mess before. They were the kind that Lan would have liked, but then, he didn't have the same interest in stories as her.

“Whose is that?” she asked.

Lan looked up, and his eyes were red. He rubbed them with a knuckle, wiping away a tear that had formed. “Sophie, don't.”

“Don’t what? That’s a leg. Who would do something like this?”

“The Karell would,” the soldier said softly.

“Aren’t you with them? You’re Taihg soldiers...” she said, not sure she should look up.

“You’ve got it wrong, girl. We’re not the Taihg. We came because of rumors of Karell and Taihg attacks.”

*Not Taihg?*

She pushed those thoughts out of her mind as she noticed the boot.

Papa’s boot.

She’d helped him fix the leather and oil the boot just the other day.

“Papa?”

She looked up at Lan, and he nodded slowly.

“How?” she asked. She didn’t bother to hide her tears as Lan did. What was the point? Let the stupid soldier see her crying. She wasn’t too proud to cry. “What happened?”

“The Karell attacked him. This is their kind of attack.”

“How do you know?”

The soldier sighed and clenched his jaw. “Because I see injuries like this far more than I care to.” The soldier turned away from Sophie and focused on Lan. “There is another body nearby. I presume his wife.”

“Nana?” Sophie whispered. “Where is she?”

“It’s not a sight a young girl should see,” the soldier said.

“Where is she?” Sophie demanded.

The soldier considered her for a moment before motioning toward the far side of the pond.

Sophie ran.

Her legs carried her around the pond, ignoring the way the weeds pulled at her feet. Mud occasionally threatened to suck

her down, but she continued regardless, tearing her feet free of it.

Nana couldn't be dead. Sophie refused to believe it. She had been alive this morning, telling her a new story as she cooked breakfast.

A motionless figure lay near the edge of the forest.

Sophie skidded to a stop.

She didn't need to approach to know that it was Nana. The brightly colored dress gave it away, as did the basket dumped out next to her.

Her legs shaking, Sophie crept closer, needing to see anyway. Nana was crumpled on the ground, eyes staring up at the sky, one hand clutching her necklace.

"Nana?" she whispered.

Nana didn't move. Didn't breathe.

She appeared uninjured.

Sophie licked her lips and crouched beside her. "Nana?"

When she cupped Nana's hands, she found them cold.

Tears streamed from her eyes.

"Sophie," Lan said behind her.

"Why did this happen?" she said.

"I don't know."

"What are we going to do now?" They had lost so much. First their parents, and now Nana and Papa. Why?

"There's another one coming, sir," one of the other soldiers said.

Sophie looked up, wiping tears from her eyes. "Another what?"

The lead soldier—Tohm—looked at the man with him a minute before turning back. "The Karell have returned. Time to go."

“Go?” Sophie asked, feeling numb. Where were they to go? What were they to do?

“I think... I think we have to go with them,” Lan whispered.

Sophie tried to control her breathing, to calm the sobbing that threatened to overwhelm her. How could they go with them? They didn't know anything about the soldiers or about where they were going, other than that they wanted Lan to go with them, to turn him into a soldier. Lan wasn't a soldier. He was her brother.

But what else would they do? They couldn't stay here alone, and she wasn't sure she wanted to stay here without Nana and Papa. She wasn't a farmer, like Papa, and had never become the weaver Nana had wanted her to.

None of the villagers had even come out here. Which meant that they didn't know what had happened.

*No one will know what happened to Nana and Papa.*

Sophie started sobbing. She couldn't help it.

They needed to go and talk to someone... only who would they go to?

She didn't know. Not without Nana here to guide her.

*And now she can't ever again.*

And now the Karell were coming again.

*Magic.*

She wanted Nana to sit and tell her stories, to reassure her that it was all going to be all right, but...

Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her heart hammered, and it felt like she couldn't breathe. Everything started to darken around her, and she nearly fell.

“Sophie?”

She looked up at Lan, not taking her hands off Nana. The cold had not left her hands, though Sophie had hoped that she could somehow warm Nana.



“But who will tell me stories?” Her voice cracked, and she wanted to look away but couldn’t.

As Lan looked at her, something shifted in his eyes. “I will.”

# CHAPTER 5

## LAN

The city of Neylash loomed in the distance. Even from here, Lan could sense the enormity of it. The city was much larger than anything he'd ever seen before, spreading so wide that he had to twist in the saddle just to see it all. Once again he glanced over to check on Sophie and found her sitting quietly, running Nana's necklace between her fingers.

"There will be lots of other girls your age when we reach Neylash," Lan said.

She bit her lip when she turned to him. "Maybe, but that doesn't mean they'll be nice to me."

"Why wouldn't they be nice to you?"

Sophie shook her head and looked down, not nearly as interested in the city as Lan, but then, she'd kept her head down and been quiet during all the weeks they'd ridden toward the city.

Not him. He'd tried paying attention to the soldiers, to see if he could understand what sort of magic they used, but he couldn't discover anything. They were soldiers and did everything with a practiced organization, from preparing their meals when camped for the night to breaking camp and departing in the morning.

Tohm, the soldier who had found them, had made certain they knew their responsibilities, and helped get them settled, but he didn't say anything otherwise. None of the other dozen

soldiers did. They stayed together and would talk while camped, but they said little while riding.

Then there was the strange man. He had deeply tanned skin and dressed in a silvery cloak, nothing like the black-streaked metal the soldiers wore. Lan thought he was separate from them, traveling with them the same way that he and Sophie traveled with them, but he'd seen the way the strange man spoke with Tohm, and Lan wondered if maybe the man was an adviser of some kind. When they reached Neylash and Lan joined the soldiers, he'd get to know more.

"Have you heard the story about the princess?" Lan asked. He'd tried this approach with Sophie several times during the ride, but he didn't have the same ability telling stories as Nana. Few did. She had a way of building the characters in the stories that made them entertaining.

She stayed quiet. *Typical when she's annoyed.*

"She had power unlike anyone else in her kingdom, though her power was untapped. A fortune teller shared a vision with the king that she would one day rule over the peaceful lands, and that she would use her magic for good."

Sophie glanced over at him. "You're not telling it right."

He shrugged. "Does it matter?"

She stared at the ring she clutched, which hung from a necklace. "It always matters. The princess was only twenty. Her magic stopped the war. The story can't be about her."

"How would you tell it?" Lan asked.

Tohm sat stiffly in his saddle, as if listening. Had Sophie noticed the same? That might explain why she kept looking down and why she refused to meet his gaze, though there was probably more to it. She wanted nothing to do with the soldiers, and were it not for Lan, she would probably not have come. He was glad to have her with him, though he wished that she would talk more.

They'd taken only a little time to gather their belongings. Tohm had claimed they didn't have much space to carry too much with them, though Sophie had had a hard time accepting

the horses wouldn't be able to carry much more than a few changes of clothes. And she'd almost forgotten to bring her boots, though she wasn't even sure that she would need her boots.

"There's nothing that I can tell that you haven't heard," she said. "When the war got out of hand, some say the Raven Queen sent the princess to use her magic to end it, while others claim she came from Lorant. In both versions of the story, none could withstand her. Then she was lost."

She fell silent, and Lan watched her, wishing she would say something.

"That's not how you normally tell stories," Lan said.

"How should I tell them?"

Lan hesitated, trying to come up with the right words for her. He needed to draw her out. "Usually you put more of a flourish into them."

She squeezed the ring, looking at her hand, not bothering to look up at the city as it came closer. "I don't feel the flourish anymore. Not without Nana."

"Sophie..."

She shook her head. Lan considered trying again, but what would his attempt at telling another story accomplish? She didn't want to hear them—not from him. Somehow he would need to find a way to draw his sister back out. Maybe there would be more time when they reached the city, or maybe all she needed was time. The gods knew he needed time to understand what had happened. It was easier not to think about it, but when he did... that was when it got hard for him.

As they approached the city, his excitement built.

Even when their parents had lived, he'd never been to a city like Neylash. They had lived in a larger settlement than Halith, but not by much.

The city rose before them. Massive towers dominated the center of the city, colored black and gray. A single building appeared to be constructed of pure white stone, gleaming

under the bright sun. All around the towers were other buildings, most of them smaller and jammed together. Those buildings flowed away from the center of the city, and roads spread out like spokes on a wheel.

As they neared, half the soldiers peeled away.

Lan looked at Tohm, but he ignored him. Should they stay with Tohm, or should they go with the rest of the soldiers? What of the strange adviser? He remained with Tohm, as did three others.

“I don’t like this,” Sophie whispered.

She’d spoken in whispers much of the time since they had left Halith. When they had crossed the border, Lan had expected her to say something, but she’d been silent. The ride through Lorant had been quiet, the rolling hillsides sweeping by them. He didn’t think he’d ever seen her scared. But something had changed within her when they had lost Nana and Papa.

“I know. You don’t have to like it, but that doesn’t mean we don’t need to be here.”

“We could have stayed in Halith.”

“And done what? If we had stayed, what would we have done there?”

He looked over at her and saw her staring at the ring on the necklace. Nana had worn it often and said that she would one day pass it on to Sophie, so it was right that Sophie should have it, but neither of them had expected her to have it quite so soon.

“I don’t know. We could have stayed in Narith at least.” She glanced at Lan before looking back down at the necklace, falling silent.

“There’s nothing there for us.”

“More than there is in Lorant. Narith isn’t at war with Reyash, like Lorant is, Lannerdon.”

“I don’t think Lorant is either, not anymore.”

Lan didn't like the change in his sister. The feisty Sophie would be fine in a city like Neylash, but what would happen to this girl? Would she lose herself, or would she be able to find her passion again?

Rather than paying attention to where they were heading, he watched his sister scanning the people passing them on the street. Their clothing was more decorative than what would be found in Halith, brightly colored and made of silk rather than the plain cotton most in the village preferred—other than Nana. She had always liked her clothing brightly colored—*bold*, as she would say—and she'd dyed it herself.

When they stopped, Lan was caught off guard. The silver-cloaked adviser whispered something to Tohm and turned his horse so that he could look at Sophie.

"You will come with me," the man said. His voice was soft and heavily accented. It was the first time Lan had heard him speak since they had left their village.

"She should stay with me," Lan said.

Tohm shook his head. "Not where you're going. No women are allowed there." He considered Sophie a moment. "Or girls."

"Lan?" Sophie's voice shook with fear, and his heart fluttered to hear it. He wanted to do anything he could to help his sister, but how could he when he was scared, too?

"It'll be all right. I'll find you after I get settled."

She stared at him, biting her lip before finally nodding. When she looked at the adviser, Lan's heart fluttered again to see the hesitancy in her eyes. Sophie squeezed her eyes shut, and when she opened them again, there was a flat expression on her face. That made him feel worse.

"You'll come with me," Tohm said.

"To become a soldier like you?" he asked.

Tohm smiled then. During their travels, he had never smiled, keeping a neutral expression on his face. "Like me? Perhaps you'll have some talent."

One of the other soldiers snickered.

What had Lan missed? He thought about asking Tohm, but the others had started forward again, leaving him riding behind them, watching their backs.

As they rode, the people in the street scattered when they caught sight of the soldiers. None looked up at them, as if they didn't even want to make eye contact. Were they afraid of them, or was there another reason? Lan knew so little about these soldiers. They weren't the Taihg, not as he had believed, and if the Karell—along with their Taihg guardians—had killed his grandparents, that might be for the best.

Maybe he *should* have asked Sophie what she knew about Lorant. She might only have stories from Nana, but those stories could help him know what he was to do now.

They continued along the road, keeping to the outer section of the city rather than heading toward the towers at the center. Would the palace be there? He tried thinking of how Nana had described Neylash. He couldn't think of anything she'd said. His memory wasn't good enough. Nana had shared plenty of stories about the city, mostly because Sophie loved them as much as she had, but he'd never paid them nearly as much attention as Sophie had, though he *had* sat with Nana and copied her weaving.

Every time he thought about questioning where the soldiers were leading him, they turned down a different street. The city was enormous, and he was already lost. How was he supposed to find Sophie? Maybe she would have better luck than him. She had a mind for such things, remembering patterns when she'd seen them only once. It should have made her a better weaver, but she had never had the patience for it.

The city was increasingly dingy here. In the distance, there was the sound of rushing water. Occasional shouts echoed along the street, but he saw no sign of whoever shouted. Everything here was still.

They turned again down a narrow street. Why would the soldiers lead him here? What was there for him along this way?

Tohm stopped and dismounted, tossing the reins to one of the other men with him. He nodded to Lan. “Off.”

“Here?”

The same hint of a smile Lan had seen before twisted Tohm’s lips. “Where else would we go?”

Lan looked along the street. It was a row of run-down buildings, most with crumbling stone and few with windows. The narrow street didn’t allow much light through, and the only movement was the scurrying of a rat toward an alley.

“I don’t know. When you suggested that I come with you to become a soldier, I thought—”

“You thought wrong. Off.”

Lan glanced at the others. If he didn’t heed them, he might not like what would happen. Tohm hadn’t seemed as if he intended to do anything to him, but that had been when Lan had been willing to go along with what he wanted. If that changed, what would Tohm do?

Once out of the saddle, one of the other soldiers gathered the reins and led the horses a short way down the street. Tohm pounded on a door that blended into the rest of the building until someone pulled it open.

“What have you brought me?” a high-pitched voice asked.

Lan wasn’t sure what he had expected, but it wasn’t this.

“Another villager with dreams of fighting. See if you can do anything with him.”

An old man poked his head out of the doorframe. He had a shock of white hair and rheumy eyes that narrowed as they fixed on Lan. “You keep bringing them to me when they’re too old.”

“Can’t be helped.”

“What makes you think this one will be any different?”

Tohm shrugged. “Nothing other than the fact that he saw a Karell.”



The old man turned toward Tohm. "If that were the case, he'd be dead."

"And yet he's not. See what you can do with him."

"No promises."

"There never are."

"I'll send word if there's any potential."

Tohm grunted. "I don't expect much." He pushed Lan toward the door. "You'll go with Graychen."

"Who is he?" Lan asked.

"For now, he's your everything."

Tohm joined the other soldiers and quickly swung into his saddle, and they continued along the street, leaving Lan staring after them.

"Inside, boy," Graychen said.

"I'm sixteen. I'm not a boy." He flushed as soon as he spoke. He knew nothing about the old man but thought about what his papa would say. "I'm sorry," he added.

The old man regarded him with the same rheumy stare.

"Too old. Damn Tohm keeps bringing me boys who are much too old."

"Too old for what?"

The man motioned for Lan to enter the building. "Too old to fight. And too young to die."

# CHAPTER 6

## SOPHIE

Sophie reluctantly tore her attention away from Nana's ring. The silver metal had grown warm in her grip, and her index finger caressed the smooth outside edge. Nana had always worn the charm, and having it provided Sophie some comfort. She felt she had a part of Nana with her. It was the only part she'd ever have now. That and her stories.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked the man, barely able to get out more than a whisper. It had been strange hearing him speak after his silence during the entire ride. *She* had been quiet but had still spoken more than this man.

"Quiet," he warned her.

Sophie blinked before glaring at his back. Was this how it was going to be for her in Neylash? Her being dismissed was something Nana would never have allowed. Papa wouldn't have, either, for that matter. But she had a sense that if she spoke up again, she would be silenced again. Something about the man told her she didn't want to draw too much of his attention.

Instead, she looked around her. Neylash was big—too big. She preferred the familiar, smaller scope of Halith. As much as Lan might deny it, *he* had been comfortable there, too. They had people who cared for them, and they didn't have too many responsibilities. In time, Lan would have taken over the land, and Sophie would have... what? Married? Joined the Weavers' Guild? She hadn't put much thought into it, but likely she'd have ended up like Nana. That wasn't such a bad thing.

But they'd not had much of a choice. They'd *had* to leave.

Now... now she had no idea what would be expected of her.

They passed along a massive street. Two of Halith's streets could have sat side by side on this one street and still left room for a wagon to pass. Dozens—no, *hundreds* of people filled the street, with more the farther they went. Most were dressed in bright-colored silks, and Sophie could only imagine how expensive they were, though maybe in Neylash, silks weren't nearly as expensive as they were in Halith.

She looked for signs of nobility but saw nothing that stood out. Maybe those dressed in silks *were* the nobility, though she somehow expected something more out of them.

The man guided her toward the center of the city. It had to be the center, because the path took them toward the massive buildings she'd seen from a distance. The stories Nana had told had often described the city, but Sophie had never expected to visit.

"Which one is the palace?" she dared to ask, looking at the outline of the towers. It had to be the white one, didn't it? With its majestic appearance, that seemed the kind of place where the king would live.

"I said quiet."

Sophie hesitated. She could continue to be quiet, but that didn't really suit her. This was a foreign city, and to survive, she would have to be strong.

Drawing herself back up, she looked over at the man. "At least tell me that."

"You'll know soon enough."

"Why?" As scared as she was, she found herself lashing out. She should be more careful, especially around a man like this, who seemed to want nothing to do with her.

He twisted so that he could look at her. He had silvery eyes that matched his cloak, and his mouth was pinched in a tight

frown that reminded her of Lan when he was frustrated with her. “You had better hope you are welcomed when we arrive.”

Unfamiliar nausea rolled through Sophie. Everything about this place felt different. The sounds were different. The smells, a hint of spice and a strange smoke, were different. The voices all around her were different.

“Arrive *where*?”

His eyes narrowed, and he turned away, ignoring her again.

Sophie didn’t like being ignored. She’d always gotten Lan’s attention one way or another.

This man seemed completely annoyed with the fact that she had come, but she wouldn’t even have been here were it not for him. He was the one who had suggested she come with Tohm and the others.

And where had they taken Lan? If they intended for him to be a soldier, had they led him off to wherever soldiers trained? Would he have time to find her later? The city was enormous; she didn’t see how he could find her again.

Sophie licked her lips. Had she made a mistake? She didn’t want to lose her brother as well. Losing her parents had been hard, but she didn’t have strong memories of them, not like she did of Nana and Papa. Losing *them* had been hard. She still couldn’t believe they were gone, that she wouldn’t ever see Papa greeting her after coming in from the fields after a long day, or listen to Nana sharing a story with her while sitting by the fire at night, demonstrating another weave that Sophie had never managed to master, while Lan found it easy, and he was a *boy*.

The farther they went, the more it became clear that the man was taking her toward one of the towers. Could it be the white one? With the way it gleamed, the stone reflecting the sunlight, she felt it was drawing her toward it. That *had* to be the palace, didn’t it?

Then he veered away, turning toward one of the smaller towers, composed of a darker stone that made it look dirty.

That wasn't where she wanted to go, but it was still a tower, so she still hoped to see a noble.

When they stopped, the man motioned for her to dismount, and she handed her reins to a boy who'd come scurrying out of some dark corner to grab them from her. She did so reluctantly. As soon as she didn't have access to the horse, she was trapped—not that she hadn't been trapped before. But she wouldn't be able to find Halith from here.

That wasn't quite true. Now that she'd ridden the route, she might be able to find her way back. She had a mind for patterns and a memory for faces and names. If she had to, she could make her way back the same way that they'd come in. But what would she find? There wasn't anything for her in Halith, not with Nana and Papa gone. She was committed to staying in Neylash, whatever that meant for her.

The man guided her through a narrow doorway and into a dimly lit hallway. The stone pressed in on her oppressively, adding to the musty odor of the hall. Lanterns in the distance and a few window slits set high over her head gave the only light, barely enough to keep her from tripping over her feet.

The hall was empty.

Sophie studied it, keeping her eyes open in case she had to run. She still didn't know why this man had taken her from her brother, or what he planned for her. More questions would have helped, but she didn't think they'd be answered.

“What is this place?” she whispered. A whisper felt right for this hall and for her mood, as if talking in her normal voice would not only draw too much attention but also get her in trouble, like the people in the libraries in Nana's stories. They always got in trouble for talking too loudly when they were supposed to be reading, though she couldn't imagine a place with as many books as Nana had described.

*All the stories that must be there!*

“This is where you stop talking,” the man said.

They stopped at a doorway, and he fished a key from his pocket, then twisted it in the lock before opening it. When the

door popped open, he shoved her into the room.

“Wait there,” he said.

“Where?”

He glowered at her. “Anywhere. Choose a chair. Sit. Say nothing until I return.”

“Is this your room?”

“What did I tell you?”

“You told me to be quiet. But you don’t tell me *anything*. I thought the Taihg—”

“And you’ve also been told we are *not* the Taihg. Or the Karell. Our soldiers are trying to emulate what we know of the Taihg training but don’t have the magical connection. Not yet.” He fell quiet for a moment. “So stay here and *be quiet*.”

Sophie wrapped her arms around herself and blinked in the bright room. He’d said to pick a chair, but many chairs surrounded a long table. Which one? A row of shelves lined the wall on the other side of the table. Dozens of books were stuffed in the space along the shelves. One shelf had nearly as many books as Nana did, and she was thought to have the largest collection in Halith.

Sophie stood in front of the shelves, shifting from foot to foot, looking at the titles. Nana had made sure she knew how to read. Not everyone in Halith did, though they could all have learned. There wasn’t any reason for them not to be able to read, with the number of people in the village willing to teach.

One of the books struck Sophie as interesting, and she hesitantly pulled it from the shelf, glancing over her shoulder at the doorway. The man hadn’t said anything about not reading, so why wouldn’t she take the opportunity to read while she waited for him to return?

When she sat, she spread the book out in front of her. The pages were thicker than those in the books Nana had, and the writing was done in a tight script that made it difficult to decipher. Was it even in the same language? As she tried

puzzling through what she saw, she decided it probably wasn't. What she could read made no sense.

As she turned, thinking to return to the shelf, she heard a key in the lock again and quickly closed the book, pushing it away from herself.

Sophie steadied her breathing and fixed her gaze on the door. Was it the strange man returning, or was there someone else coming here?

When it opened, she sucked in a breath.

A woman with milky skin stood on the other side of the door. She had hair the color of the setting sun and wore a pale blue dress with her hands clasped in front of her, making her look every bit like the Pale Princess in the stories.

*She's gone. Killed in the war.*

"What do we have here?" the woman asked. She spoke softly and had sweetness in her voice.

Sophie lurched to her feet and quickly bowed. If it *was* the Pale Princess, she wasn't about to misbehave. Wasn't that what she was supposed to do when faced with a princess? "I'm Sophie Varison, Your Highness."

"So polite," the princess said—and it had to be the princess, didn't it? Who else would come dressed like this? "Why are you in *this* room, Sophie Varison?"

Sophie looked around her again, feeling foolish and fighting the flush that came to her cheeks. "I was brought here, Your Highness. I don't know his name, but he has silver eyes and—"

"That would be Ridaln. He left you here?"

Sophie bobbed her head. "He told me to sit and not say anything."

The princess looked past her and seemed to note the book lying on the table. This time, Sophie failed to suppress the flush that worked through her, so she turned her eyes down to the floor to hide it.

“I’m sorry, Your Highness. It’s just that I—” She wasn’t sure what to tell the princess. Did she admit that she couldn’t follow directions as simple as sit and wait, or did she share with the princess that she loved stories? The last seemed to be the least dangerous. “I wanted to see what stories were here.”

“You enjoy stories?”

Sophie nodded. “My nana would tell me the best stories.”

“And where is she?”

Sophie licked her lips and clenched her jaw to keep from crying. She would *not* let the princess see her like that. “She’s dead, Your Highness. She was killed in our village of Halith. In Narith.”

“Narith? That would be to the south. You are a long way from home, Sophie Varison. Did you travel with Ridaln, or did you come alone?”

Sophie flicked her gaze to the door. Would the strange man reappear and question why she was talking to the princess? Surely the princess would have authority over him, wouldn’t she? “We came with him and some of the soldiers.”

The princess frowned, and the expression clouded her entire face, making it seem as if her skin darkened. “Why were they in Halith?”

The question was asked mostly of herself, but it was one Sophie knew the answer to, so she spoke up. “There was a Karell there.”

The princess smiled. “They wouldn’t have crossed the border, Sophie Varison. The soldiers prevent that. There would have to be another reason.”

“But there was a Karell. I *saw* her!”

The princess stepped forward. She smelled of flowers and sunlight, and she radiated warmth. “You saw *her*?”

Sophie blinked. “She said she was a Karell.”

The princess smiled. “The Karell would not have a woman, Sophie Varison. They are all men.”



Sophie stared at the princess. The woman had been the Karell, hadn't she? Wasn't that what she had indicated when she had attacked? If it had been one of the men—or both—why would the woman have been in charge?

"I can see that you're confused. The Karell have that effect on people. You should not feel bad for making such a mistake."

"I don't feel bad," Sophie said. She bit her lip to keep from saying anything more. Why would she speak out like that, and to the princess?

"No?"

The woman waited, watching Sophie intensely. Sophie struggled to take her attention off the princess. She was so glamorous, exactly what Sophie had imagined the princess from all of Nana's stories to be like. It amazed her that she would be standing here with her, having a conversation.

"What is it that you feel, Sophie Varison?"

Sophie swallowed. Did she tell the princess the truth? That she felt sad more than anything else. She wasn't even scared—not as she knew she should be. Coming to the city and not knowing anything or anyone should frighten her, and it did, but what she felt the most was sadness. She missed her nana.

"You don't need to cry. You're safe here."

Sophie shook her head. "I'm not crying." She rubbed her eyes and found wetness. So maybe she *had* been crying, a little.

"What happened to you?"

The door opened, and the strange man entered again. He took a look at the princess, his eyes narrowing and a frown pinching his lips. "Why have you come here?" he asked the princess.

"Am I not allowed?"

"You know the answer to that."

The princess smiled. “I know *your* answer to that, but the actual answer is quite a bit more complicated.”

Ridaln glared at her. “I brought her here for me to—”

“I know why you brought her here. She’s told me.”

He turned his attention to Sophie. “And what, exactly, did you tell her?”

His silver eyes bored into her, and Sophie wanted nothing more than to pull away, but she couldn’t. As much as she tried, she felt compelled to meet his gaze. It reminded her of the way the Karell had held her attention, forcing Sophie to look at her, even when she had wanted to run. If she could have run now, she would have.

“I told her what I told Tohm. Nothing more than that, I swear!”

Ridaln watched her, and her skin tingled, the same strange sensation that she’d felt when facing the Karell coming to her again before fading. Had the princess’s skin taken on something of a glow? She couldn’t tell. Maybe she imagined it.

“Is it true?” the princess asked.

“Is what true? That we rescued her from a small village in the south?”

“That she encountered a Karell.”

He snorted. “If she had, do you think she’d still be here?”

The princess turned to him. “*I* encountered the Karell, and *I’m* still here.”

Silence hung in the air for a moment. “You know that’s not the same.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No. Now, if you don’t have anything more to do...”

The princess smiled. “I think we both know the answer to that.”

Ridaln said nothing.

The princess turned to Sophie, making a point of ignoring Ridaln as she did. “I would very much like to speak to you about your experience later, perhaps when you’ve settled into the palace.”

“Into the palace?” Sophie couldn’t help but repeat what the princess had said. Why would she need to settle into the palace?

“You will be staying here, as a guest. We will have much opportunity to speak later.”

Sophie could only nod.

The princess smiled at her before leaving Sophie and Ridaln.

When the door was pulled closed behind her, Ridaln breathed out a hard sigh. “That one is challenging.”

“She’s breathtaking,” Sophie sighed. “I never thought I’d meet the princess.”

“Princess?” Ridaln asked. “That wasn’t the princess. That was Nessa. I thought you liked stories.”

“I do.”

“Then you should have heard that the princess was killed long ago.”

He said something else, but Sophie didn’t hear. She looked at the door, unable to take her eyes off it. If that hadn’t been the princess, then what would the princess have been like?

# CHAPTER 7

## LAN

Lan followed Graychen into the hallway. It was narrow, and wood paneling ran along each side, with darker shadows along it that he couldn't quite make out. There was a strange odor, a stench that made it hard to breathe, though he tried to ignore it.

The older man motioned to a door near the end of the hallway, and Lan stepped to it. "Is this where I will be—"

The man shoved him forward.

Lan stumbled, twisting to look back at Graychen, but the old man merely glared at him.

This had to be a mistake. Had they forgotten to bring him where he was meant to go?

Where was Tohm? He had promised to train Lan, had promised that he could learn to be a soldier—one of them. Wasn't that the case?

The door slammed shut before Lan had an opportunity to find out any more. He stared at it, standing there for a moment, before staggering forward and finding that the door was locked.

*What's going on?*

He pounded on the door. "Graychen? I think there's been a mistake."

There was no answer.

Lan continued to pound on the door, and he lost track of how long he did so. It could have been moments, but he suspected it had been much longer. His fist began to get sore, and he stopped, then stepped back into the room and stared at the door.

When it became clear that no one was coming for him, Lan looked around the room. It was a small space, barely more than a couple of paces in either direction, and the walls were all wooden. He marched from one side to the other before realizing that this really was all there was to the room. There wasn't even a chair, nothing for him to sit on, and if this was where they intended him to stay, there should at least have been a bed—but there wasn't one of those either.

The longer he sat here, the more convinced he became that there had been some sort of mistake.

He was supposed to learn to become a soldier, wasn't he? How was he supposed to learn to be a soldier in this way?

He had to sit and wait.

Lan took a seat on the floor, staring at the wall. He wrapped his arms around his knees, pulling them up to his chest, and trembled. Wasn't this what he wanted, if this was how he'd become a soldier?

Was this the same sort of place they had taken Sophie to?

He should have worried about her sooner. He should have prevented the strange man from taking her away from him. He was the older brother, after all, and it was his responsibility to take care of her, especially now that Nana and Papa were gone.

In the days after they had left their village, Lan had done his best not to think about their absence. They had been everything to him. All they had wanted was to give Lan and Sophie a chance to grow and thrive and have an opportunity to eventually take up a useful role within the village. His role had been to run the farm, and as much as he had grumbled about it, would that really have been all that bad?

Compared to sitting in this room, it probably wouldn't have been.

But a part of him remained excited, thrilled with the idea that he would be able to learn how to become a soldier. All the time that he had spent hacking at the tree in the forest, using Papa's sword, and there was now the promise that he might be able to do more—that he might be able to become more.

If he could become a soldier, then he wouldn't have to worry about protecting Sophie. If he could fight, then he *would* be able to protect her. He had always had size. That was what had prompted Papa to work with him, to train him in grappling, to ensure that if someone tried to start a brawl he would be able to end it. Lan had learned those lessons, taken them to heart, and while he still wasn't as skilled as his papa had been at brawling, he had grown far more capable, especially since he had begun to develop real muscle.

Lan wiped a tear from his eye. It wouldn't do for him to sit here and mourn. As much as he might miss his nana and papa, they were gone.

What was the lesson they had wanted him to learn when he and Sophie had lost their parents? Grieve and move on. The world wasn't always kind. The fact that their parents had died trying to escape war proved that. And yet growing up in Halith had been something of a kindness. No one there had ever attempted to harm them.

Lan got to his feet, headed to the door, and pounded on it again. He waited, thinking Graychen would come, but no one did.

He started to pace. This was a mistake, and eventually they would realize it, come for him, and release him, but how long would that take?

Lan slouched against the wall, staring at the door.

When the door finally opened, he had no idea how long it had been, but he half expected Graychen to come in and apologize for locking him inside. Instead, a severe-looking man greeted him. He had a long scar running beneath one eye,

dark hair cut short, and he wore tattered clothes. Moreover, he stank.

The man set a tray down on the floor, and Lan lurched to his feet.

“I’m glad that you’re here. I think there has been some sort of—”

The door slammed shut, closing him back inside. This time, he heard as the lock clicked shut.

This wasn’t a mistake.

He stared at the door again. If not a mistake, then what was this?

When it became clear that the door wasn’t going to open again, he looked down at the tray the man had brought him. It was a bowl of water and a small hunk of bread.

Lan ignored it. He had eaten reasonably well on the journey, and though his stomach rumbled, the moldy bread didn’t look all that appealing to him. He had no idea whether the water was even safe to drink, so he left that alone, too.

Sitting there, he drifted off. When he came back around, he did so with a start. The tray resting in front of him taunted him, and he licked dry lips and debated whether he should risk drinking the water. He decided that he needed to. It couldn’t be that harmful, could it?

Lan reached for the tray, pulled it toward him, and sipped at the water. It was foul, and there was a strange odor to it, but it was water.

He sat back for a moment.

He had been captured, but why?

Lan got to his feet and went to the door again to bang on it.

Surprisingly, the door opened, and the severe-looking man regarded him before kicking him in the stomach.

The surprise of it sent Lan staggering back.

The man came into the room, glaring at him.

Lan held his hands up. “There has to be some sort of mistake. I was supposed to come here to train with the—”

The man kicked again, this time catching him in the chest.

Lan rolled over, trying to protect himself.

The man brought his foot back again, and Lan rolled off to the side, avoiding the sweep of the man’s boot.

“Please...”

“You aren’t hungry?” the man asked.

“What?”

As he lay there, the man grabbed the tray and took it with him, closing the door behind him with a loud thud.

Lan sat up with a groan, then placed himself where he could watch the door as questions rolled through his mind.

None of this made any sense.

Lan huddled against the wall. Shivering, wet, naked, and covered in his own filth. That was what it was like in the cell. This was nothing like what he had expected coming to the city to train with the soldiers.

He had lost track of how long he had been here.

Had it been days?

He hadn’t been able to keep track. Every so often, the door would open, and someone would slide water in, but there had been no food. The moldy lump of bread that he had ignored had been the only food offered, and that had been taken from him.

It had been a mistake not to keep it.

Now he knew better.

When the door opened this time, he searched for whoever was coming in, hoping for Graychen.



The old man didn't appear. Lan hadn't seen him since the first day, which made him wonder whether he would ever come across the old man again.

The person who stepped into the room was new. He was younger than the last man, but he had a similar scar on his face. His hair was cut short in the same style, and he carried darkness, a brooding violence.

“At least tell me what's going on.”

The man sneered at him, dropping the pitcher of water.

Lan lunged toward the pitcher but got there just as it spilled out over the stone and broke.

The man stood over him, laughing darkly.

“Why?” The water had been for Lan, and it was the most that he'd been brought in the last few days.

Rather than answer, the man brought his foot back.

Lan grabbed for it, trying to keep him from kicking him, so the man punched, catching him on the shoulder. He dropped down on top of Lan, raining blows, his fists pounding into him, one after another. Lan was too startled to do anything.

When the attack ended, he lay there, staring up at the man, pain throbbing within him. Everything hurt.

As his vision began to clear—the tears streaming down his face were hindering his ability to see—he realized that he was alone once again.

Alone and brutalized. Alone and broken.

Had that been Tohm's intention? Why had he brought Lan here if he had intended nothing more than to abuse him?

The water from the now-broken pitcher pooled in one corner of the room—or cell. That term was more fitting, considering his situation. He hadn't been anywhere else since coming to the city. Whatever promises had been made to train him, he was now a captive, nothing else.

Lan scrambled forward, trying to get to the water before it seeped into the floor, and when he couldn't cup it between his

hands, he leaned down and lapped at the water, feeling like an animal. That was what he had become in his time here.

His mouth was dry, caked with blood.

He leaned back against the wall, settling in to wait.

He had to figure out what his captors wanted.

How was he to figure that out when they said nothing to him? How was he to figure out anything when they brutalized him before leaving him to rot?

*Where is Sophie?*

Lan tried to think about how long it had been since they had come to the city. Probably a week, maybe more than that, and in that time, he had been punched, kicked, and abused enough that his body felt broken. Each day he hoped for something more, an opportunity to learn what Tohm had promised.

If Sophie suffered a similar fate, he wondered how she would survive. She was strong—there had been times when he had thought her stronger than him, at least in certain ways—but being brutalized like this might be more than she could take. As tough as she was, she had a tender heart.

It was more than Lan could fathom.

He drifted, and his dreams turned to thoughts of freedom. Surprisingly, they went back to Halith, happier times, and times when he had been with his nana and papa, toiling in the fields or sitting and working at the weaves.

The dream that came now was a memory, but it seemed mixed with something else, an edge of darkness. Lan stared, seeing his grandparents within the dream, but Sophie was there, too.

He tried crying out, but his voice fell on deaf ears. Instead, the memory played out.

“Tell us again about the Taihg,” Sophie said.

Nana looked up from her weaving, glancing over to where Lan sat alongside her. His hands worked through the weave, his fingers nimbler than they should be, given his size, but he had always enjoyed the work. For some reason, sitting and weaving, drawing yarn over itself to create a pattern, had always appealed to him. His sister found it far too slow for her liking.

“Why do you want to keep hearing stories like that?” Nana asked.

Sophie glanced in Lan’s direction, sitting with her legs curled up underneath her as she leaned toward the hearth. Her fingers twisted the end of a blanket that Nana had made for her years ago. “It’s not for me.”

Nana glanced over at Lan. “Your brother doesn’t need to hear those stories, either.”

“He likes stories like that. Those are about the only ones he does like. I like them all,” Sophie said, smiling at him, “while he likes to hear about fighting and soldiers and—”

“I don’t need to hear those stories,” Lan said.

Sophie shot him a look. “No?” There was something knowing about the way that she looked at him, and he frowned.

It hadn’t been long before that that he’d found Papa’s sword in the shed. It had been buried beneath a cluster of baskets, the blade a dull steel, and yet it had been a sword. Most people in their part of the world didn’t have weapons. When Lan had found it, he had been surprised that Papa would even have a weapon like that. What need would he have had for a sword?

It looked old, and he had snuck it away, thinking that he would return it, but when he had gone out into the forest to swing it against the trees, he had felt strangely alive. It had been as if he was supposed to have a sword like this. He had hacked at the tree, chopping at it in a way that he chopped with an ax, despite knowing that technique wasn’t quite right.

“The Taihg are dangerous, just like the Karell they protect. Don’t you forget it,” Nana said.

“*Why* are they dangerous? I thought they were—”

Nana leaned forward, setting down her weave. “All peoples with power are dangerous. In the war, do you think one side was better than the other? Why do you think we stay here?”

“Because there’s nothing to do,” Lan said.

Nana watched him for a moment before picking up her work and beginning to weave again. “Too many people think that they need to get out into the world and find themselves, but do that, and you lose who you are. Why do you think your papa and I enjoy Halith so much?”

“You leave Halith,” Sophie said. “You go off with the weavers.”

“The guild needs my services.”

Papa chuckled, coming in through the doorway. “I’ve learned not to challenge your grandmother when it comes to the Weavers’ Guild.”

Nana looked up at him, and though she glared at him, there was warmth, too. They cared about each other, and that affection was obvious.

“Why don’t you tell them about the Taihg?” Nana said.

Papa took a seat next to Sophie, resting a hand on her knee. “The Taihg are dangerous soldiers. All soldiers are dangerous, especially those who chase war.”

“We know that. Nana keeps telling us that,” Sophie said.

“Does she? The problem is that you seem to like stories like that.”

“I like stories where there’s magic. That’s why I like the stories of the Pale Princess.”

“The Pale Princess is gone, Sophie,” Papa said. “And the war is over because of it.”

Nana and Papa always spoke carefully about the Pale Princess. The war had finally ended with her death. Lan's grandparents thought that was a good thing, though based on some of the stories, it was hard to know whether it really was. Some of the stories had the Taihg as the heroes, though Lan, unlike his sister, realized they were just that—stories. Sophie took them as if they were factual. How could they be factual when so many of them described impossible magic? And if they were factual, how did Nana and Papa know these stories?

“But the Taihg—”

Papa cut Sophie off by patting her leg. “Be thankful that you will never have to know the Taihg.”

Lan stirred, and he eventually started to come around.

It had just been a dream, but the division between vision and reality was growing blurry. This one had likely come from his desire to be a soldier like the Taihg, but maybe he should have wished to stay on the farm. Away from the war. His fists clenched. Weak and a fool. Maybe he deserved this punishment.

The door opened, and a slender man appeared. Lan didn't get up, and the man grabbed something from his waist and cracked it.

Pain surged through Lan.

*A whip.*

Lan held his hands out, trying to stop the attack, but there was no stopping it. It came again and again. *What did I do to deserve this?* The not knowing was as bad as the pain.

Eventually, the whipping stopped, and the door closed with a loud clatter.

When the tears stopped running down his face, he looked toward the doorway and saw another pitcher of water.

All of that for water.

Papa had been right. Lan wished that he had never come to know about any sort of soldier.

# CHAPTER 8

## LAN

Lan leaned against a wall, his arms wrapped around himself as he shivered. How had everything gone so wrong? He was supposed to learn how to be a soldier, not endure whatever this was.

“Come away from the wall,” the voice said.

“I don’t want to.”

The kick came vicious and painful, striking his leg. Lan could barely stand as it was, and this nearly toppled him completely.

His body hurt from dozens of bruises, each inflicted by a powerful punch or kick or the sting of the whip. That was the worst. The whip tore flesh from him, leaving him bloody. Worse than that, each time he was whipped, he soiled himself. How could he stand when he hadn’t eaten for days?

“There is no want. Get up.”

Lan pushed away from the wall. If he didn’t, the attacks would worsen.

Another blow caught him on the arm. A punch. The message was clear: he hadn’t moved quickly enough. Lan stood frozen, cringing away from his abuser but afraid to move without an order.

“This way.”

He tottered in place. How was he supposed to follow when he could barely stand? If he didn’t, there would be another

blow, and then another, until eventually he wouldn't be able to stand at all.

There was no choice but to follow.

He leaned on the wall. Rough boards scraped against his hands, and splinters pierced his skin—splinters he'd have to remove later. Later. For now, he had to stay with the man, even if he had to lean on the walls for support, even if he ended up with half the wall attached to him.

The hall was narrow and dimly lit. The sounds of others moaning assaulted him, but he ignored them. He couldn't afford the distraction, or he'd end up with another beating. He couldn't tolerate many more.

He staggered forward, often leaning on the wall to take a break and then scurrying forward when his abuser glanced back at him. Did he have the same silver eyes as the strange man who had come with them from Halith? In the darkness, it was hard to tell. Maybe it was nothing more than his imagination.

Still, he'd never seen eyes like those before. They weren't gray so much as true silver, reflecting the light, so they seemed to glow. What else could they be but the same color?

"In here," the man said, standing beside a door.

Lan hesitated too long. The man pushed him forward, sending him stumbling into the room, where he collapsed on the floor.

"Survive, and you eat."

His stomach rumbled. Eat? He wanted food almost as much as he wanted the abuse to stop. Almost.

"What?"

The door closed before he had an answer.

A kick slammed into his side, leaving his eyes watering.

He rolled over, trying to fold himself into a smaller size, anything that would conceal him from this next attack.

Why had he wanted to learn how to be a soldier?



He should have known their training would be brutal. And he had. Sophie had warned him. But he had been stubborn and hadn't listened. Usually *she* was the stubborn one. If she were here now, he wouldn't doubt her ability to get them to stop attacking him.

Another blow struck his back, and Lan screamed.

He wanted to be strong. Tohm had told him that he would need to be strong. But Lan couldn't be. All he wanted was to give up, lie in one place, and let the beating come to an end.

Blows rained down on him.

Before, they had always stopped. There had been a limit to the length of the attacks. This time was different.

*Survive, and you eat.*

Why would they have told him that?

Did they want to see if he could withstand the abuse?

Lan didn't know how much more he could withstand. He suspected that if the assault continued, he would die from his injuries. Hadn't Nana told Sophie stories about men who died from falling from a horse?

He tried rolling away, wanting nothing more than to get away from the next blow, and ended up colliding with his attacker.

Someone fell on top of him, and punches struck him.

Lan coughed, his mouth dry. "Why?" he tried to ask, but it came out mostly as a croak.

Another punch, this one grazing his head.

Lan rolled again. If nothing else, he would try to get away from the worst of it. If he could reach the wall, maybe he could curl up in the corner and avoid the brunt of the attack.

"Please," he begged as another punch caught him in the stomach. This one took his breath away.

"You or me," a breathless voice said.

It took Lan a moment to register what the other person had said. “What?”

Another punch caught his shoulder. It throbbed now, and he doubted he’d be able to use his arm.

“It’s you or me. I—want—to—eat.” Each of the last words came punctuated with a painful blow, striking his chest or face or side.

*Survive, and you eat.*

The words took on a different meaning. Did his tormentors want him to fight back?

Had they wanted that all along? How could he fight back when they were stronger?

His attacker grunted as he punched.

Lan pushed off, using what remained of his strength.

The other person fell and then screamed.

Lan examined his attacker for the first time. He was smaller than Lan, and he clutched his wrist to his chest.

Lan scooted back, trying to get away from the man. Now that his wrist was injured, the man eyed him differently.

“Please,” Lan said. “You don’t have to do this.”

His voice was no more than a croak, and he struggled to get each word out. He wanted nothing more than to return to his room and sleep for however long they would let him.

More than that, he wanted to return to Halith. How had he ever thought the farm boring?

“You or me.” The man got to his feet and stormed toward Lan, still clutching his injured arm against his chest.

“Please,” Lan said.

When the attacker got near, he drew back his leg to kick.

Lan pushed off the rock, trying to get away. Reflex took over, and he kicked, catching the man in the groin, sending him flying into the rock.

He lay there for a moment. It was long enough that Lan wondered whether he'd killed him, but he saw the steady movement of his chest that told him he still breathed. Was that good or bad?

The man—or boy, he couldn't tell—rolled toward him.

Blood streamed down his face. He glared at Lan, trying to hold his arm to himself.

“We don't have to do this,” Lan said.

“I want to eat.”

“I do, too.”

The attacker started toward Lan. “You're new. I can see that. You won't last.”

He tried to stand, and Lan scooted away from him.

The man staggered and fell near Lan. “You think you're the first they've pitted me against?” He spat out a glob of bloody phlegm.

Lan kept his eyes on the man, afraid to look away. “Stay back,” he warned.

The man shook his head. “Can't do that. I want to eat.”

He started toward Lan, moving at him with a lumbering pace.

“Don't,” Lan said. “I don't want to hurt you.”

“You haven't.”

“Your arm—”

“You think this is the first time it's been broken?”

How could he be as hurt as he was and still come at Lan?

Then again, how badly was Lan hurt? Would he be able to fight back if this man struck him? That was what his captors wanted, wasn't it?

Survive. Then eat.

First, he had to survive.

Doing so meant that he would attack this man, and he wasn't thrilled with that, but what choice did he have? It was either him... or his attacker.

Lan kicked as the man neared him.

The man caught his leg and twisted, sending pain shooting through Lan.

A dark sneer crossed his face, and he held on to Lan's leg, continuing to twist. Lan screamed.

With all his strength, he kicked at the man's remaining arm, connecting at the elbow. The arm bent backward, and the man released his grip on Lan's leg.

Lan kicked again, this time into the man's stomach, dropping him.

When he fell, Lan kicked over and over again, continuing until the man didn't move. Even then, he continued until hands grabbed him and dragged him away.

Lan thrashed, trying to break free.

He was dragged down the hall and back to the room they had given him. Once inside, he was tossed onto the ground and left alone. The door was pulled closed.

He lay there, panting.

Everything hurt.

Other than the pain, he was aware of nothing. Eventually, the door opened, and someone slipped a tray inside. Lan made his way over to it hesitantly after the door closed, and he smelled food.

Without waiting, he dug in.

His stomach rebelled, screaming at him to take it slow, but it had been too long since he'd eaten, and he wasn't sure when he would get another chance. Maybe there wouldn't be another chance.

Survive. Then eat.

He'd survived, and the gods knew he intended to eat his prize.

Only after he'd finished did he start to think about what he'd done. He'd beaten another man, kicked him into submission. Why were they doing this to him? This was torture, not training. He'd seen no sword and had no training, and he had barely been offered food and water. And now he'd become no different from the men who held him captive.

Was that what he was now?

He crawled to the corner of the cell. His leg hurt the most, and he suspected his leg had broken. If they forced him to fight again, he wouldn't last. Not like this.

A mistake. All of this was a mistake.

He had believed that he wanted to get away from farming, that the way Papa had spent his time was not for him, but he'd been mistaken. Coming to Neylash had been a mistake. And Sophie had been right. If he ever saw her again, he would tell her that.

And he wanted to go home.

What of Sophie? Was she having a similar experience? How could he have led her into this? If she had been forced into violence because of him, he wouldn't be able to forgive himself, but then, he'd have to get out of here to find her, and he wasn't sure that was going to happen.

He whispered prayers, knowing they were useless, but whispering them nonetheless.

# CHAPTER 9

## SOPHIE

The bathwater was too warm. Each day she'd been here, they had prepared it far too hot for her liking, and today was no different. She should say something. Otherwise, they would think this was how she preferred it, but she suffered through it. It was more than she deserved, anyway.

Sophie leaned back in the bath, taking a deep breath of the fragrant air, inhaling the perfumed soap she had been given, letting the muscles in her shoulders relax for the first time since she had spotted the soldiers on the road. Nana would have loved this. What would Nana have given to lounge in a bath like this, letting the bubbles swirl around her, listening to the steady hissing of the coals keeping the water at the right temperature?

Not *quite* the right temperature. She really would have to say something.

It had been a week since she'd come to the palace, and a week of days like this, when she was allowed to lounge in the bath, enjoying the comforts placed in front of her, but otherwise spending them in her own sort of solitude. There had been no sign of Nessa, and she began to think Nessa had been warned to stay away from her. For that matter, there had been no sign of Ridaln.

Sophie soaked as long as she could tolerate it before climbing out of the bath and dripping dry as she struggled to find the robe the palace servants had left her. They always left her a robe, though often she couldn't find it easily.

As she slipped the robe around her shoulders, someone entered the bathing room. She stepped back to watch. Every other time she'd come here, she'd been alone. This time had been no different—at first.

“You don't have to watch from there.”

Sophie recognized Nessa's voice, and the tension that had eased in the bath suddenly returned.

“I didn't think anyone was here.”

“Sophie Varison. I did not know there was anyone here, either.”

Sophie stepped forward and noted Nessa's pale skin as she soaked in the water. Her hair stood out, a bright orange against her milky skin.

“Nessa,” she said, bowing.

The woman chuckled, taking a pitcher and pouring water over her head. Even in that, she had a delicacy to her. “We will have to teach you proper court behavior, Sophie Varison, especially if Ridaln intends for you to remain.”

“Why would he intend for me to remain?”

Nessa tilted her head strangely, considering her with hazel eyes, unmindful of her nakedness. “Why indeed?”

“You don't know?”

Sophie took another step forward, realizing that she was being too forthright with Nessa. She didn't know anything about the woman other than that she lived in the palace. That was enough for Sophie to know that she had a place in the court, but she couldn't deduce much more than that.

“I know many things, perhaps even why Ridaln brought you here.”

“Who is he?”

Nessa poured another pitcher of water over her head. “He is the king's adviser, a sorcerer of some skill.”

“Sorcerer?” Sophie hadn’t known that he was a sorcerer, but there was no reason that he wouldn’t be, with those silver eyes of his and the strange power she had felt whenever she had been around him. It was easy to believe.

“You didn’t know?” Nessa laughed softly. “Knowing Ridaln, I imagine that was what he wanted, for you to be confused. It makes what he wants easier.”

“What about the soldiers?”

“What of them?”

“Don’t they have magic?” Sophie thought of what she’d seen, and the way they had been willing to fight the Karell suggested they would have to have some power.

Nessa laughed. In the humid room, it was muted, and it left Sophie feeling ashamed. She wrapped her arms around herself.

“The soldiers have no magic, Sophie Varison, other than their armor and their swords. They are tested to see who can wield the swords, as not all are capable, but they possess no magic of their own. For that, they have need of sorcerers like Ridaln.”

“If he’s the king’s adviser, why would he have been so far away from the city?”

Nessa smiled at her. “Why indeed?”

The woman grabbed a soft-bristled brush and began working it along her legs, scrubbing gently. Sophie couldn’t help but stare. There was something elegant about Nessa, and she couldn’t take her eyes off her. When she had finished with her legs, she moved up to her stomach. Her eyes flicked open, and she smiled at Sophie, noting her watching.

Sophie flushed and turned away.

“For someone as impetuous as you seem, you are quite modest.”

Sophie glanced over. “I’m not impetuous.”

“No? You have no difficulty questioning me, which is something I have seen very few willing to do.”



“I’m sorry, Nessa.”

“Nessa. Do you not still believe me to be the princess?”

Sophie sucked in a breath. “You knew?”

“How could I not? You bowed as if you were with the king himself, and then you kept calling me ‘Your Highness.’ Alas, as far as most are concerned, the princess is gone.”

Sophie stepped forward. “Most?”

Nessa smiled. “See? Impetuous.”

“I’m sorry,” Sophie said again.

“I didn’t say it was anything to be ashamed of. I only said that you certainly are impetuous. It is a trait that might see you in some measure of trouble in the palace, though you wouldn’t be the first to have such a trait.”

“You?”

Nessa shrugged, running the brush along her back. “There was a time when I might have been known to speak beyond what was considered proper.”

Sophie thought of the way Nessa had spoken to Ridaln. Maybe the woman had remained just as impetuous as she claimed Sophie to be.

“My family called me passionate,” Sophie said.

Nessa paused and considered her a moment. “I think I like the sound of that better.”

“Why was Ridaln in the south?” Sophie asked.

“I don’t know. As I said, it likely had to do with the Karell. If they anticipated there would be Karell present, that would be a reason for him to venture beyond Neylash. It is uncommon for him to do so.”

Sophie thought of what she’d seen when the soldiers had first ridden through. She remembered thinking how impressed she was by their armor, and how powerful they seemed, but also wondering where they were headed. Had they known the

Karell would be there? If so, why wouldn't they have gotten to them first?

"You faced a Karell," Sophie said.

Nessa nodded. "They believed me to be the princess, much as you did. Had it not been for the soldiers traveling with me, I might have perished."

"What happened?"

"There is a certain power the Karell possess, a cold sort of magic that burns your insides. When they use it, they can keep you motionless. Had the soldiers not been there, I would have been abducted or worse."

Sophie remembered the sensation she had felt when facing the Karell. Had it been cold, or had there been something else to it? Either way, she hadn't been able to move.

"What am I doing here?" Sophie asked.

She didn't have the answer and wanted to understand what was expected of her. How long would they keep her here? How long would it be until she was able to see Lan? When would they be able to return to Halith?

As she looked around the bathing room, Sophie decided that maybe it wasn't all *that* bad that she had been brought to the palace. If she was here, she suspected Lan was being treated the same way. She didn't know why she should be treated to such luxuries, but she wasn't about to complain and risk them disappearing.

"You are here because you saw the—"

"Karell. That's what you said before, but that doesn't explain why I'm in the palace." She looked at Nessa and tried to ignore how elegant she seemed even while bathing. "If Ridaln only wanted to talk to me about what I saw in the forest, he could have just asked, but he's said nothing. That tells me that there's another reason for my being here."

Nessa watched her for a moment before a smile began spreading across her face. "You are clever, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you mean."

“What have you done in the time since you came to the palace?”

Sophie looked around. “This is it.”

“You’ve bathed continuously since I last saw you?” Nessa asked, not hiding the smile on her face. She’d replaced the brush and simply lounged in the bath now.

“Not continuously,” Sophie said hurriedly, feeling the heat rising in her cheeks again, “but this is pretty much it. I was given some freedom to wander the palace.”

“And have you?”

Sophie shook her head, twisting her hands together. “Not really.”

“Why is that?”

She flushed. That was the other reason she hadn’t minded coming to the palace. Not only did she enjoy the bath and the time she’d been allowed to soak, but the room given to her was near a library stocked with hundreds and hundreds of books, and she had taken a stack of them back to her room to pore over. There were countless stories in them that she couldn’t help but want to read. Nana would have loved to see the library, and she would have loved the stories that Sophie had found.

“What have you been doing, Sophie Varison?”

“Reading.”

Nessa smiled. “I thought as much. Ridaln allowed you access to the library?”

“He didn’t say I *couldn’t* visit the library. Why?”

Nessa pressed her lips together, as if trying not to grin. “No reason. I would like to be there when you speak to him about it.”

“Was I not supposed to?” Sophie asked.

“I wouldn’t dare presume to know what you’re able to do in the library. That is Ridaln’s place.”

Sophie blanched. Not only was Ridaln the king's adviser, but now she had gone into his space? She didn't mind being called passionate, and she didn't really mind being called impetuous—especially in the way Nessa said it—but she didn't want to risk angering a sorcerer.

“Don't fear, Sophie Varison. Had he wanted to keep you from the library, I imagine he would have done so.”

She licked her lips. “What else should I be doing? Why am I here?”

“That isn't for me to share.”

“It has something to do with the Karell and what they were doing when we found them.”

“*You found them?*”

Sophie shrugged. “They were in the forest near our home. My brother heard some sound and thought we should go find out what creature was in the forest, but then we were blown up.”

Nessa didn't need to know that Lan had warned her against going into the forest, or that he had wanted to return to their house. If they had, what would have happened? Likely Nana and Papa had already been killed, so that wouldn't have made a difference. Maybe they wouldn't have come across the Karell, and maybe she wouldn't have seen the wand, and maybe the soldiers wouldn't have brought them to Neylash.

Nessa smiled. “You heard a creature? What did it sound like?”

“Like thunder,” Sophie answered, and then she bit back any more words. Should she be telling Nessa about what they had seen? Would she want to know?

“Thunder. And then you were blown up, yet here you stand.”

“Maybe ‘blown up’ is a little bit extreme,” Sophie said. “We were blown *back*.”

The smile faded from Nessa's face. “You really are lucky to have survived. If you managed to hear their steed and feel

the power of its flame, you should by all rights be dead.” Nessa leaned back, staring up at the ceiling. “A shame you didn’t see it, really.”

“What steed? It was in the forest, but when we tried going toward it, we were thrown back. There was fire and thunder.”

“What do you think did that?”

“The Karell magic,” Sophie answered quickly. She had felt it again when the Karell had readied to attack, but she wasn’t about to tell Nessa that much. She couldn’t tell whether Nessa believed her, though it didn’t really matter.

“A form of it, perhaps,” Nessa said softly, and mostly to herself. She looked up, and a smile crossed her face. “What else do you remember?”

There was an eager quality to Nessa’s question that changed something about her and gave Sophie reason to hesitate. There was something off-putting about it, but she wasn’t really able to place why she would feel that way. “Nothing. After the explosion, there was nothing else. We ran and made it back to the farm, where the Taihg found us.” And that was near enough the end of the story for it to be all there was to it.

Nessa watched her, as if expecting Sophie to say something more. When she didn’t, Nessa smiled again, a promise of something more burning in her eyes. “It is fortunate that you survived, really. Meeting with a Karell can be... quite unsettling.” She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, swirling the bubbles in the bath around her. “Unless you enjoy that. What do you enjoy, Sophie Varison?”

“I...” She didn’t know how to answer. Instead, Sophie watched for a while before leaving the bathing room. It should have been relaxing, but for some reason, she felt more on edge than when she’d gone in.

# CHAPTER 10

## SOPHIE

Warmth radiated from the kitchen, and the smell of baking bread wafted to Sophie, making her mouth water. How could she still be hungry after everything she'd eaten this morning? There had been plenty of pastries, most so filled with sweet fruit that juices ran down her chin, as well as bacon and sausages and so much more than she could ever find room to fit in her stomach. Not that she wouldn't try.

And now she was back, making her way through the kitchen, trying to sneak through to see what else there might be in this part of the palace. In the days since her conversation with Nessa, Sophie hadn't seen her again. There had been no sign of Ridaln. Sophie had been left alone. Usually that would please her, but the longer she was here, the more she began to question exactly what she was doing here. It had to do with the Karell—and Ridaln—but she didn't understand much more than that.

There were still no answers for her. She'd come across plenty of servants and had been summarily welcomed by everyone, but she didn't know why she had been brought to the palace. Her time was spent wandering the halls, searching for royalty, and looking through books in the library. Nessa hadn't scared her away from using the library, though she did look up every time someone entered, curious to know whether Ridaln would appear and, if he did, whether he would be angry with her presence.

“You've returned so soon?”

Sophie spun and saw Oleda, the senior cook, watching her with her arms crossed beneath her bosom. She was a stout woman—as were most who worked in the kitchen—and watched everything with an appraising eye. Brown stains down her apron looked like the gravy served with the sausages this morning.

“I thought you might have something tasty here,” she said, twisting the fabric of her gown between her fingers.

Oleda pressed her lips together, a playful smile upon them. “You don’t look like you could eat all that much, but you manage to put away more than most of the older boys. You’d think you were off fighting in the war.”

Sophie grinned. “I can’t help it. I like your pastries.” She had never tasted anything quite so sweet, and having unlimited access to them probably wasn’t safe. She’d end up looking like Oleda if she wasn’t careful.

“You and the king. There’s a plate left in the pantry, so have at it, but make certain you leave some for him. I don’t want to get awoken in the middle of the night to bake for him just because you couldn’t ignore your sweet tooth.”

Sophie grinned. “You probably wouldn’t mind anyway.”

Oleda narrowed her eyes. “What makes you think that?”

“You always hum while you bake. That’s the same thing my nana did when weaving. She said it was her way of showing her contentment.”

Oleda tapped her arms and sniffed. “Perhaps I wouldn’t mind, but don’t you go telling the king that.”

“Don’t worry. I haven’t even met the king.”

“You haven’t? With the way his man bustles around here, making sure you’ve got everything you need, you would think you had spent time with His Majesty.”

That was news to Sophie. Ridaln made sure that she had what she needed, but he hadn’t found time to come and ask *her* what she needed? What was the point of that?

What was the point of *any* of this?

If it was only about the Karell, there were other ways in which he could have asked and found out more. Not that she was going to complain. She enjoyed the access to Oleda and the kitchen and didn't want to risk upsetting whatever balance she'd already managed, regardless of the reason for it.

"Thanks, Oleda," Sophie said.

The cook waved her away. "I've got more work to do, so best you be getting on your way. And don't take too many pastries!"

Sophie flashed a smile and hurried off, racing toward the massive pantry. She'd been there several times before, though she had never found pastries. There were other treats within the pantry—mostly breads and dried meats—as well as supplies of flour and jars of honey.

Inside the pantry, she found the plate of pastries, just like Oleda had claimed. Sophie grabbed two of them and stuffed one in her pocket while eating another as she made her way out of the kitchen.

She paused by the stairs leading to one of the upper levels. Had she explored here? The palace was enormous, and she had only visited her small section of it, afraid to get lost if she wandered too far, so she didn't think that she'd gone this way before, but maybe she had.

Taking a bite out of the pastry—rhubarb, having just the right amount of tartness—she started up the stairs. Would Ridaln be angrier with her for wandering the palace or for spending time in his library? Maybe it would be neither, especially if he had the kitchen making certain she had her needs met.

She passed a few servants who made their way down the stairs, and nodded to them, smiling as widely as she could while greeting them by name. Sophie remembered names well—a trait that had always annoyed her brother but pleased Nana.

At the next landing, there was a wide hallway. Portraits lined the walls, of elegant people dressed in formal clothing.



They were all so regal.

Sophie paused, taking a seat on a bench, and ate her pastry. She didn't notice when a man took a seat next to her.

"They are impressive paintings," he said.

Sophie glanced over. He wasn't wearing the gray-and-white clothing of the servants, but he wasn't dressed nearly as formally as Nessa, which made her wonder if he was some sort of upper-level servant. She wasn't entirely certain which floor of the palace she was on, so she wasn't sure who she might run into here.

"They are," she said, taking another bite of the pastry. "I like the way the artist has made them all seem to be watching you."

The man turned his attention to the paintings, smiling widely. There was something quite reassuring about his smile. "I suppose they do seem to be watching. I haven't paid attention to that particular feature."

"You can tell which ones are closely related," she said, pointing to two paintings next to each other. "Those two have the same chin, and those two"—she pointed to a pair of paintings to her left—"have the same dimple."

The man chuckled. "You seem to have something of that dimple yourself."

Sophie shrugged. "My nana said it came from my mother."

"You don't know whether it did?"

"I don't remember him that well. He died when I was barely old enough to remember him."

"The war?" the man asked. "Was he a soldier?"

Sophie shook her head, looking over at the man. He had a long face and deep blue eyes that reminded her of one of the paintings. "I think my brother wishes he was, but no. They were caught in an attack when trying to move away from the border." And in Narith, they should have been safe, but even there the war had spilled over.

The man nodded. "From what I hear, there are many who were lost even there. A shame they were."

She took another bite, enjoying the thick crust of the pastry. How did Oleda manage to get the boysenberries into the crust that way? They tasted so delicious. If Lan had a chance to eat these berries, he'd think he was practically dining with the gods.

"One of Oleda's pastries?" the man asked.

Sophie nodded. "She had some saved but let me take a couple."

"They *are* delicious."

Sophie looked over at the man and saw something in his deep blue eyes. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the other pastry she'd taken from the kitchen. "You can have this one."

The man waved his hand. "I don't want to take it from you."

"It's fine. I'm sure Oleda will let me have more. She told me not to take too many, because the king likes them, so I only grabbed the two, but there were plenty more."

He looked at the pastry longingly before taking it from her hand. When he bit into it, she noted the scent of blueberries. Those were almost as good as the boysenberries.

"Thank you."

She smiled. "I haven't met you. I'm Sophie Varison. Who are you?"

The man cocked his head to the side while taking a bite. "I'm Dannith."

*Dannith*. She said the name to herself, making sure to remember it. Keeping the name and face together in her mind would help if she ever saw Dannith again. In a place as large as the palace, that wasn't always a given.

"What do you do here?" she asked in between bites. "If you don't mind my asking, you don't look like one of the

regular servants.”

Dannith smiled. “Oh, I’m a servant here, like so many others.”

He took another bite, and Sophie let him eat in silence, choosing to look at the paintings as she did. They were all impressive, and she decided that they must be portraits of the royals over the years.

“Why don’t any of them have pale skin?”

“Hmm?” Dannith asked.

“The portraits. They’re all royals, right? So why don’t any of them have pale skin like the princess’s?”

“Do you know the princess?” Dannith asked.

Sophie shook her head. “Just from stories. My nana used to tell me all about her, and from those stories, I *think* I know her. I always imagined her to look like Nessa.”

The man’s face clouded. “You’ve met Nessa?”

She nodded. “She was one of the first people I met when I got here. She looks so regal, sort of the way I always expected the princess to look.” She glanced at Dannith. “Can I tell you a secret?”

He leaned in. “Does it have to do with pastries?”

Sophie smiled. “That would be a delicious secret, but it’s that I thought Nessa *was* the princess when I first met her. She looked just like what I thought the Pale Princess would look like in the stories I’ve heard.”

Dannith took another bite and used the tips of his fingers to wipe his mouth clean. “What do your stories tell you about the princess?” he asked.

Sophie shrugged. “Only that she is beautiful, and that she has long hair, pale skin that seems to glow, and there’s some magic about her. I don’t know if Nessa can work magic, but she fits everything else in my nana’s stories. Then again, Nana said the Pale Princess was lost in the war.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Otherwise, there would still be fighting. At least, that’s what Nana said.”

“Your nana must be a special woman.”

Sophie nodded. “She was.”

“Was?”

Sophie only nodded again. She didn’t want to tell the story about losing her nana and papa again. It seemed as if everyone she met wanted to talk about them with her, but she had no interest in doing so. It was easier to talk about than it had been, but it still wasn’t easy. Thinking of Nana continued to make her sad. She missed the warmth of her smile, the blue eyes that sparkled, and her stories.

“Ah. I see. This is someone you lost as well.”

She swallowed and nodded, finding it difficult to put words to what she had gone through. “I’m sorry.”

“I am the one who should be sorry. You bring me Oleda’s pastries, and I ask you about those you loved and lost. The great Mandain knows many have suffered lately.”

Sophie nodded again. It surprised her that Dannith would worship Mandain. She was a lesser god, though she was a deity of peace and well-being. She was never a god Nana and Papa had worshipped, as they had preferred to stay devout to those who could offer them help.

“I will leave you, Sophie Varison. Thank you for sitting with me.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome.”

“Perhaps we will find an opportunity to share a pastry another time.”

When he left her, she remained sitting, staring at the wall of portraits. These must be the previous rulers, or their family, or people somehow connected to them. Would Dannith know? He seemed to have some understanding, but that probably came from how he served.

She finished her pastry and licked her fingers. Maybe Oleda wouldn't mind if she went for another pastry, but she'd probably push her luck doing so. She didn't want to anger the cook, regardless of how tolerant she seemed.

Movement down the hall caught her attention. Was that the pale complexion of Nessa? The hair seemed all wrong, but that was because she didn't see the bright orange.

Sophie started after the person. If it was Nessa, she wanted to see her. It had been days since the bath, and she worried that she'd said something to upset her. And if she had, she wanted to make amends. She liked Nessa and wanted to make certain that she didn't do anything that might anger her.

Nessa started toward a staircase at the end of the hall.

Sophie hurried after her, casting a furtive glance behind her every so often as she went. She was probably not supposed to be heading in this direction. That was definitely a pale blue dress, and she had seen Nessa wearing something similar in the past, so maybe it was her.

What would Nessa say when Sophie caught up to her?

She'd probably be annoyed that Sophie had decided to follow her.

Sophie paused on the stairs before heading up after her. When had someone getting annoyed with her ever stopped her? Had she allowed such a thing, she never would have spent any time with Lan, since he was always annoyed with her.

At the next landing, she peeked along the hall and saw the blue dress disappearing into a room. She had started after it when she heard a cough behind her.

Sophie spun.

Ridaln stood behind her, a deep frown etched on his face. "I would ask what you're doing here, but seeing as you haven't the sense to stay out of my library, perhaps it doesn't matter."

She squeezed the fabric of her dress, trying to find the strength not to turn and run. “Your library? I thought it was just the palace library.”

Ridaln sniffed. “*Just* the palace library? Do you know how many works we possess? It has taken centuries to curate that collection. Few outside the royal family have ever been allowed entrance.”

Sophie paled. She most certainly didn’t belong, then. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I couldn’t help myself.”

He sniffed again. “That seems to be a trend with you. I hear you are the same way in the kitchen, going after bread, if I understand correctly.”

“Pastries.”

He frowned, and she shrugged.

“I prefer pastries. Oleda’s bread is good, too,” she said hurriedly, “but there’s something about her pastries...”

“Why have you come to the royal family’s floor?” Ridaln asked.

Sophie’s eyes widened. Was that where she was? Maybe she shouldn’t have followed Nessa. If the woman knew that Sophie was coming to the royal family’s rooms, she would definitely get annoyed, and that was the kind of annoyance Sophie didn’t want to deal with.

“I thought I saw someone.”

“Indeed? Whom, may I ask, did you think you saw?”

Sophie turned away from the hall and looked over at Ridaln. Would he be angry that Nessa was on this level, too? She had a sense they didn’t get along, but that was mostly from what she’d seen of the two of them interacting the one time. When Nessa had spoken about him, she hadn’t seemed to dislike him, but she had warned Sophie about the library. Ridaln didn’t seem particularly upset about the fact that she had been in the library, other than expressing a mild annoyance. She was used to much more than that.

“I don’t know. I was hoping to catch sight of a member of the royal family.”

Ridaln watched her, staring as if seeing through her deception, but she only smiled. Nana had always told her how her smile could charm a hook off a fisherman, so she hoped she could do the same to a sorcerer—or whatever Ridaln was. What would be the equivalent? She didn’t know what sorcerers used for their magic. A wand? But she hadn’t seen him with a wand. Maybe they used powders or potions. That fit with what Nana had described in her stories, but Ridaln didn’t look like the kind of person who had much patience for potions. Maybe he didn’t need anything to work his magic. Or maybe Nessa had teased her, making her think Ridaln had powers.

“You should return to your room,” Ridaln said.

“And do what? What am I here to do? Why have you given me a place in the palace? If you need me to do something, tell me what it is.”

“You were brought here for your safety.”

Sophie started to grin. “My safety? I was perfectly fine in Halith.”

Ridaln pursed his lips and clasped his hands in front of him. “Were you? From what I saw, you were attacked by the Karell.”

“They attacked because you and the soldiers were there. They wouldn’t have attacked otherwise.”

“No? Or did we come because we knew the Karell would attack?”

That was a possibility she hadn’t considered, and the hint of a smirk on his face made it clear that Ridaln knew that.

“Why would they have come to attack?”

His eyes widened slightly, and he studied her. “Why indeed, Sophie Varison?”

He watched her a moment before starting down the hall, leaving her watching him depart, with fewer answers than she

had before.



# CHAPTER II

## LAN

Creaks sounded outside the cell, like someone stepping on the floor. It came slowly, almost painfully so, before easing off. Did whoever was out there want him to know they were there?

He leaned against the wall of the cell. His leg throbbed where it had been broken, and the splint applied around it didn't support it nearly as much as it had at first. The pain was less than it had been, and for that he was thankful. What he wouldn't give for the magic in Sophie's stories to heal himself.

The creaking came again, lingering.

Lan braced himself for another beating. There had been two more since he'd fought the other captive, each one painful but not as painful as what he had survived. They seemed to avoid kicking at his ruined leg, either by accident or intentionally, though if it was intentional, it likely had more to do with the fact that he had it splinted and they didn't want to risk harming themselves by kicking the splint. At least there had been no more whips.

His stomach rumbled again. There had been food for the day after he'd survived, water, too. But that was it. Nothing else. How could he recover if they didn't feed him or offer him anything to drink? Unless they didn't intend for him to recover.

Considering what he'd been through, that was a real possibility.

Had he any ability to stand, he would have. Lan would love to have a chance to attempt an escape, but without the use of this leg, there wasn't anything he could do. There was no running. There wasn't any walking.

The creaking stopped outside his door.

Lan tensed.

It could be food or water, but he didn't think he was lucky enough for either. Probably another beating or worse—they might attempt to make him fight for food again. In his condition, he didn't think he could survive to eat.

The door opened.

A shadowy figure stood in the doorway. Maybe Graychen, though Lan hadn't seen him since he'd first been placed in the cell. He had thought him a hard man despite his age, but he was nothing compared to the others who had come, most without saying a word, only striking him in their torment.

“Get up.” The voice was weary but firm.

“I can't stand. My leg—”

“Get up.”

Lan shook his head. “It's broken. I can't use it—”

“Get—up.”

Lan's heart hammered. What would happen if he continued to defy the man? Attempting to stand—and walk—was beyond him.

He would prove it, show this man that he couldn't walk. When he fell into him, Lan would grab for whatever weapon he could find, and maybe he'd dole out some abuse of his own.

Clutching the wall, he dragged himself up. His fingers dug into the rough wood, and more splinters pierced the soft flesh of the tips of his fingers. One slipped under the nail of his middle finger, and he tried not to cry out, but it was difficult to ignore the pain. He refused to fall and pulled himself to a standing position, finally turning to face the man, leaning only

on his good leg. The other didn't work, and he didn't dare put any weight on it.

“Come.”

“I can't.”

The man grunted. “Come.”

He started down the hall, leaving Lan standing in his cell, the door open.

If Lan could run, now would be the chance. He could escape. Find Sophie. And then... what? Even if he knew how to find his sister, where would he go? Back to Halith? That was home as much as anywhere, but reaching Halith would take weeks, and that was if they managed to secure horses.

There would be no escape.

He had known that from the moment the cell had closed around him, but he had hoped he had misunderstood what was happening to him.

It would be so easy to give up. Let himself fall. Let the abusers win. If he did, what would become of Sophie? She was in Neylash because of him, and no other reason. If he was going through all of this, and he was the one the soldiers had wanted to come with them from Halith, what torture must Sophie be experiencing?

For her sake, he had to push himself.

Lan took a step.

His bad leg throbbed but held.

How long had he been in the cell following the last attack? It couldn't have been more than a couple of days. There was no question that his leg was broken, and when they had splinted it, he had been certain he wouldn't walk for weeks, if ever.

Lan took another step.

His leg hurt, but it held.

How was that possible?

The man waited down the hall. Lan saw him as nothing more than shadows, and he limped toward him, afraid to put too much weight on his leg, but the farther he went, the clearer it was that it was only pain. And they had taught him to deal with pain.

When Lan caught up, the man nodded to him and continued along the hall. Lan followed, uncertainty within him. What would they want from him now that he could walk again? Would his training begin? It was hard for him to remember, but that was why he had come to Neylash. He had intended to learn to become one of the soldiers. Was this all a part of the training?

There was another door, and the man paused, unlocking it before pulling it open.

A room like Lan's cell appeared before him. Another person waited inside, lying on the ground. A boy. He had to be a few years younger than Lan, maybe the same age as Sophie.

“No—”

“Survive, and you eat.”

The man shoved him inside, and the door locked behind him.

There was little light in the room. A lantern glowed somewhere to the left, giving Lan the chance to evaluate the room. It was only a dozen paces in either direction. Solid wood walls blocked them in. The floor was hard-packed earth.

“I don't want to hurt you,” Lan said.

The boy lunged.

He was quick and went for Lan's knees.

Lan reacted instinctively, twisting on his good leg, protecting his recently healed one. Another break, and he might never walk again.

The boy flew past him, crashing into the door.

He jumped up and spun toward Lan, a crazed, almost feral look in his eyes.

The boy had dark hair that hung to his shoulders, and he was lean with muscle.

How long had the boy been in this cell? How many times had he been forced to fight?

If Lan survived, how many more times would he have to fight?

This wasn't what he wanted. He didn't want to fight, and he certainly didn't want to hurt some poor boy.

The boy lunged again.

This time, Lan didn't react quickly enough, and the boy struck him in the stomach, knocking Lan to the ground.

The boy climbed onto him, wrapping his legs around either side of Lan, and began pummeling him.

At least this time, Lan knew what was expected of him. Survive, and he could eat.

Positioning his leg beneath him, he thrust, driving his hips off the ground, and sent the boy up into the air. He didn't release his grip on Lan, keeping his legs wrapped around his waist, but it loosened slightly.

Lan shimmied his arm underneath the boy and jerked up, colliding with his groin. The boy screamed, and his legs relaxed. Lan pushed off again, throwing the boy from him.

He rolled to keep the boy in view.

The boy watched, his eyes dangerous.

"We don't have to do this," Lan said.

The boy ignored him and charged again.

Lan was ready for it. He'd seen the way the boy's eyes shifted when he prepared for his attack, and it wasn't a surprise when he came at him.

After rolling to the side, Lan reached out, wrapping his arms around the boy's neck, gripping him to his chest. He'd wrestled with Papa enough to know how to hold him down.

The boy fought, but Lan had experience holding wiggling hogs much larger than this boy. He struggled, but Lan held on.

The struggling slowed before finally stopping.

Lan released his grip, pushing the boy away from him.

He got to his knees, panting, looking around the room. The last time, the door had opened as soon as he'd survived, and they had dragged him back to his cell. Where were they?

A minute passed, and then another.

What did they expect him to do?

Survive, and then he could eat.

Lan had survived. He had done what they wanted. Now he wanted the other half of the deal.

As he waited, the boy began to come around.

Lan got to his feet, ignoring the twinge in his leg, watching the boy cautiously. The fight was over. Lan had ended it, rendering the boy unconscious. He didn't need to hurt him any more than that. There was no purpose in doing so.

Then the boy suddenly sat up, and his gaze went to Lan, his wild eyes staring at him. Muscles twitched in his arms. He intended to attack again.

"Don't," Lan warned.

It didn't matter.

The boy let out a wild scream as he came at Lan.

Lan was forced to move off to the side, but he wasn't fast enough. The boy adjusted his attack and crashed into Lan, sending him to the hard-packed earth with a grunt. His breath was pressed out of him as the boy wrapped his legs around him again, this time locking them behind Lan's back.

As the waves of punches came, Lan tried thrusting as he had before, but it wasn't enough to get the boy off him. He tried getting his arm beneath him again, but it didn't work. The boy continued to punch.

Lan grabbed the boy around the neck, his longer arms giving him the necessary reach, and pushed.

He strained against the tight grip the boy had, and against him clawing at him, but Lan held on. He squeezed, afraid of letting go, until the grip around his back eased and the punches ceased. He continued to squeeze until the boy fell from him.

Lan remained next to him. The boy twitched.

He had to ensure the boy wouldn't get up to attack him again. He smashed the boy's head into the ground. Once. Twice. And finally, a third time.

The boy didn't move.

Lan backed away from him, ignoring the blood that came from where he had smashed the boy's head into the ground and soaked into the earth.

He sat there, staring at the boy for a long moment, thinking he wasn't breathing.

*Did I kill him?*

Then the boy's chest moved. Lan's heart started again, and he breathed out. He wanted to survive and eat, as his captors instructed, but he didn't want to kill someone, not even a boy who attacked him like a wild animal.

The door opened, and the figure who had brought him here stood in the doorway, looking from Lan to the boy. Was that surprise on his face?

"Come."

Lan glanced at the boy, watching to see whether he would continue breathing. Shouldn't they do something to help him?

"What about him?"

The man grunted. "You worry about him now?"

"Is he... is he going to be all right?"

The man grunted again. "You survived. You eat. Come."

As they left the room, Lan glanced back at the motionless form of the boy once more before hurrying after the man.

## CHAPTER 12

### LAN

The cell stank. Lan no longer smelled it as he once had, but it was still there, the constant reek, a mixture of sweat and feces and rotten food that he'd refused to eat. There wasn't much of that, not anymore. He made a point of eating everything he could, not knowing when he might get a chance to eat again. "Survive, and you eat" only came when he fought.

He was alone, and his body ached, but it was the kind of ache he could ignore. How long had he been here? Did it even matter anymore? The last battle had been days ago, and though he was healing, he hurt from bruises all over his body.

Had the other captive lived? Not even a man. A boy. Lan had injured a boy—a child, really—and had almost killed him. There was little doubt that if he hadn't, *he* would have been in danger of ending up in the same—or worse—shape as the boy.

Time dragged by. Lan kept track of it by the faint shadows along the wall, which stretched gradually as the day went on, then receded completely. When he'd first become aware of them, he had thought them imagined. The shadows were real, which meant the change in the light was real.

A soft scratching drifted into his cell at times, and Lan knew that it had to be from another cell nearby, but he never heard anything more than that. There were no voices, and there was no sound other than the scratching. It could have been nothing more than a rat, but Lan liked to think that he wasn't alone, and that he heard the sounds of a companion.



How many days had it been since he'd eaten? At least a few. His stomach rumbled, which was surprising, especially when he picked up on the stench in the cell, and he wondered how much longer that would be the case. Eventually, his stomach would abandon him and cope with the fact that he was starved. How long could a man live starved in such a way? Weeks, he suspected. It was water that he needed most.

The door opened, and Lan looked up.

The figure standing in the doorway watched him, his narrow face visible as little more than an outline. Silver streaks in his eyes reflected the light from the hall. "Come with me."

Lan shook his head. "I don't want to fight."

"Come with me," the man said.

He turned away, leaving Lan staring after him.

Should he go with him? When he had barely been able to walk, he had chosen to go with his captor, but now seemed different. He was wasted. His body was struggling to recover from his tormentors' beatings, as well as those that came at the hands of the other men he had to endure. Could he manage to survive a third time?

His stomach rumbled. What choice did he have?

He staggered out of the cell and down the hall after his captor. When he caught up to him, the man glanced back, a dangerous smile on his face, before guiding Lan to the next door.

He pushed it open and shoved Lan inside.

"Survive, and you eat," the man said.

"I know," he grunted.

It was much like the other times, only this time Lan didn't need the message. Survive. Then he could eat. His stomach rumbled, rebelling at the idea of food, and he licked his dry mouth, trying to prepare for what he had to face.

There were two other captives in the room. One was younger than the other. Neither looked to be in good shape, but

then, Lan suspected he looked about the same. How wasted was he after so many days spent in a cell? Hunger had limited how active he could be.

Both eyed him warily, and Lan backed away, trying to get a handle on what was expected of him. He had to fight, but how was he to fight both of them? What did they expect from him?

The answer was made on his behalf. The older of the two surged toward him, running with his head down as if to drive it into Lan's stomach.

Lan pivoted, turning to the side and away, and collided with the younger of the two. He was larger, and he grabbed Lan as if to lift him from the ground.

Lan brought his elbows down, crashing them into the younger one's back.

The older one charged, and Lan swung, twisting to bring the younger one between him and the older one. They crashed into each other, and the younger one fell, dropped by the attack.

It gave Lan a moment to breathe.

The older one charged again, this time keeping his head up as he charged.

Lan twisted, but his injured leg gave out, and he dropped to the ground. He scrambled back, frantic, trying to keep the other one from collapsing on top of him, but he feared he wasn't moving fast enough. Something struck his shoulder—a fist or a knee—and he screamed. His arm went numb, and he lost movement in it.

He scooted to the side. Survive, and then he could eat. His rumbling stomach, more than anything else, convinced him to move.

What could he do but rely on the wrestling skills his papa had taught him? How would Papa have managed to withstand this attack?

With only one arm, there were few grappling moves that he could try. He ignored the pain in his leg and spun around, gripping the older one's wrist and swinging it in a sharp arc, trying to use his momentum against him. The boy flipped forward and crashed onto the ground.

Lan wasted no time. He kicked, catching the boy's side, then shoulder, then head. Each kick was made with every bit of strength he could muster.

The older one stopped moving, but the younger boy wasn't where Lan had expected.

He got to his knees, trying to ignore the pain in his leg. Had he broken it again?

Backing toward the wall, he kept the older one in the periphery of his vision. He didn't want him to get up before Lan had a chance to react.

There was movement to his right, and Lan jerked around in time to see the younger boy launching himself at him, both fists driving toward his head.

Lan dropped to the ground. The boy crashed into the wall and fell, barely missing the top of Lan's head. The boy screamed, and Lan dropped his elbow onto his face, silencing him.

He crept back, making his way toward the wall, watching his two attackers.

Neither moved.

The door opened, and the silver-eyed man entered. He scanned the room quickly before nodding to Lan. "Come with me."

Lan got to his feet and stumbled from the room. He didn't bother casting a glance back, not wanting to see if the two boys were seriously injured. If they were, he couldn't allow himself to feel any sort of remorse. His captors had made it clear that it was either him or them. If he survived, he got to eat. That was all he cared about. His stomach rumbled, agreeing with him.

In the hallway, his captor guided him away from the room but in a different direction from the way he'd come. He passed another hall with rows of doors along it. Likely cells. How many men were captured here, held as Lan had been held? He doubted he would ever know and decided that he didn't want to.

His captor paused at the next doorway and pulled a key out of his pocket, unlocking it with a loud click. Lan's heart hammered. Were they going to make him fight again? He didn't think he could withstand another fight.

He hesitated as his captor stepped through.

"Come," his captor said, glancing back at him.

Lan shook his head. "I can't fight again."

The man's brow furrowed. "Can't fight?"

Lan licked his lips. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. He had survived, so he should be able to eat. "I... I want to eat."

"Yes. And you will."

The man waited until Lan stepped through the doorway.

It wasn't a room like the others he had been in so far. Where he had expected to find another combatant, there was only another hallway. His captor closed the door, locking it once more.

As he did, Lan took the opportunity to look along the hallway. This one looked different from the last. The walls were stone here, where they had been wooden before. Lanterns were set at even positions along the hallway. Doors were made of iron rather than stout oak.

Had he been brought from one cell to another, even more secure?

What had he done to deserve this? He had done what they had asked. He had fought—and survived—so that he could eat. That was the only reason he had agreed to battle. He hadn't done it out of any desire to fight, not like that. He had

never minded wrestling with his grandfather, but this... this was something else entirely.

His captor made his way along the hall, and Lan had no choice but to follow. This hallway ended in a branching, and his captor took a left turn, guiding him deeper into the stone, until the air changed. Growing cooler and damper. At least the stink was mostly gone, though what remained was likely because of Lan rather than anything else.

The man continued until he reached a door and pulled it open.

Lan looked from his captor to the doorway. He was expected to go in here, but he didn't want to. Why would they make him fight again? He had done what they had asked, and he had survived.

“I did what you asked. I want to eat.”

His captor stormed forward, grabbing Lan's arm, and thrust him into the room.

Lan stumbled forward as the door slammed closed behind him. He looked around, his eyes taking a moment to adjust. This room was nothing like what he had expected.

For one, there was no one else in the room. His captor had not said that he needed to survive to then eat.

For another, there was a bed. It was narrow and raised off the floor on an iron frame, but it was a bed.

A tray rested to the side of the bed, and Lan staggered toward it, smelling food.

He pulled the top off the tray, finding a bowl of thick stew and a tall glass of water.

He dug into it greedily, trying not to think about what would be asked of him next, but fearing that it would be something worse than before.

As long as he got to eat, it didn't matter.

# CHAPTER 13

## LAN

Sunlight streamed through the hole in the wall. Lan pressed his head against it, wanting to see sky, or the sun, or *something* other than the darkness of his cell. Had he known the last time he had been outside would be the *last* time, maybe he would have taken a moment to appreciate it more, rather than rushing in as he had.

This room was different from the others. The cell the man had brought him to had a door that opened into a small adjoining room with a hole in the wall, giving him access to sunlight, but only for specific times of the day. The rest of the time, the door was locked, preventing him from making it out here. When he heard a tapping, he was to return. The first time, he hadn't known and hadn't acted fast enough. The punishment had been severe.

Now he simply stood, his face pressed on the cold stone, letting the sun shine on him. The air smelled cleaner through the hole, and he occasionally heard sounds from outside, though they were infrequent.

The tapping from his cell alerted him, and Lan ran through the doorway, ducking underneath so that he could get back into his cell. When he threw the door closed, it locked behind him.

As had happened before, a meal waited for him.

Lan dug into the food. Only stale bread and a hunk of meat, but after not eating for a day, both tasted delicious. He ate everything on the tray and stopped only when he'd wiped

all the juices from the meat up with the bread and savored the last bite. Then he leaned back, pushing the tray away from him.

He hurt less than he had, not nearly as badly as when he'd been beaten every day, and not nearly as badly as when he had first been forced to fight. For now, it seemed he might have a chance to heal. His leg still bothered him and throbbed in ways that made Lan feel it might always hurt, but he could ignore it. He had no choice.

After crawling into the bed, he lost track of time. When the door opened, Lan jerked awake and sat up, meeting the gaze of Graychen. He hadn't seen the old man since the very first day he'd come here. He stood, arms crossed over his chest, his eyes a flat gray. They weren't the same silver as the eyes of the other captors. Lan didn't know what that meant.

“You've survived.”

Lan licked his lips. Would Graychen demand he fight again? Lan was just starting to feel some semblance of normality once more. He didn't want to fight someone. “I wanted to eat.”

Graychen's eyes narrowed. *Were* they silver? Lan no longer knew whether he could trust himself. Maybe none of this was real. Maybe he'd died during one of the fights, and this was all part of the After.

“It's unfortunate that we must filter candidates in such a way, but it is necessary.”

“Candidates?” Lan couldn't make his mouth work the way he wanted. It had been a long time since he'd spoken.

“You survived,” Graychen said again. “I'll admit that when Tohm brought you to me, I thought you might be too old. Often the older candidates don't have the necessary passion for what is needed.”

In another time, Lan might have smiled at the choice of words, but he no longer knew whether he *could* smile. Pain had made him feel nothing more than a constant numbness.

“Why did you do this to me?” Lan leaned forward. His body was tensed. Would he finally start to get answers? It seemed too much to believe that he might be freed, but answers... he wanted those almost as much.

Graychen studied him. “Not all have the necessary potential.”

Lan blinked. “For what?”

“For what must be done. Come.”

Graychen turned away and started down the hall.

Lan shuffled off the bed and followed. Once in the hall, he pulled the door closed. There wasn't anything in the room that he needed.

Graychen guided him along the hall, and they began to pass sections with slits in the wall where light could stream through, much like his hole in the wall. When they stopped at a doorway, heat radiated out.

“Clean up. Then your training begins.”

As Graychen tossed the door open, Lan frowned. Steam wafted out of the room before clearing. A tub of water rested on coals in the center of the room. A long brush leaned against the side of it with a bar of soap next to it.

A bath. *Blessed Darish!* Would he finally be allowed to clean up?

Graychen left him alone in the room, closing the door behind him. Not locking it, Lan noted with surprise. Every other time he'd been brought from one room to another, the door had been locked behind him. It was a relief that it wasn't this time.

He quickly undressed and made his way to the water. The tub wasn't that large, barely enough to hold a small hog, so he didn't intend to climb in and soak as he might have in the tub at home. He touched the water and found it nearly scalding. More pain. That shouldn't surprise him. Neither should he be surprised by the coarse bristles on the brush that threatened to tear his skin off. But he endured. The desire for cleanliness,



and the desire to finally be rid of several weeks of filth, overwhelmed any fear of pain from the water or the brush.

When he was done, his skin raw and irritated, he glanced at the pile of his soiled clothes. There was no way he was putting them back on, not after finally feeling clean again. He scanned the room, but the steam made it difficult to see anything clearly. No robe, towel, or clothing, leaving him with what he had worn in. He could either leave the room naked or wash his clothes.

Lan grabbed the pile of clothing, wrinkling his nose when they came too close to him, and dumped them into the tub. He dropped the bar of soap in with them and used the brush to swirl them around. Dirt streamed off them, and he worked at them until he was satisfied they were as clean as he could make them. Lan used the brush to pull the clothes free from the tub, and he squeezed water from them. They still stank, but the reek wasn't nearly as bad as it had been.

When dressed again, he stepped through the doorway.

Graychen eyed him and then nodded. "Most come out nude."

Lan glanced down at his tattered clothes, which dripped onto the stone. "I thought I might need these clothes."

Graychen sniffed. "You might find them cumbersome for what is to come."

Lan debated saying anything. He imagined his sister wouldn't debate at all. Sophie would speak up and obtain the answers she wanted. She was strong—and likely she wouldn't have been tormented in the same way that he had. Sophie would have demanded her freedom, and if Lan knew her at all, she would have been granted it.

The hall ended in another door. Rather than being made of metal or wood, as the others were, this was made of stone. Graychen pressed on the stone, and there was a soft click as the door swung open.

Light streamed in, practically blinding Lan.

He wrapped his arms around himself, letting his eyes adjust. A breath, then another. He looked out into a courtyard, the green of the grass shocking him. Graychen pushed him forward, and Lan stumbled as he fell toward the lawn.

Where was he?

He tried looking up, but his eyes still struggled to adjust.

Something struck him in the side, and he grunted.

An attack.

Why would they have allowed him to bathe and then attack him again?

Then again, why had Lan allowed himself to think the attacks were over? They had only changed location.

He rolled to the side, curling up to protect his stomach, not wanting to get struck without some way of defending himself. Lan was hit again, this time on his back. Anger seethed through him. He had survived beatings, and he had survived battles so that he could eat, and he had been given the promise of finally getting away and moving on to whatever was next, only to find out that it was more of the same. Why?

He spun, lashing out where he'd last felt an attack.

There was nothing there.

Lan lunged to his feet, stabilizing his injured leg long enough to get his footing, and looked around.

A small boy faced him, holding what looked to be a spear. The boy couldn't be more than fourteen, but he had a lean musculature and cruel black eyes. His hair was dirty black and stuck out in spikes from his head.

*This* was his attacker?

The boy was even younger than the others he'd faced, and *they* had seemed too young to fight.

The spear swirled through the air, moving nearly too fast for Lan to keep track of it, and he fell back to avoid risking getting hit.

His feet tangled together, and he tripped.

He watched as the spear arced toward him. Lan braced for the impact, even while trying to scramble away.

It caught him on his injured leg.

Lan screamed.

Fire raged in his gut. He had only begun to recover, and now he was getting hit in his leg again.

He heaved himself to his good leg and launched himself at the boy, heedless of the spear. It caught him on one arm, but he shook it off, reaching for the boy's neck.

His hand closed around it, and he let out a victorious grunt.

Momentum carried them forward, and he crashed down on the boy and began punching him, ignoring the boy's screams. Lan rained blows down, catching the boy on the face, the shoulder, everywhere he could. His other hand held on to the boy's throat, and he squeezed, determined to suffocate him if nothing else.

Hands grabbed him and pulled him back.

Lan thrashed, kicking with his good leg and trying to get free. He swung, trying to punch whoever thought to attack him now. He wasn't surprised that they would have him facing more than one person at a time. He was only surprised that it would take place out in a courtyard. And that the boy had a weapon. It didn't seem fair that he should have a weapon while Lan was unarmed.

Lan was thrown back, and he lunged forward, trying to reach his attackers before they managed to strike him. There were two—both men larger than him, but that wasn't about to stop him, not after what he'd been through. He had seen the way they wanted him to attack, and he recognized that if he didn't fight, he wouldn't eat. He'd gotten accustomed to eating over the last few days and didn't want that taken from him.

“Enough!” Graychen roared.

He stepped in front of Lan, staring at him with eyes that suddenly blazed a clear silver. This time, Lan was certain that

he hadn't imagined it. They had been gray before, not silver, but the other captors had all had silver eyes. That had to mean something.

"This one is aggressive, Graychen," one of the men standing near him said.

Lan looked over, and only then did he realize the man had a sword. How had he missed that before? What was he doing fighting a man with a sword?

He knew the answer. *Survive, and you eat.* He'd endured enough beatings and enough violence to know that he had no choice. Even without a sword, he was willing to challenge his captors, wanting to get free so that he could eat.

"And you thought he would be too old," the man said.

Lan looked over, recognizing the voice. Tohm.

What was he doing here? Was he here to fight Lan, too? Would Lan have to find a way to get past him?

Graychen pointed at one of the men. "Take care of Jarson. And get him cleaned up. Again."

# CHAPTER 14

## LAN

Lan looked around the courtyard, staring at the others all around him. All were soldiers, and all were quite a bit larger than him. There was a row of swords along one wall. A tree towered overhead, practically inviting him to climb it. Branches swayed high above him, like enormous arms reaching toward the heavens. Most of Lan's attention remained focused on Tohm. The soldier who had brought Lan here ignored him, almost purposely so.

Lan made a point of ignoring the boy he'd beaten. He had a bloody lip and a black eye, and he had limped around the courtyard and was now leaning on the spear he'd attacked Lan with. For his part, Lan had little pity for the boy. How could he, when the boy had jumped him, assaulting him before his eyes had even had a chance to adjust to the bright light?

Should he even blame the boy? Was it his fault, or was it Graychen's? Likely the latter. Lan suspected the boy had only done what he'd been instructed to do, but Lan felt no remorse. If he hadn't fought, it would have been him limping away.

Lan tried to figure out what was taking place. All he knew was this appeared to be a barracks, and Graychen must be the commander, though Lan wasn't sure how. The others were soldiers who served him.

The boy took a seat and glared at Lan. Lan met his gaze, uncaring of the anger and heat behind the boy's eyes. It would have been no different with any of the others he'd fought before, only he'd never seen any of the others again.

“What is this?” Lan asked Tohm.

The older soldier glanced over. “Quiet.”

Lan fell silent for a moment before thinking better of it. What would Sophie have done?

He knew the answer.

“No,” he said quietly.

“What was that?” Tohm shifted on his chair to face Lan.

“I said no. What is this?” he asked. “Why do you have me here?”

Tohm shared a glance with another man before looking back at Lan. “You wanted to be a soldier. I brought you here for a chance.”

“This isn’t training to be a soldier,” he said. He didn’t know what it was, but he had paid attention to Nana when she’d told stories about soldiers learning how to fight. They all began with training, swordwork, not torture.

Tohm leaned toward him. “What do you think it is, then, if not training?”

Lan shook his head. “I don’t know. Where’s my sister?”

“Not here.”

“I know that.”

Tohm grinned at him. “Be thankful she’s not. Women don’t have the right temperament for what you’ve endured.”

“She’s not a woman.”

“Not yet. She will be. She’s nearly old enough to wed.”

There was something in his voice and the way that he spoke that made Lan uncomfortable. Was that why Tohm had brought them from Halith? Did he think to use Sophie in some way? She didn’t deserve that. Lan didn’t think she would put up with talk like that.

“Where is this?” Lan asked.

“I thought you knew.”

“I knew where you claimed you were bringing us. I don’t know that it’s where you *did* bring us.”

“Like I said, be thankful that you’re here.”

“Thankful? I was beaten and forced to fight, and—”

Tohm’s eyes narrowed. “You had nothing different done to you than was done to any of the rest of us.”

Lan looked at the man sitting near Tohm and then at the boy.

“Yes. Even him. As Graychen says, you’re a little older than most who come here. He didn’t think you’d make it through, but I thought you might. I saw a little fight in you. And if you hadn’t, then you would have been fodder for the others. Either way, we would have been better off.”

“Why did you make me fight?”

“To see if you could.”

“Why?”

Tohm snorted. “We’re at war, boy. You can’t let a weak heart keep you from doing what’s needed. Anyone can carry a sword, but not everyone can be a soldier.”

Was that what he was to be?

“You think I could be a soldier like you?” Lan didn’t believe him, but he was too tired and sore to argue.

Tohm sniffed. “I didn’t know. We find plenty of boys who have some potential. Either they’ve got the right attitude but aren’t strong enough, or they’re strong but don’t have the right mentality.”

“What mentality is that?”

“Survival.” Tohm grinned. “I knew it the moment I saw you. You wanted to protect your sister, and you weren’t afraid of soldiers, though you should have been.”

Lan didn’t blink. That didn’t describe him at all. He had been terrified when the soldiers had appeared at the farm. He didn’t think he could have done anything, and he had wanted

only to leave. After he had learned about what had happened to Nana and Papa... what had there been for him? There hadn't been any reason to stay. There was nothing in Halith, especially since Sophie had been willing to go, though that had likely been because *he* had been willing to go.

“What happens now?” Lan asked.

“Now you fight,” Tohm said.

“Isn't that what I've been doing?”

“Not yet. You've been surviving. That's all you been asked to do.”

Lan glanced at the swords the two men carried. Was that what he meant by “training”? Did he intend for Lan to learn to wield a sword? Would he be able to?

“What are we doing here?” Lan asked.

Tohm smiled, and he glanced at the other man. He had a grizzled appearance, a hint of a beard, and the scars on his face showed he'd seen his share of scrapes. “See? I told you he had some fight.”

“You'll get your payment.”

“Payment?” Lan asked.

Tohm glanced over at him. “We made a friendly wager. He didn't believe that you had the potential to make it through the first cycle. I thought you'd survive it, but I didn't know if you would survive entrance to the yard.”

Lan blinked. Could all of this have been some sort of test?

It could have, he realized. Wasn't that something along the lines of what Graychen had said?

“What do you mean, if I would survive the entrance to the yard?” He looked at the boy he'd beaten, and he sat watching him, sullen.

Tohm nodded to the boy. “Jarson is one of the more skilled trainees. I suspect Graychen didn't think that you would make it this far, either, and pitting you against him was his way of



proving that.” He smiled to himself. “A pity that he used one of his favorites.”

Lan felt no pity for Jarson. If he was Graychen’s favorite, it was the boy’s fault that he was injured as much as it was Lan’s.

“What now?”

“Now you begin your training.”

Tohm made his way to a rack that Lan hadn’t seen before, and he grabbed two items from it. When he turned back to Lan, he tossed him a sword. Lan wasn’t quick enough and didn’t grab the weapon, letting it fall in front of him.

He looked up at Tohm. “I don’t want anything to do with it.”

“I thought you wanted to become a soldier.”

Did he? Was that what he wanted? Lan no longer knew with certainty what he wanted. He had thought that might be what he wanted, but that was before he had been forced to fight for his life. That was before he understood the cruelty the soldiers were capable of inflicting.

How could he not have known? They were soldiers, and they were tasked with fighting—and winning—the war.

“Get up,” Tohm said. The tone of his voice changed, no longer taking on something of a playful quality. “Now that you’re here, you will do as you are instructed.”

Lan stood slowly. His leg throbbed from where he’d been struck most recently. He feared putting weight on it, thinking that the boy, Jarson, had injured it again.

“Pick up the sword.”

Lan glanced down at it and crouched carefully to raise the sword. He’d never held a sword other than the one he’d found with Papa’s belongings. This one was weighted differently, and it felt awkward in his hand.

“Have you ever held a sword?” Tohm asked.

Lan shook his head. It seemed best to deny that he had even held Papa's sword. Admitting that would open him to other expectations. It was better if they thought him completely untrained, which, in reality, he was.

“Well then, try not to get poked.”

Tohm struck, swinging his sword with an angry efficiency, striking at Lan. He barely had a chance to react, raising the sword. The attack clanged off the blade, but Lan was not nearly skilled enough to manage any sort of effective fighting style. He twisted the sword, trying to defend, not even daring to think about attacking.

Tohm was ruthless, his blade spinning with ferocity. Lan turned, trying to get away, but the sword came at him.

Lan dropped, rolled, and kicked as he did.

He swept Tohm off his feet.

Should he duck back, leaving him alone, or should he attack?

His experience in this place sent him forward.

He jumped on top of Tohm, wrestling him to his back. The man was stronger, but Lan had experience grappling with someone stronger than him. Papa had been quite a bit stronger than Lan, but he had demonstrated ways to counter someone's superior strength.

Tohm grunted as Lan wrestled him down, pushing the sword out of his hand. As he had with the other attackers, he restrained him, one hand drifting to Tohm's neck to constrict him. He began to choke the man, wanting nothing more than to squeeze the fight out of him. There had been too much fighting and too much hurting, and Lan was ready to be done.

Something struck him in the side, and he rolled over, releasing his grip on Tohm.

He looked up to see the soldier who had been sitting with Tohm glaring at him. “I think this one has too much fight,” the man said.

Tohm shook his head while sitting up and rubbing his neck. “Too much? That’s exactly what we’re looking for. It was my fault to underestimate him.” He got to his feet, still rubbing his neck. There was a red line where Lan had gripped him, and the outline of his fingers could be seen around the man’s neck. It was almost enough to make Lan smile.

“You might not have any experience with the sword, but you’ve grappled before, haven’t you?”

Lan looked away.

“Answer him,” the man said.

“I have,” Lan told him.

“Where?”

“Does it matter?” Lan asked.

Tohm grunted. “Probably not.” He smiled, the expression dangerous and his eyes glittering. “I think I might enjoy having a chance to grapple with you, knowing what you’re capable of.”

Lan turned away again. He wanted nothing of that but wondered if he would even have a choice in the matter.

Tohm crouched down in front of him, getting low enough that Lan had no choice but to look at him. “You survived the first part, but the rest will be a little more difficult. You should get some rest, because your training begins in earnest tomorrow.”

# CHAPTER 15

## SOPHIE

Flowers bloomed in the courtyard. There were dozens of colors, possibly hundreds, and each had its own fragrance. The flowers were arranged in patterns, and the gardener who made his way along the row of flower beds paused every so often to inhale their fragrances or shoo off pesky critters, and occasionally he would simply stand and study them.

When he reached Sophie, he frowned. “Are you supposed to be here?”

Sophie smiled. “Apparently.”

“Apparently? And what does that mean?”

Sophie shrugged. “It means that I can’t believe that I’m supposed to be here, either.”

The gardener watched her for a moment, and then he laughed. “And how are you here?”

“I came to the city with Ridaln.” She watched the gardener as she spoke, curious as to his reaction. Most within the palace had a very strong reaction when she said Ridaln’s name, though she hadn’t determined the reason. Was he the sorcerer that Nessa claimed him to be, or was he simply the king’s adviser?

“Yes, well, I suppose if you came with Ridaln, you are meant to be here.”

Sophie smiled. Even the gardener was afraid of Ridaln. Maybe he really *was* a sorcerer. She wondered if he sat up in

the pale tower, working spells. It had to be spells, not potions, and probably not anything else. Ridaln seemed the kind of man who would use incantations to create power, the same way sorcerers used them in the stories Nana had told her.

“You are not to pick any of the flowers. These are the king’s flowers.”

“The king’s and not the queen’s?”

The gardener shook his head. “The queen... She had been gone for quite some time. The king remembers which ones she loved and so feels quite strongly about which varieties we plant. He feels that the fragrances have meaning.” He shrugged, as if dismissing the idea.

“I didn’t catch your name,” Sophie said.

“I’m Petra Owlent, though I am sure you’ll forget that the moment you leave the garden.”

Sophie shook her head. “I never forget names. I like to know as many people within the palace as I can.”

“There are hundreds who work within the palace. You can’t know everyone.”

Hundreds? How many had she met? Maybe two dozen, maybe a few more, but certainly not even a hundred. “Maybe I won’t be able to learn everyone’s name, but it doesn’t hurt to try. I figure if I can get to know a few people, maybe the palace won’t seem quite so big.”

Petra smiled knowingly. “The palace really isn’t that big. Oh, from the outside, it may seem enormous, but once you’re inside the walls, it becomes something else. The palace—and life within it—begins to take on a life of its own. It’s easy to forget that there’s a world beyond our walls.”

“I won’t forget. I came from that world.”

Petra smiled. “As did I, young lady, yet even I begin to forget what it was like before I came here.”

“What did you do before you came to the palace?”

“Before? I lived in a city near the front of the war. I was a farmer then, but the king has allowed me to work in his gardens and take on an increasing role.”

Sophie smiled to herself. “My papa was a farmer.”

“You said ‘was,’ so I assume the war claimed him.”

“Maybe,” she said. She hadn’t learned whether the Karell had come because of the war or because of another reason, as Ridaln had suggested.

“Why do the flowers have certain patterns?” she asked the gardener.

“There are no patterns.”

Sophie frowned. “I see them. Some of the colors create shapes. It has to be intentional.”

The gardener looked along the flower beds, shaking his head. “There is nothing intentional. I place only the varieties that grow well together. Unfortunately, I won’t have much more time to devote to these flowers.”

“Why not? I thought you said the king liked the fragrances.”

“My attention will be focused on helping to maintain a supply of food. We continue to attack, and the war continues to stretch on, so we will need to provide supplies.”

Sophie hadn’t realized the war waged on as it did. Everything she had known about the war had been little more than superficial knowledge, stories told by her nana, nothing that was real. Even coming to the palace had made it difficult for her to believe the war was real. There was beauty all around her, so she struggled with believing that the war would come to Neylash.

“I traveled to the city with soldiers,” she said, thinking to draw out the conversation. If Petra was helping to supply the army, maybe he would know more about the war, and the role the Karell had in it.

“Yes. We have needed those soldiers more than ever these days—as much as I think the king despises that.”

“Why would he despise it?”

“It means the Raven Queen’s offensive has increased.”

“I thought there was a treaty with the Raven Queen.” Wasn’t that what Nana’s stories had said? With those tales, she often believed that Nana didn’t so much tell stories as recount histories.

“There was a treaty for a while, but that was a long time ago. We’ve been fighting for years.”

Years? That wasn’t what she remembered from Nana’s stories. Then again, they were far away from the threat of the Raven Queen.

The gardener studied Sophie for a moment, a smile playing across his face. “If this is news to you, then you’ve come from the south.”

“Halith,” Sophie answered.

“Halith? I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s a small village near the mountains.”

Petra nodded. “Lucky for you. Or should I say it *was* lucky for you. Now that you’re here, you are much closer to the war.” He pressed his lips together, pinching his chin. “I shouldn’t scare you. The soldiers are well equipped to protect us, even from the Raven Queen’s worst attacks.”

“I still don’t understand why she would have broken the treaty.”

“She claims the treaty was broken by our forces.” He shrugged. “But what do I know? I’m nothing but a gardener. I won’t have to fight in the war. And for that, I’m quite thankful.”

The gardener watched her for a moment, smiled, then wandered away.

Sophie stayed where she was, watching the flowers, deciding that regardless of what Petra said, there had to be a pattern to them. They were beautiful, and they smelled delightful, almost as nice as Oleda’s kitchen, but for a very

different reason. She didn't think she could eat these flowers, not like she could eat the pastries Oleda made.

The courtyard was enormous. Three dark stone towers formed points around it, and the pale, glowing white tower stood near the opposite end. From a distance, the towers appeared to be all part of one building, but now that she was here, it was easy for her to discern the differences. Lower buildings connected the towers. From here it was difficult to tell where Ridaln's rooms were, not as she could when she was inside the palace. She couldn't even tell which of the towers housed the royal family, though she hadn't gone looking. She didn't want to push Ridaln that much. He might grow angry with her, and with each passing day, she settled into the comfort of the palace and found herself enjoying it.

All of this bored her. Ridaln didn't give her anything to do, leaving her with nothing but time to wander the stupid palace. After this long here, she'd lost track of how many days he'd kept her here. Plus the palace was nice enough that it was easy to become complacent. It was time to search for Lan, but that meant she'd have to leave the palace. Would Ridaln even let her do that?

She headed back into the palace and decided to wander in a different direction than she had taken before. The hallways looked much the same on each level, other than the wall of paintings. She occasionally passed servants and greeted each by name, smiling as she did. For the most part, they smiled back, though some regarded her with suspicion. She understood why. She would be suspicious of her, too, especially as there seemed to be no explanation for her presence in the palace, or for why she was permitted such free access.

One of the doorways was open, and she glanced inside. A circle of women sat in high-backed chairs, working on weaving. This, at least, was familiar.

Nana used to sit with weavers, sharing gossip with the rest of the guild. She had often traveled with the guild, and Sophie remembered Papa teasing her about her trips, joking that she



had to escape to meet with her other family, by which Papa meant the weavers.

A woman looked over and smiled. “You don’t have to stand there. You can join us.”

Sophie twisted the fabric of her dress between her fingers. “I’m not very skilled.”

The woman arched a brow at her. “How do you know how skilled you could be if you don’t practice?”

It was just the kind of thing that Nana would have said. A wave of emotion washed over her, and Sophie decided to join them. She entered the room and took a seat at an empty chair, and the woman next to her took a ball of yarn and handed it to her.

“Do you need a demonstration?”

Sophie unspooled the yarn a little and began her weaving. “I know a little. My nana taught me, but I was never very good.”

She looked over at the woman, noted the exquisite blanket she had in front of her. There were delicate patterns woven through it, and the colors reminded her of the garden. She smiled to herself, thinking that Petra likely wouldn’t see these patterns, either.

The woman smiled at her. She had full lips and a wide nose, but her greenish eyes were soft, and there was warmth within them. The woman wore a striped shawl, and her dress was brightly colored. As Sophie looked around the circle of weavers, she realized they all wore similarly bold colors, and she smiled again. All of it reminded her of Nana.

“What’s your name?” one of the women asked from across the circle. She appeared to be weaving something like a vest, and it was striped. Sophie decided that was an odd thing to be weaving. Vests would more easily be made by seamstresses, or by a good tailor. It was much simpler to cut a swath of cloth to create something like that.

Sophie looked up from the woman’s creation. “I’m Sophie Varison.”

“You’re the one who came in with Ridaln,” another of the women said.

“That’s right. He hasn’t really told me why I’m here, but...” She let her words trail off, falling into silence. Would one of the women know why she was here? If they did, would they tell her?

“Ridaln often does things for very strange reasons. He can be quite... particular.”

“I’ve heard that he’s the king’s adviser.”

The women all nodded. “As much as one can advise that man. He can be quite stubborn, if you ask me.” This came from a woman with chestnut hair and sparkling blue eyes. She had a sharp jaw and high cheekbones, making her appear nearly as elegant as any of the people in the paintings Sophie had seen the other day.

“Carolyn,” the woman sitting next to her chided.

Carolyn shrugged. “I think he would agree.”

“You shouldn’t speak like that in front of our guest.”

Carolyn set her project on her lap. Hers was as strange as that of the woman who wore a vest. There were long sleeves and what appeared to be a hood, making Sophie question whether this was a sweater or some sort of woven robe. Either way, it was strange. Even more strange was the array of bright colors. Who would wear a garment like that?

“I would speak like that in front of him. And I have.”

“You know the king?” The idea of speaking to the king left Sophie’s stomach fluttering more than it had when she had first met Ridaln. Despite that, she wanted to meet him.

The woman who had chided Carolyn chuckled. “She should. She’s his sister-in-law.”

The elegant features took on greater meaning. If she was the king’s sister-in-law, Sophie wasn’t surprised that she seemed so distinguished. *A princess, even.*

“Have you met him?” Carolyn asked.

Sophie shook her head quickly. "Not yet."

*Yet?*

Why would she have said that? What would make her think that she would even be allowed to meet the king? She was nothing more than a guest in the palace, here because of whatever Ridaln thought she could offer, but there was no reason for her to be granted an audience with the king.

Carolyn seemed to see the struggle within Sophie, and she smiled. "Perhaps I will introduce you to him, but first you would have to make him something useful."

Sophie looked down to the weaving in her hands, trying to keep the others from seeing it. She had a single line, nothing more than that, with the deep purple yarn they'd given her. "I don't have the same talent all of you do."

The woman next to her leaned over and squinted as she studied the weaving Sophie had begun. "I've seen a pattern like this before," she said. "You say you don't have much skill?"

Sophie shrugged. "My nana tried to teach me, but I've never had the patience for it."

Even now, Sophie was bored with attempting to weave. She didn't mind sitting here and talking to the women, but sitting in one place, working on a pattern, left her more annoyed than anything. She shifted in her chair, looking at the others, but most of them looked like they were content with weaving. Sophie could think of a dozen other things she'd rather do, probably more if she were pressed.

"There are many ways to accomplish the same weave," the woman on the other side of Sophie said. She had leaned in as well, to watch Sophie's movements.

Sophie paused, flushing slightly. It felt strange to have anyone other than Nana critiquing her weaving. And Nana had always been patient with her, understanding that Sophie didn't have the same discipline.

The two women both sat up, nodding to Sophie, as if realizing that they had made her uncomfortable. Sophie turned

her attention back to the pattern, not wanting to upset the women. They had welcomed her here, and as she knew so few people in the palace—at least, she didn't know anyone *well*—she didn't want to offend these women.

“You know, it is always nice when a young woman learns the art of weaving,” a thin woman across from her said.

Carolyn smiled. “It is always nice.”

“My nana was part of the guild.”

Carolyn leaned forward, her smile widening. “Which guild?”

Sophie looked around at the others. “The Weavers' Guild.”

Carolyn looked at the others before nodding. “Is that right? Well, then you should be quite advanced. I think I would like to see what you are capable of creating, Sophie Varison.”

Sophie nodded but felt she would disappoint them if she told them she really had no ability with weaving. Lan would be better at it than her.

The thought of Lan made her breath catch. She couldn't imagine explaining how her big lunk of a brother could weave better than she could.

Sophie turned her attention back to the weave and tried to make something other than a line, but she doubted that she could create anything like these women could.

# CHAPTER 16

## SOPHIE

Sophie studied the weave she'd made. The pattern was very basic, nothing that Nana would have been pleased by, though she had pretended to be pleased by everything Sophie had made. Purple was garish, far too bright for her liking, though it did remind her of Nana and her preference for brightly colored clothing.

She looked up, glancing around the garden. She was never going to impress Carolyn with a weave like this, and if she couldn't impress Carolyn, how was she going to be offered the opportunity to meet the king? That was what she wanted most of all.

That wasn't *quite* true.

Most of all, she wanted to know what Ridaln expected of her. She had yet to see the sorcerer again and began to fear that he had left the palace—and the city—without informing her of what he expected from her. She'd caught glimpses of him, little more than that, but whenever she had, he had been walking with a woman she'd never met. Sophie expected to be expelled from the palace at any point, and if she were, what would she do? All of this left her wanting to rush back to Ridaln and make him tell her why she was here, but she couldn't return to Halith without Lan. And she had no idea where he was.

Petra wound his way through the garden in the distance. Sophie left the gardener alone, not wanting to bother him, especially as he seemed far busier these days than he had the first time she'd come to the garden. He was checking on

various flowers before moving on to the next bed, never slowing.

Sophie sat back, admiring the flowers nearest her. They were the same purple as her yarn. There *was* a pattern to the flowers, though Petra might deny it, and she might be the only one able to see it. Maybe she imagined the pattern, though she doubted it.

Her hands worked, moving through the weave, finding it not nearly as easy as it had been when she had worked with Nana. Sophie was out of practice, and she could imagine Nana's disappointment at how poor a job she was doing.

Thinking of Nana always put her in a melancholy mood, and it grew worse the longer she was away from Halith. She hadn't even had the opportunity to give Nana and Papa a proper burial. Would the gods still welcome them to the After? Maybe Darish would, but only because he was the god that Nana and Papa had worshipped the most.

Sophie sighed. Here she was in this magnificent palace, surrounded by all this luxury, and all she could think of was sadness. Her heart still ached when she thought back to Nana especially. They had been close, and since she could barely remember her mother and father, Nana had been like a parent to her.

What stories would Nana have told her about the palace? She imagined wondrous stories and suspected that Nana would have known how to handle herself in a place like this. Nana would probably have joined the weavers' group and taken command of it, the way that she had taken command of the group in Halith.

No. Sophie knew what Nana would have done. She would have told her stories, much like the stories that she had always told. As she looked around the garden, Sophie remembered a day long ago when she had sat near Nana as she had worked in her garden, pulling weeds and plucking grubworms, keeping the plants as well tended as she could. Nana had always talked as she'd worked, telling stories, and Sophie had always listened.

That day was like any other. The sun had shone overhead, and it was warm, but not uncomfortably so. The gentle breeze fluttered, stirring up the fragrance from the garden. Nana's garden had the smell of vegetables and the dense aroma of greenery.

"Tell me about the Pale Princess," Sophie said.

She had interrupted Nana, cutting her off as she'd talked about care for the tomato plants that she tended. Nana glanced back at her, and a smile wrinkled her face. Her silver hair was pulled into a bun, as it often was, and her necklace dangled as she leaned forward.

"I've told you all about the Pale Princess," Nana said.

"I like that story," Sophie told her.

"I can tell." Nana sat up, dusted her hands on her dress. She never minded dirtying her clothes and ignored the dirt under her fingernails. She smiled when she looked at Sophie. "Which story would you like to hear this time?" Nana asked.

"I want to hear about her magic," Sophie said. Those were her favorite stories. The Pale Princess was powerful; a sorcerer of great skill. She alone had pushed back the threat along the border.

Nana smiled. "You know all about her magic. The princess is powerful, with magic that makes it seem as if the sun burns within her."

"That's why her hair is the color that it is," Sophie said.

Nana smiled. "Some would say the same power radiates from her, but she was a fighter, too. When she led the Taihg to the front line, she didn't hesitate to join in the attack. Had she not—"

"Had she not, the invaders would have crested the border, and their entire army would have swarmed in. Only through the act of this one woman were they saved," Papa said,

appearing behind Nana and leaning toward her to kiss her on the cheek. He smiled at her, and the sunlight seemed to dance in his eyes. Even with his advanced age, Papa was a powerful man, thick with rosy muscle.

Lan stood behind him, annoyance on his face. Lan wanted nothing more than to escape the farm, and he hated that Papa made him work with him, but what else was he going to do? One day, the farm would be his, and Lan needed to know how to run it.

“You don’t need to make it quite so dramatic,” Nana said.

“I’m not the one who has a flair for the dramatic,” Papa told her. “Though I suspect Sophie is particularly fond of this story.”

“And why shouldn’t she be?” Nana asked.

Papa’s smile faded. “Stories like this are dangerous, Persepha.”

“They’re just stories, Papa,” Sophie said.

Papa turned to her, smiling tightly. “They are that,” he said. “Sometimes stories have too much truth in them, and that makes them dangerous.”

“I thought all of the stories were true,” Sophie said.

“True? How can a woman have the power of the sun?” Lan asked. “These are just stories. And they’re silly ones at that.”

“They’re not silly, Lannerdon.” She stormed over to her brother. He glanced from Nana to Papa, as if searching for support, but neither of them offered it. Unless they engaged in physical violence, they let them argue.

“Fine.” Lan looked over at Papa. “Are we done for the day?”

Papa nodded. “We’re done, so if you want to stay and listen to your nana’s tales, you certainly can. I’ve got to head into the village for supplies.”

“Don’t forget my package. The guild has asked that I deliver—”



Papa nodded. "I know what the guild has asked, Persepha."

She studied Papa for a moment and then dropped back to her knees and began working on the tomato plants again.

Sophie continued to watch, noting the steady way she moved from plant to plant, something that was so similar to the way that she wove, and that steadiness was something Sophie never managed when she attempted to copy Nana.

Sophie shook away the memory and looked down at her hands, studying the weave that she had created. It was nothing like what Nana could have done, but it was a start, and Nana had often told her that starting was often the most difficult part. Once she had started, it was a simple matter of continuing the weave, rather than trying to start something new. Sophie found both to be difficult and hated that Lan found weaving to be much easier than she did.

What was she even making? It was narrow and long, little more than a strip of a weave, and looked stupid to her compared to what the others did. She should hide it. Better yet, she should throw it away, rather than show it to Carolyn.

Sophie sighed, disgusted with herself, and set it to the side.

"You're giving up already?"

Sophie turned and saw one of the women from the weavers' group standing behind her. She was a younger woman, with mousy gray eyes and brown hair that was pulled back and tied with a ribbon to match.

Not a ribbon, but a scrap of weaving.

"I'm just frustrated with it," Sophie said. "I've never really had the patience for weaving. I've tried, but I don't have a steady enough hand, and everything I make ends up looking like that." She pointed at the strip that she'd made. From a distance, it looked like nothing. At least from a distance, she couldn't see how clumsy an attempt she had made.

“It only takes practice. There aren’t too many who have the ability to create the patterns,” the woman said.

“It’s not so much the pattern as the time required. I just”—how much should she share with this woman?—“don’t really enjoy it.”

The woman smiled. “You might be surprised, but you aren’t alone in that. Especially in the beginning, most have a hard time mustering the necessary patience to form a weave. Over time, as your skill develops, you’ll likely have a greater tolerance for it.”

How would she even have patience for anything more than what she’d already made?

“I didn’t catch your name.”

The woman smiled and pushed a strand of hair back behind her ear. “I’m Caitlyn,” she said.

Sophie stuck her hand out and waited until Caitlyn took it, shaking it quickly. “It’s nice to meet you, Caitlyn.”

Caitlyn motioned toward the bench, and Sophie nodded. She took a seat next to Sophie and drew in a deep breath, looking out at the flowers in the garden. “They are quite lovely.”

“Petra has done a wonderful job.”

Caitlyn looked over at her. “Petra?”

Sophie pointed to the gardener. “He’s the gardener here. He says that he was once a farmer, but I think he doesn’t give himself nearly enough credit. The patterns that he’s placed in the flowers are quite lovely.”

Caitlyn looked over at the flower bed nearest them, narrowing her eyes as she studied it, and then shook her head. “I don’t see a pattern.”

Sophie shrugged. Maybe it *was* just her. Maybe the pattern was something she imagined rather than something that was really there. Did it even matter? If she saw it, it probably didn’t matter whether it was real.

“Anyway, I think the flowers are very pretty. Petra said that the king has requested particular flowers here.”

Caitlyn grinned. “You seem to have gotten to know the gardener quite well.”

“I talked with him. I don’t know that I have gotten to know him all that well.”

“Better than me, and I’ve been in the palace for... a long time.”

“I think it makes it nicer when you get to know the people around you,” Sophie said.

“Or it makes it harder,” Caitlyn said.

“Harder? Why would it make it harder?”

Caitlyn glanced over at her. “When you leave. Eventually, we will all have to leave the palace.”

Sophie breathed out. Of course she would. She was here for whatever reason Ridaln had, but this wasn’t a place she would stay indefinitely. The longer she was here, the harder it got to think of a time when she wouldn’t be here.

“How long have you been here?” Sophie asked.

Caitlyn’s face flattened. Was it something that Sophie had said?

“I’ve been here for a few months.”

Months. Was that to be Sophie’s fate? Would she be allowed to stay here for months?

Did she want to?

That might be the better question. Staying in the palace was comfortable, and there were lavish opportunities for her that she had never had before. Comforts like the bath sprang immediately to mind, but spending time in the garden was a luxury.

“Don’t worry. You probably won’t be here quite that long,” Caitlyn said.

“Why not?” It had already been a few days. What would that mean for Sophie?

Caitlyn shrugged. “There aren’t many who make it for more than a week or two... I’m sorry. I shouldn’t talk about that with you.”

“What do you mean? Why wouldn’t many last more than a week or two?”

More importantly, how many others were there? How many had Ridaln brought to the palace? She had known there was some reason for Ridaln to keep her here, but she hadn’t realized that he had brought others here, though why wouldn’t he? Why should she have been special?

“It doesn’t matter,” Caitlyn said.

Sophie watched the woman, noting a hint of sadness in her eyes. What was there to be sad about, especially in a place like this?

“Maybe it does. Why did you come to the palace?”

“Probably the same reason as you.”

Sophie smiled tightly. “I doubt that.” Caitlyn didn’t look like someone who had suffered through an attack by the Karell. What would she know about losing her parents, and then her grandparents? Caitlyn looked like someone who had known the comfort of the palace her entire life, though she’d said it had only been a few months.

If Sophie stayed in the palace, would she end up looking like Caitlyn? When she had first met the woman, Sophie had thought her happy and distinguished, but maybe that wasn’t the case.

“Ridaln found me,” Caitlyn started quietly.

When Sophie looked over at the woman, she found her staring down at her hands, bunching the fabric of her dress together.

“Like he found everyone else—including you. He brought us here, gave us a place to be, comfort, but haven’t you wondered why you’re here?” Caitlyn asked.

“Every day,” Sophie said.

Caitlyn glanced up. “Try leaving the palace. See what happens.”

“What do you mean?”

Caitlyn shook her head. “Just try it. I’m sure you’re still getting used to the niceties. How many times have you had a bath?”

“A few,” Sophie said.

“What about eating?”

She thought about all the time that she’d spent with Oleda in the kitchen, eating pastries. “I’ve eaten a bit, too.”

Caitlyn eyed her with an amused smile on her face. “I suspect it’s been more than a bit.”

Sophie looked down at herself. What did Caitlyn mean by that? She might have enjoyed the pastries, but what was the problem with that? Any were allowed to go into the kitchen and sample the food, and it wasn’t like Oleda tried keeping her from the pantry.

“They want you to be comfortable. It’s how they keep you here.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Why would they care about whether I’m here or not?”

Caitlyn glanced past Sophie and then hurriedly stood. “I shouldn’t be the one to tell you. I’ve been here for a while, but that doesn’t mean I’m safe.”

Sophie grinned. “Why wouldn’t you be safe? They wouldn’t do anything to hurt you here.”

“Wouldn’t they?”

Sophie didn’t know Ridaln all that well, but she had a hard time thinking he would do anything to hurt her. Maybe at first he’d scared her, but she’d talked to him enough that he didn’t now. Most of the time.

Caitlyn dusted her hands on her dress and forced a smile that Sophie could tell wasn't genuine. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything to you about any of this. Ridaln will likely keep you here for a while. You're pretty and young, which might give you more than a few weeks. Maybe you'll even get a few months with him, though it depends on whether you give him what he wants."

"I don't understand."

Caitlyn considered her for a moment. "Give it time and you will." There was something almost threatening about the way she said this. "I wish it were different for you, but you will."

As Caitlyn left her, Sophie watched, wishing that she had gotten more information from Caitlyn, and feeling a rising anxiety about why she was here.

Ridaln wouldn't hurt her, would he?

# CHAPTER 17

## SOPHIE

Sophie waited near the door to the bathing room, watching. She wasn't willing to go in—not until she knew whether Nessa was in there—but she was willing to wait. If there was anyone who might be able to tell her about Ridaln and what Caitlyn had implied, it would be Nessa, but where was she?

Days had passed since Sophie had seen her. The last time she had actually seen her, rather than simply thinking that she had, she had been in the bath. Nessa enjoyed coming to the bathing room and would come nearly daily. So this was a good place to find the woman, but so far, Sophie had seen no sign of her.

“What are you doing here?”

Sophie turned to see Ridaln watching her. How had he managed to sneak up on her so easily? Was he spying on her? That made her uncomfortable to think about, especially after what Caitlyn had said about Ridaln liking her because she was pretty and young. Sophie didn't necessarily consider herself pretty, but she was younger than many of the women she'd met in the palace. Was there some reason for that?

“I'm *trying* to take a bath,” she said, not feeling quite as confident as she had. How could she after what she'd been told?

“It looks as if you're waiting for someone.”

Sophie glanced at the door, wanting to avoid reacting. Ridaln didn't need to know what she had been doing. “Who

would I be waiting for?”

Ridaln shrugged. “Who indeed? I don’t have the pleasure of spending much time in the women’s bathing room, so I can’t say for certain what you ladies might do while in there.”

Sophie didn’t care for the sound of that. Was he implying that she was doing something other than bathing in there?

“You’re a man, so you wouldn’t be allowed in our bathing room.”

She turned to enter, if only to prove that she had been heading where she claimed, but Ridaln grabbed her arm.

“You were with the weavers’ circle the other day,” he said.

“The guild?”

Ridaln shook his head. “There is no guild in the palace. There is the circle, but there is no guild, as you would have known in your village.”

Sophie watched him. How would he know what they had in their village? But then, if Ridaln was a sorcerer, he probably knew lots of things, so it shouldn’t surprise her that he would know.

If there wasn’t a guild, then what had she seen? The circle? What did that mean?

“So what if I was with them?” she said.

“You claimed that you had little talent with weaving.”

“When did I make that claim?” she asked.

Ridaln pressed his lips together in a frown and released her arm. “Perhaps you didn’t. I think there are things you’re keeping from me, Sophie Varison.”

How was she supposed to react to that? There *were* things that she kept from him, but why would he be surprised by that? “What do you think I’m keeping from you? You’re the one who brought me here and decided that I should have all these luxuries. Are you saying that I’m not supposed to have them, or is there some reason you’ve given them to me?”



She might have been too forward. As soon as she had said this, she realized she probably should have been more careful. She didn't need Ridaln to grow tired of her already, not when she had just learned he *might* grow tired of her.

“You are here as my guest. That has certain requirements with it.”

There it was.

Maybe Caitlyn was right. She thought Ridaln wanted Sophie because she was young and pretty. That was disgusting. She would *not* let Ridaln use her like that. She'd heard far too many stories in which women were treated like nothing more than property, and she was *not* going to be anybody's property.

“What requirements?”

Ridaln bowed his head, keeping his eyes up. “I have yet to decide. You have shared everything that you recall of the Karell attack?”

He watched her, waiting for her to tell him that she hadn't, but that was one thing she had been completely honest with him about. Why would she lie about the Karell attack? Now that she knew what they were, she was thankful that she'd lived through it.

“Yes. I think that you have. There may be other requirements in time, though I don't know what they are.”

Sophie bit her lip. At least he wasn't trying to force her back to his room. Ridaln seemed almost... respectful with her. That didn't fit with what Caitlyn had said. “When can I see my brother again?”

The expression on Ridaln's face flattened, and with it, any hope that she might see Lan anytime soon. “I'm afraid that will be difficult.”

“Because you don't want me to see him?”

“Because he agreed to training. There are certain components to it that I'm not privy to.” He hesitated, considering her for a moment. “I will see what I can do. I

cannot make any promises, Sophie Varison, but I will find out whether I can get you an opportunity to visit him.”

She bit her lip again, knowing what Lan would say if he saw her, but then, he wasn't here, so he couldn't say anything. Sophie was going to find a way to get to him, even if it meant sneaking out of the palace. She needed to talk to him, especially after what Caitlyn had said.

“I will let you continue with your bath,” Ridaln said. “If you see Nessa, would you tell her that I'm looking for her?”

“Why are you looking for her?”

He shook his head. “It is of little importance. If you see her?”

Sophie debated telling him she wouldn't run his errands, or some other snappy response, but she only nodded. Why treat him that way, especially if he only wanted to speak to Nessa? Wasn't that what she was after, too?

“I will tell her,” she said.

Ridaln left her, and Sophie finally entered the bathing room. The air had a perfumed fragrance far more floral than it needed to be, and the massive tub overflowed with bubbles. Steam made it difficult to see anything, and she tried fanning it away from her, to no effect.

Sophie made her way to the back of the room, knowing that there would be a clearing there, and an easier way to see whoever might be in the tub. She didn't see anyone. There had been one person who had entered before she had—a woman she hadn't recognized, with dark hair and a round face. Had she not been trying to wait for Nessa, Sophie might have taken the time to meet the woman.

With no one here, she was of half a mind to climb into the bath and just soak. The perfume in the air was cloying, though, and she didn't really want to smell like that for days afterward. Well, maybe not days. The chances were good she'd end up back in the bath again soon, anyway.

She found the dressing chair and a stack of clothes on it.

Sophie turned back to the bath. The steam wasn't so thick she couldn't see someone in the tub. Where was the dark-haired woman she'd seen going into the bathing room?

But these weren't the dark-haired woman's clothes. That woman had been wearing a dress of maroon and midnight blue, not this gown of pale yellow and aqua.

Sophie grabbed the dress and held it up. She didn't think that she recognized it. As she folded it and set it back down, a ring slipped from a pocket she hadn't seen and landed on the cushion of the chair.

She picked up the ring and frowned at it. It reminded her of Nana's ring, though mostly because of the strange metal used to make it. The shape was different, as was the chain.

Where was the owner?

Sophie set the ring back on top of the dress and went to the tub. When she grabbed the sides of the tub, the water scalded her fingers and left them tingling.

She jerked her hand away.

The water had never been that hot when she'd bathed before. Water like that would be too hot...

Could something have happened to whoever was in here?

She took a step back, peering into the water, but saw nothing there that would make her think there was someone in the bath. Was there a way to check *in* the water?

Sophie looked around, but there was only the chair and the clothing.

Her gaze lingered on the dress—and the ring. There was something about it that felt wrong, but she wasn't quite sure what.

After taking the dress off, she used the chair to probe through the water. The chair was heavy, and the water made it even heavier as she tried to feel for someone in the water. The bath was deep enough to soak in, with a bench on the side to keep occupants from fully submerging.

Sophie had started pulling the chair back when it bumped up against something in the water.

She tried moving the chair around to bring it out but couldn't manage it.

Her gaze went back to the dress. If someone was in there, she had to help.

Sophie reached into the water and then jerked her hand back out. It was too hot for her. It was probably too hot for whoever was in the tub, but she couldn't simply do nothing.

Maybe *she* didn't have to do something.

She raced toward the door.

Would Ridaln even still be there? If he wasn't, there might not be anything that could be done for whoever was in the bath. Even if he was, would he be able to help?

She sprinted through the hallway and saw him in the distance.

"Ridaln!"

The man paused and turned slowly toward her. "I shouldn't have to tell you that one does not simply yell within the halls of the palace," he admonished as she reached him.

"I need your help in the bathing room."

His brow furrowed.

"Not like that. I think there's someone in the tub."

He started to smile. "If there's someone in the tub, then you most definitely do not need my help. Besides, I doubt they would be pleased to have me there."

"I think they're in the water. We don't have time." She grabbed his sleeve and was surprised that he didn't try to pull away from her. Thankful as well.

"Think?"

"There's a dress on the chair, but there's no one in there."

He started to slow. "Then why would you need my help?"

“Because I stuck the chair into the water, and I hit something. I think whoever is in the tub is *below* the water. It’s too hot for me to go in.”

They reached the door to the bathing room, and she found it cracked slightly. Had she left it like that? Sophie couldn’t remember if she had, but if she hadn’t, then did that mean someone else had come through here?

When she pushed the door open, steam wafted out, but not as much as it had before.

She pulled Ridaln into the room. He resisted somewhat, which she found surprising. Hadn’t Caitlyn made it seem like Ridaln would want to go into the bathing room, especially with her? As unsettling as that might be, she needed his help now.

“I don’t see a chair,” Ridaln said.

“Let the steam clear a little,” she said.

“I see through the steam just fine, Miss Varison.”

She glanced over at him, noting the silver in his eyes. Did he have some magic ability to see through the steam? If he was a sorcerer, he might. “I used the chair in the tub.”

“That is what you said, but I do not see the chair.”

Where was it? It had been here when she’d left, but where had she left it?

In the tub.

“I think it’s in the tub.”

He glanced at her. “If it was in the tub, then it is no longer. Didn’t you tell me there was a dress here?”

“There *was* a dress.” Now that she looked, she could see that the dress was missing. Where would that have gone?

Someone had been here after she’d left. That had to be the answer, but it made no sense that they would have taken the dress... or the chair.

“There was something in the tub, Ridaln. I know there was. If you could just—”

“Just what, Miss Varison? What do you think I am capable of doing?”

“I don’t know. Aren’t you supposed to be some kind of sorcerer?”

He looked at her with a hot intensity, and she suddenly wondered if she had miscalculated. Maybe Ridaln wasn’t a sorcerer at all. Maybe he was just the king’s adviser. Even in that, he would be a powerful man.

“Sorcerer? Is that what you’ve come to believe?”

Sophie blanched. “I...”

He shook his head. “I am well aware that there are rumors about me in the palace, but I would have expected someone as new to the palace as you to not be quite so prone to listening to those rumors. Perhaps that was my mistake.”

It wasn’t so much the rumors but the fact that they fit with all the stories that Nana had told her. “What do your silver eyes mean, then, if they don’t mean that you’re a sorcerer?”

He looked at her with bemusement. “They are my eyes, Miss Varison. That is all.” Ridaln turned his attention back to the tub. “Now, if there *is* someone in the tub, then we must find a way to drain it. I think...” He leaned over the edge of the tub, looking at the space beneath it where the coals were glowing. “Yes. There it is.” He lay on the edge of the raised platform and grunted. As he did, there was a loud hissing, and steam filled the room once more.

The water level in the tub began to drop.

He’d found a drain.

Why hadn’t Sophie thought of that? Rather than thinking through what she should do, she’d gone running from the room in search of help. Impulsive. The way she always was.

Ridaln straightened and wiped his hands on his jacket before glancing down at them and frowning. “That is interesting,” he murmured.

“What is? I told you the water was hot.”

He looked up, as if remembering that she was there. “Yes. The water *was* quite hot for a bath. But this is something else.”

“What?”

He ignored her and peered over the edge of the tub, saying nothing. Wrinkles formed at the corners of his eyes.

Sophie followed him with a growing apprehension.

“What do you see—”

Before she even had a chance to finish questioning him, she noticed what he must have seen.

There was a body in the tub.

It had long hair that clumped along the side of the now-empty tub. That was the only recognizable thing Sophie could make out. Otherwise, the flesh appeared scalded, practically peeling off. The body looked as if it had been boiled.

She turned away, unable to stomach looking at such a horrible death.

“The hot water did that?” she asked.

“No,” Ridaln answered. “The poison likely did.”

# CHAPTER 18

## SOPHIE

Her hand burned. Sophie slipped the glove off, stretched her fingers, and tried to work feeling into them. In the days since the bath incident, she had begun to have less and less feeling in her hand. Poison. That was what Ridaln had said. And she had touched it.

Sophie had seen what had happened to the woman in the bath, and she worried that she suffered from a similar effect. If she did, how long would it be before the skin on her hand began to slough off? She couldn't shake the horrific image of the flesh peeling off the woman as Ridaln had lifted her from the tub, nor could she shake the stench. It clung to her nostrils, as if she would smell it forever.

The kitchen was her best hope for removing the smell, but even the promise of Oleda's pastries wasn't enough to draw away the memory, which lingered as a mixture of odors in her nose, a combination of filth that she wanted only to ignore.

"You already had breakfast," Oleda said, appearing from around one of the massive counters in the kitchen, carrying a mixing spoon. She wore a brown apron today, and it was dusted with white.

"And it was delicious," Sophie said. She'd had pancakes with a berry syrup and sausages. There had been poached eggs, but the smell had reminded her too much of the bath, so she had passed on them, but not before gagging. There hadn't been any pastries for breakfast, but just because they weren't out didn't mean they weren't made. That was what Sophie hoped for this time.



Oleda smacked her hand with the spoon. “Delicious? You didn’t have any eggs.”

“You noticed?”

Oleda shrugged her broad shoulders and slipped her hand around Sophie’s waist, guiding her away from the middle of the kitchen, where people moved through. Sophie said their names to herself, pleased that there weren’t any she didn’t know. “I notice when you don’t eat the way you have every other day. I notice when you make a face when I mention my food.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Don’t you worry about that. What’s happened?”

Oleda sat her on a stool facing a counter. The surface of the counter was coated with flour, and there was a lump of dough rising near her. The smell of it was pleasant, and nothing like the eggs that had reminded her of the bath and the flesh and the...

“There was an accident,” she said. Was that all it had been, or had it been something else? Ridaln didn’t want her to speak of it to anyone until he figured out who had been in the tub. Sophie had no idea how he planned to determine that, especially considering all that he had was the color of her hair, and even that might not be right after soaking in poisoned water. “I can’t get it out of my head.”

Oleda frowned as she studied her. “An accident? There hasn’t been any talk of an accident.”

Had she said too much? If anyone was plugged into the gossip of the palace, it was Oleda. The cooks went everywhere, because everyone had to eat. Likely they wouldn’t even be noticed. Not everyone made a point of trying to remember names like Sophie did. Some preferred to see the cooks as nothing more than decoration.

“I’m not supposed to talk about it,” Sophie said.

“Don’t worry. I won’t try to make you talk if you don’t want to.” Oleda watched her for a moment. “Whatever it was must have been something.”

Sophie sniffed. “It was something all right.” She wiped the flour off her hands, dusting them on her dress. She’d found a colorful dress that would have made Nana happy. The colors were vibrant, stripes of yellow and pale blue that reminded her of a sunny day. Or the garden. Maybe the garden would help her ignore the stench.

“Would a pastry help you get over your trauma?” Oleda asked.

Sophie smiled. “I thought you would never ask.”

The large woman smiled and slid off her stool, then disappeared toward the back of the kitchen. Sophie leaned on her elbows, breathing in the smells of the kitchen. The longer she sat here, the easier it became. Maybe she *could* begin to move past the horrible smell. That didn’t help her get over the memory of what she had seen. Sophie worried she would have nightmares about it, but thankfully, she’d had none yet.

What had happened troubled her. Why would someone have been poisoned? And why use the bath to do it? Sophie could think of three... no, five... no, a dozen ways in which people had been poisoned in stories. Any of them would have been better than filling a bath with poison and scalding water. Anyone could have gotten into the bath. *Sophie* could have gotten into the bath.

She hadn’t pieced that part together yet.

What would have happened had she climbed in?

What must it have been like for the poor woman who *had*?

As Oleda appeared, carrying two pastries, Sophie tried to push those thoughts out of her mind. They did nothing other than make her feel terrible.

“This is strawberry,” Oleda said, offering a golden pastry to her. The crust glistened. Sophie hadn’t been hungry before, but now her stomach began to growl. “And this is your favorite.”

Sophie smiled. “Boysenberry?”

Oleda nodded. “Now, don’t you go telling anyone that I gave that to you. That’s the king’s favorite as well, and I can’t have anyone knowing that I gave you a treat meant for him.”

“I don’t want to take something that’s meant for the king,” she said.

Oleda waved her hand. “There are plenty. And I can always make more. But there are people in the palace who refuse to eat the rhubarb, thinking that it will upset the king.”

“Will it?”

Oleda shrugged. “Who’s to know the mind of a king?”

Sophie brought the pastries to her nose and took a deep breath. They were just what she needed, a way to remove the memory of the poison in the tub, and she was able to push away those thoughts as she breathed in the sweet aroma of the pastries.

“Thank you.”

“Now, I’ve got to get back to work.” Oleda watched Sophie for a moment. “I’m here if you need someone to listen. I’ve got good ears and tight lips, so don’t you worry about me spreading anything that you don’t want out there.”

Sophie took another breath of the pastry and smiled at Oleda. “Thank you.”

She slipped off the stool and made her way out of the kitchen, and she bumped into Nessa in the hallway.

“Watch... Sophie Varison. What have you there?” Nessa asked, eyeing the pastries. “Oleda must have taken a liking to you.”

“Because she let me have a pastry?” Sophie asked. It seemed a strange comment, but then the more she had been around Nessa, the stranger she had thought the woman to be.

“Because she let you have rhubarb.” She glanced at Sophie’s face and smiled. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell the king that you’ve gone and eaten his favorite treat.”

“It’s not the last one,” Sophie said.

“I’m sure it’s not, even if boysenberries are difficult to harvest around Neylash.”

Sophie hadn’t known that, which made her taking one of the king’s favorites even more of an issue. Would he be mad if he learned that she had taken his pastry? It seemed such a small thing, but then, she didn’t know the mind of the king.

“You seem troubled,” Nessa said, watching her.

The question reminded Sophie of the fact that she had gone in search of Nessa when she had found the woman in the bath. She was thankful it hadn’t been Nessa. As strange as she could be with her, Sophie didn’t want anything to happen to the woman. She seemed so regal that nothing should happen to her.

“I’m glad you’re well,” Sophie said.

“Did you worry that I would not be?” Nessa asked. She brushed a strand of hair back from her face, grinning at Sophie.

What kind of foolish comment had she made? She didn’t need to worry Nessa about what might have happened, especially as Nessa was completely well. It wouldn’t do anything other than make her worry, and she suspected that wouldn’t make Ridaln very happy, regardless of how he might feel about Nessa. “I... I just haven’t seen you in a few days.”

Nessa sniffed. “I do have other responsibilities than simply talking to Ridaln’s new pet. Would you prefer that I give you my schedule, Sophie Varison?”

She shook her head. This wasn’t going at all how she had hoped it would. She wanted Nessa to like her, but she always seemed to say the wrong thing. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I... I’m *not* Ridaln’s pet,” she said.

“No? The fact that he brought you here and keeps you the way that he does would seem to indicate otherwise. It makes the rest of us realize what we’re missing.”

Sophie frowned at Nessa. Why was she saying things like that? “He doesn’t *keep* me,” Sophie said. “He’s... I don’t know what he’s doing with me, but it’s not keeping me.”

Nessa grinned, and Sophie noted a slight twinkle in her eye. Was Nessa teasing her? Normally, Sophie was so much better at recognizing that sort of thing, but with Nessa, she just wasn't, maybe because she wanted Nessa to like her, and she usually didn't feel that so strongly.

"Maybe *you're* Ridaln's pet," Sophie said. If nothing else, she could try to irritate Nessa as much as she had been irritated.

Nessa didn't take the bait. Sophie wasn't surprised. She doubted much disturbed Nessa. She was too composed for that. "Ah. Good. I was beginning to think the fire that I saw when you first came to Neylash had already been extinguished. You wouldn't be the first girl with such flame to be quenched. It would be a shame were that to be so."

Nessa tipped her head in a slight bow and started away, down the hall.

Sophie watched her go, wishing that she had asked more about where Nessa had been. Belatedly, she realized that she should have mentioned Ridaln had been looking for Nessa.

What would she do now? She didn't want to go to the bathing room again, not after what she'd seen. Even if she could ignore the smell that lingered in her nostrils, Sophie didn't think she could ignore the memory.

Staying in the palace had become boring. That was a thought she had never expected to have, but there was no getting around it. She could only lounge in the bath or sit in the library or even linger in the kitchen for so long. After a while, she felt that she needed to be doing something.

The garden.

When she'd been in the kitchen, she had thought of the garden. Maybe the scents would help her lose the stink from the bath, and if they didn't, maybe she could sneak a few flowers back to her room. That way, she could ignore it better.

When she stepped outside, the humidity hit her and set her off sweating. She *hated* sweating. It was probably why she

hated running, too. Lan had always teased her about it, but she didn't need to run to feel strong.

The sun shone brightly, and there were a couple of men with Petra, following him as he made his way through the garden. When he saw her, he nodded briefly but gave no other acknowledgment. That was strange. Petra usually treated her more kindly, so his ignoring her irritated her, probably more so after speaking with Nessa. She was tired of being ignored. Whatever the reason she had been brought to the palace, she didn't deserve to be ignored, and she was most certainly not Ridaln's stupid pet.

As she made her way toward the men, Petra glanced in her direction and shook his head slightly. Why would he wave her away? She'd spent time in the garden, enough that he shouldn't dismiss her quite so easily—unless it was some sort of warning.

She veered away but circled close enough to listen. Maybe she could overhear what they were saying and get a better idea of why Petra was now acting strangely. He watched her out of the corner of his eye, but she ignored the glances he gave her. If he wasn't going to talk to her, then she wouldn't talk to him, either.

Sophie drifted toward the edge of the garden, pretending to inspect different flowers. As she often did, she noted the pattern to the flowers, and though Petra claimed otherwise, she knew it had to be intentional.

“What is the purpose of these?” she heard one man say. He had an accent she couldn't place, and it was so thick she could hardly understand him.

“These are decorative, my lord,” Petra said.

Lord? Who was Petra guiding through the garden?

Despite the length of time that she'd been in the palace, she had yet to meet any royalty, and certainly hadn't so much as seen the king. It would make sense that he would come out to the garden, especially as this was where Petra claimed that

he often visited. It was one reason Sophie spent time in the garden, thinking she would catch sight of him.

“Decorative only? What’s the point of that?” This came from the other man with Petra, his voice raspy and carrying an angry edge. Sophie immediately didn’t care for him. There were too many boys that had sounded like that in Halith, and they had never been nice.

“There are many purposes to such decoration, my lord.” Petra’s voice was clipped. He sounded nervous.

What would make him nervous? Perhaps it was because the king didn’t like his garden. Sophie didn’t know how the king could not like the garden. It was amazing and beautiful, and the fragrances here took away everything that she had smelled in the bathing room, more than even the pastries did.

Reminded of her pastries, she took a bite, keeping her gaze on a particularly pale lavender set of flowers. They all had long petals that curled outward, though thorns on the stems reminded her of roses.

“Besides, their perfume is enough to mask even the foulest odors. We use it in many places throughout the palace.”

Sophie’s ears perked up at that. If the flowers they were looking at could be used in that way, she would have to find out what they were. If she could sneak a few cuttings, the flowers would be nice in her room, and maybe she could use them to keep from remembering the horrible stench of the bathing room.

“There are many of my men who would benefit from such a thing,” the other said.

Petra bowed his head. “Yes, my lord. They are quite lovely, despite not having any secondary uses.”

That was an odd way to describe flowers. When these men were gone, Sophie would have to ask Petra what sorts of secondary uses he had for flowers. They were pretty, and they smelled nice. Those were the only uses Sophie had ever known for flowers.

They moved past her, but she was too out in the open to attempt to follow, and she didn't want to risk irritating Petra *that* much. She had probably already annoyed him by sneaking along the side of the garden and listening.

Instead, she watched them. The men were dressed well, in dark jackets and pants, and they both had dark hair that they wore slicked back. The older of the two—the one she thought had the thicker accent—had a pointed and oiled beard. It was a style she hadn't seen in Neylash, though she hadn't managed to get very far in the palace. And she hadn't been outside the walls.

She turned to the gate leading into the gardens. Beyond it was the rest of the city. From there, she would find freedom. Was that what she wanted?

Staying here seemed a luxury, but it was a form of captivity, wasn't it? It might be a pleasant form of captivity, but it was captivity nonetheless.

She had to get out. She had to find her brother. And then they had to decide what they were going to do, whether that meant they would return to Halith or whether they would do something else. Either way, she had to find him, because it didn't seem as if Lan was doing anything to find her.

What sort of luxurious captivity would they have him held in? It was probably another part of the palace that she hadn't seen. She didn't know where the soldiers would be found, and that had to be how he was spending his days.

She sighed. It seemed strange to be thinking about escaping, especially as she had once dreamed of living within a palace, but this wasn't for her. The longer she was here, the clearer it became. The people were nice, but it was a superficial sort of niceness. Not all of them. There were those, like Oleda and many of the other servants, that Sophie had met who treated her with kindness, but she didn't really know what Nessa thought of her, much like she didn't really know what Ridaln wanted with her. Not his pet, regardless of what Nessa said, and not for the things that Caitlyn had suggested.

But what was she to do? Why was she here?



Those were answers she still hadn't managed to get, and the longer she stayed, the more she wondered if she ever would. Maybe that was reason enough to leave.

She finally pulled her gaze from the gate leading away from the palace. Not yet. She would leave, but she would try to understand more first—and maybe learn where she could find Lan.

# CHAPTER 19

## LAN

His boots thudded on the cobbles, each step jarring Lan's injured leg. He tried to ignore the pain, but it throbbed, leaving him with a slight limp that worsened the longer they marched. He'd lost track of how far they had gone so far today. It was at least around the city.

His mouth was dry, and though he had a waterskin, he didn't dare drink from it. Not until he knew how far he'd need to march today. His new commander, Karn, had given no indication. In the days that Lan had been working with him, there had been few answers. Karn expected him to follow, so Lan followed. What choice did he have?

As he often did, Lan looked at the others with him. He wasn't the only new recruit Karn was attempting to train. There were others, enough for him to understand why there had been hesitation about his age. Lan was by far the oldest. Most of the others were no older than Sophie, reminding him of the boy he'd nearly killed. Nearly. He had to tell himself that, not wanting to believe that he actually had killed the boy. Doubt nibbled at the back of his mind, though.

They changed direction. There was no command other than a tap on the ground of what Karn called his training stick. The first time he had done this, Lan hadn't understood, and one of the other boys had collided with him. Now Lan knew what was expected of him, at least when it came to the march. There were plenty of other things that Lan still didn't understand. Hopefully, he would learn what was expected of

him in time. If he didn't, he would suffer. They had demonstrated that quite clearly to him.

There was a rhythm to the march, and other than the pain throbbing through his leg—pain that Lan refused to acknowledge—he enjoyed it. Not as much as he enjoyed the time spent working with the sword. That was what he considered a reward. From the very beginning, he had discovered that he hadn't used anything resembling sword technique. What he had used on the tree had been nothing more than hacking. What Tohm demonstrated to him was far more skilled than Lan had ever imagined.

“Halt!”

Lan stopped immediately. If he didn't, not only would he crash into the others in front of him, but Karn would smack him with his training stick, and that hurt.

Karn made his way through the ranks of boys, and Lan heard someone being struck by the stick. It was a sharp smack, and he expected the boy to cry out, but they never did. When Lan was struck—something that happened far more often than he liked—he tried not to make any sound, but he didn't think he had been all that successful.

“March!” Karn ordered.

As one, they started forward. Lan didn't understand the purpose of the forced march, or what Karn hoped they would learn, but he wasn't about to call him out and question him, not with others around and not when there was the danger of another strike. He tried to let his mind go blank, wanting to think of nothing more than the next step, losing himself in the march the same way that he lost himself when working with Nana and her weaves. There was something to doing that which felt far more natural than this forced march, though he couldn't admit that to anyone. If he admitted that he actually enjoyed weaving, what would Sophie say?

Nothing. Sophie would support him the way she always had. She would be proud of him for finding something that he was skilled at. She always managed to support him, and did so much better than he supported her.

As they marched, he worried about Sophie. Had the strange silver-eyed man taken her somewhere like where Tohm had taken Lan? Would she have been forced to fight other women in the same way? Lan didn't like that idea. She was tough, but physical combat wasn't Sophie's strength. She wanted—and deserved—affection.

Lan realized too late that he had missed a command. He had drifted out of position, and someone bumped into him. Maybe he'd even missed the command to stop. He was quickly looking around, trying to figure out where he was supposed to be, when the training stick crashed into the side of his injured leg.

Lan cried out. He couldn't help it.

Karn appeared in front of him, looking up at him. “Varison. You need to keep your focus at all times. The moment you lose focus is the moment you're blindsided by an attack. The men with you demand your attention and your focus, much as you should demand theirs. Do you understand?”

*They're boys!* his mind shouted, but they were words he didn't dare say aloud. Instead, he nodded. What else could he do? “I understand.” His mouth was dry, and the words came out on a thickened tongue.

Karn regarded him for a moment. His eyes had a hint of silver but were more a flat gray. What did that mean?

The training stick crashed into his leg again. Did Karn know that was the one that had been injured and hadn't fully healed yet? Was that why he continued to strike it, or was it chance?

“I'm not sure that you do understand, Varison. I plan to make certain that you do. You will learn to focus, and not to lose focus, because the moment you do—”

The training stick smacked into his back. Lan didn't even see the strike coming, but it sent him staggering forward. He crashed into a boy in front of him, who didn't move. Lan didn't blame him. Had the boy moved, he would have suffered

the same fate as Lan. Most of the boys were likely happy that it was Lan getting smacked rather than them.

“I will march next to you and make certain you’re paying attention,” Karn sneered. “Do you understand me?”

“I understand,” he said, gritting his teeth as another attack struck his leg. It was the same Darish-blasted leg each time.

“March!” Karn said.

Everyone immediately started forward, lurching quickly into a rapid pace. Lan tried to hide his limp, but it was difficult, and every step forced him to keep his jaw set to avoid crying out. At the first sign of a limp, Karn’s stick smashed into his leg, and Lan had to ignore the pain so that he could keep the same pace as the others.

They reached the outer edge of the city, and Karn shifted direction again. This time, he marched them along the edge of the city, keeping them out of the streets. There was more room for them to work, and he began to have them change direction quickly. A few times, they even completely reversed course.

None of the other boys lagged behind, and Lan did his best to ignore the pain screaming through his leg. As promised, Karn remained next to him, smacking him as he went, using any sign of a limp or the slightest hesitation as reason to hit him.

Frustration began to change to anger. The training stick stung when it hit him, but it was more the repetition and the fact that Karn focused on him rather than anyone else. Was he so angry that Lan had fought Tohm that he wanted to get revenge for his friend? Or was there some other reason? Was Karn the same as those in the first place he’d been brought to, men who seemed to think that Lan was too old for whatever training they had gone through and intended to prove it?

They turned back toward the city, passing along a wide street. People cleared out the way around them, giving them a wide berth as they passed. Lan managed to maintain his focus, despite the assault of the training stick, until they turned a corner and the palace came into view.

He'd not seen it before, not clearly. When he did, he stumbled, unable to take his eyes off the gleaming white stone that seemed to call to him.

As soon as he stumbled, he knew that he'd made a mistake.

The training stick collided with his leg painfully.

Without thinking, Lan swung toward Karn.

His fist landed.

Too late, he realized what he had done. He looked over in horror and saw Karn rubbing his jaw, blood dribbling down his chin from a split lip.

"You've had enough?" Karn asked, his voice pitched dangerously low.

Lan swallowed, steeling himself for the next strike. Another one was bound to come, and he didn't think Karn would take it easy on him. He braced for the inevitable pain.

Karn drew back the training stick. Lan's eyes were drawn to it. He couldn't help it. As he watched it, he could tell that it would arc toward his leg.

"Now you think to hold back?" Karn said.

Lan grabbed the stick before it could strike him, and twisted it free.

Karn reached for it, but Lan jerked it back.

What was he doing? He knew better than to torment Karn like this. He knew better than to risk greater punishment. But his leg throbbed, a gnawing sort of pain that made it difficult for him to think of anything other than stopping it.

And maybe Karn wanted him to take the training stick from him. Wasn't that similar to the lessons he'd been taught in other places? Fight back, survive, and he would be treated differently—fed or brought out of the cell or even brought into a sort of training.

Lan was taller than Karn, and he held the stick away from him, keeping Karn from it. Karn watched him with a

dangerous glint in his eyes.

“What do you think you’re doing, Varison?” Karn asked.

“You’ve made your point.”

Where was this coming from? He knew better than to antagonize the man. Likely Karn would leave him beaten on the side of the road and simply continue the march without him.

“Have I? And now you command?”

Lan forced himself to meet Karn’s eyes. It was difficult, especially as he wanted nothing more than to look away. He had been raised to respect authority and rarely questioned it.

“I don’t want to command. You’ve made your point.”

“And what point is that, Varison?”

“You want me to focus.”

“Do you think that was the point?”

Lan blinked. Wasn’t it? What else would Karn have wanted to demonstrate to him if not that?

“Hand it back.”

Lan glanced at the stick. He still held it overhead, keeping it beyond Karn’s reach. The shorter man seemed not to mind and somehow managed to make himself appear imposing enough to force Lan to do what he wanted anyway. Had he been anywhere else in the city, Lan might have been compelled to do what Karn wanted.

Standing where they were, with the palace looming before him, he felt compelled to do *something*. Maybe it didn’t matter what he did. It only mattered that he stopped allowing Karn to harm him.

“No more attacks,” Lan said.

“I command this squad. I’ll decide how many more attacks there should be.”

Lan hazarded a quick glance at the others with him. Some wore a grim look of desperation, while others looked thankful

that Karn was focusing his attention on Lan. None seemed willing to speak up for him—not that he could blame them. He didn't know whether he would speak up were he in their place.

“Stop hitting that leg. You know it was broken,” Lan said.

Karn grabbed for the stick, and Lan let him take it back.

What would the man do? Lan could think of two ways in which he might respond, and neither of them was pleasant. He would either attack Lan again or abuse him in different ways. Lan had met others like Karn before, so he wouldn't be surprised by either response.

Karn glared at Lan. “Fall in.”

Lan nodded and did as commanded.

They started off again, Karn now leading them. Lan kept his focus, not wanting to draw Karn's attention again, and he was thankful that he had managed to get away with nothing more than he had already received.

He was able to ignore the throbbing in his leg and the fear that the injury might have been worsened. By the time they made it back to the barracks, he was moving with a much lighter step.

A victory. It might have been a minor victory, but it was the first one he'd had since he'd come here, and it felt good.



# CHAPTER 20

## LAN

Lan rested his head on his pillow, staring at the bunk above him. The boy sleeping there snored, making it difficult for Lan to get any rest. He preferred quiet, and if not real quiet, at least a semblance of it, nothing more than the sounds of the night or the occasional howls of wolves.

His mind continued to race, and his body ached. He'd been struck again today on the march, though this time it had not been Karn. The soldier leading the squad had been a younger man—one who was nearly Lan's age—and he had taken a sadistic sort of delight in correcting everyone on the march, not just Lan. Had the leader focused only on him, Lan might have felt compelled to do something, but as it had been everyone, what point would there have been in trying to resist? At least he hadn't seemed as interested in focusing on his legs as Karn had. That was some small relief for his injured leg but did nothing for arms that now throbbed where he'd been repeatedly struck.

The room stank. It was the stench of dried sweat, which nothing could mask. Most of the boys were given an opportunity to bathe, and Lan suspected they chose not to. Not him. He couldn't stomach remaining filthy. Every opportunity he was given, he scrubbed himself clean, regardless of how freezing cold the water might be. He made a point of rinsing his clothes, too, and wore them to dry them.

Lan knew sleep would eventually claim him, but he couldn't slow his thoughts enough for that to happen. All he

wanted was rest. If he didn't get any, tomorrow would be as bad as today, and he would end up on the wrong side of the training stick.

Someone moved in the room, and Lan tensed.

The boys who shared the bunk room with him were all here. There shouldn't be any movement... unless it came from one of the soldiers, but why would they have come in here?

Maybe they hadn't.

It could have been his imagination, though Lan didn't think so.

He pretended to sleep. That seemed the safest option.

The movement shifted away from the wall, scraping along the floor.

This time, there was no questioning that he heard it.

"Careful," someone whispered.

Was there more than one person here?

The sound came closer. Now Lan could make out the steady breathing of whoever was in the room with him, a slow and controlled breathing that tried to mask its presence and failed. It was nearby, near enough that he could hear it.

They were coming for him.

Lan spun around on his bunk and kicked.

He didn't pay any attention to who he kicked. He only knew that if someone was coming for him in the middle of the night, no good could come of it. His foot—the injured leg—struck someone and sent them staggering back.

Someone else jumped on his legs. Fists began striking him in the thighs, the stomach, and the side.

Lan worked to control the panic that threatened to overwhelm him. Panicking now would not get him out of this. He focused on the person holding his legs. The blows hurt, but whoever attacked had left themselves open.

He brought his elbow down, crashing into the back of their head.

The attacks stopped.

Lan elbowed them again, harder, and winced as he did. Too much, and he risked breaking his own arm. All he needed was to incapacitate them.

Someone reached for his neck, and a hand or an arm started to squeeze.

Lan let them squeeze, bringing his chin down sharply, trying to dislodge the connection. He punched at the space where the attacker would need to be, and he was happy when his fist collided with someone.

The attacks ceased.

He spun off the bed and stood, quickly taking stock of the situation. There were three attackers. He was disappointed to realize that two of them shared a bunk room with him. How many of the other boys would think to attack?

Lan couldn't take that chance.

He reached the middle of the room, giving himself enough space to fight if forced to continue. One of the boys that he'd already hit lunged for his ankles, and Lan stomped on him, driving him back to the floor. He gave him a sharp kick to the back of the head for good measure. Had he been wearing his boots, maybe he would have been able to put more force into it, but he had to be satisfied with only dropping the boy.

Someone reached for him, and Lan spun, swinging with his fist. There was no technique to a fight like this, nothing but brawling, and the only thing that had saved him so far was the fact that he was larger than the other boys. There were more of them, though.

Now another boy joined in.

Lan shook his head as the boy who slept above him slipped off his bunk.

"Don't do this." He hadn't bothered to learn the boy's name. He remembered faces but had to work at remembering

names.

The boy's gaze flicked past him, and Lan turned quickly, but not quickly enough.

Another boy lunged into him.

He caught Lan in his stomach and dropped him.

Someone kicked him, catching him in the side of his head.

Lan tried fighting back, but doing so was difficult when he couldn't see, and with his now-ringing ears.

Another kick to his stomach curled him up.

Lan wrapped his arms around his head as more blows started to come, raining down on him. He no longer had the strength to fight, though he wanted to. The abuse continued unabated, each attack hitting him with enough force that he could focus only on the pain he now felt. It was a reminder of when he had first been captured, and when he had first been tossed into the fighting pit and forced to survive so that he could eat, only this time there didn't seem to be any chance for survival.

“What is this?”

Lan hadn't dared hope that the assault would end, but a booming voice cut through the pain and the sound of his whimpering. He hated the noise he was making, but he hated more the pain his assaulters were inflicting upon him.

Slowly the violence being worked upon him began to ease.

He felt hands on his arms, and then there were others, now pressing on his face and his side. They were rough, but they were not touching him with the same anger that he'd already experienced. At least this meant some chance of help.

“Get up.”

Lan tried to blink but couldn't see through the pain.

That wasn't it, he realized. Blood dripped down his face, making it difficult to see. It pooled in his eyes and obscured his vision.

He didn't recognize the voice, but he recognized the tone. There were enough men with commanding voices like that, some who were barely older than him.

The command came again. "Get up."

Lan tried standing, tried following the request, but his legs didn't want to respond. "I... I can't."

His voice came out weak, even to his ears. He hated the way it sounded, and he wished that he could be stronger, more like his papa, but that wasn't him. He tried, but maybe all of this had been a mistake. Lan had no fight left in him, and he allowed himself to be moved.

He sensed himself being dragged but couldn't see through the tears and the blood that still clouded his vision. He suspected they took him out of the room, but even that wasn't certain. Did he dare try opening his eyes?

As he was dragged, he tried keeping his alertness, but with every passing moment, that became increasingly difficult. Pain throbbed in him, a kind of agony that he hadn't experienced even in the fighting pits. This was an agony from dozens and dozens of injuries, each enough that he wanted nothing more than to curl up and let the end come for him. That was what he'd reached, wasn't it? This was the end. This was his end.

The movement stopped. "Stay with me."

The voice held the same echoes of command as the other. For all he knew, it was the same voice, but there wasn't nearly as much anger in it. Did he recognize it? He tried opening his eyes, but they didn't do as he needed.

Hands moved along him again, and he no longer attempted to fight. Why had he tried to fight before? There was no purpose in fighting, no purpose other than delaying whatever was going to happen to him.

He felt something on his face, and it took a moment to realize that what he detected was a cloth, and it wiped the blood and tears away from his forehead. A gentle touch, almost compassionate, something Lan had begun to feel unworthy of experiencing.

“Can you open your eyes?”

“I don’t know.”

The person helping him grunted. “Don’t know, or won’t try?”

Lan blinked. He was willing to try, even if he didn’t think that his eyes would work as they should. When he managed to get them open, he saw that he was in a small room. A man he didn’t know stood over him, and he watched, saying nothing.

“Who are you?” Lan asked.

“You get beat as you did, and that’s your first question?”

Lan looked around the room, trying to figure out where he was, trying to understand what was happening. He rested on a cot. Jars sat on a table near him, and there were sharp implements lying on the table, which gleamed in the lantern light. He couldn’t take his attention off them.

“Are those for me?”

The man glanced to the table, and when he turned his attention back to Lan, a smile crossed his face. “Those? Do you have secrets you intend to keep from us?”

Lan shook his head. “I don’t even know who you are. I don’t want to keep secrets from you.”

“Good.”

Lan rested his head back and stared up at the ceiling. He couldn’t make it out very well but noted that planks of wood ran crosswise over his head. There seemed to be a pattern in the wood, a rhythm to it that reminded him of weaving. Since he had come here, he hadn’t thought of his nana and papa much. He was sad that they were gone, but after losing his parents, he was no longer surprised by death.

“What is this place?” Lan asked.

“I’m known as the Fixer.”

Lan breathed a few times before the man’s comment registered. “Fixer? What kinds of things do you fix?”

He looked up at the man and noted his long face and hollow eyes, features that made him appear gaunt. He was smaller than most of the soldiers and had wispy yellow hair. “I fix all sorts of things. In this case, it seems that I was asked to fix you.”

“Fix me how?”

“You were assaulted. It wouldn’t be the first time that’s happened, but we rarely see so many boys jump another. You must have done something truly awful to have warranted that.”

Lan searched his mind, trying to figure out what he might have done to deserve such a beating, but he could come up with nothing. Were they angry because he had drawn extra attention to them? Or was it simply their way of trying to eliminate him from their ranks? He could imagine Karn asking the others to teach him a lesson, and with the abuse that he had sustained, it was a lesson Lan felt had been taught.

“I don’t know.”

The Fixer worked around the cot, occasionally wiping at Lan. When he did, it was a gentle touch, with the same surprising compassion Lan had felt when the man had cleansed his face. “You will need quite a bit of stitching. Unfortunately, it will scar. There is nothing that can be done about that. I will do my best to minimize the scarring, but there are limits to even my skill.”

Lan tried moving on the cot and found that his legs didn’t respond quite as well as they needed to.

The Fixer placed his hand across Lan’s legs, holding him down. “That would not be a good idea,” the man said.

“Why not?”

“The bone is shattered.”

It surprised Lan that he wasn’t even aware of the broken bone in his leg. The pain had become nothing more than a blur, a constant agony shooting through his leg, but it was no worse than the pain in his side or in his arms or even in his face.

“How badly am I hurt?”

The Fixer mumbled something that Lan didn't quite hear.

“How badly?” he asked again.

“You will take some work. Don't worry.” The Fixer ran a soft cloth along Lan's arms.

The touch sent tingling across his skin, and he involuntarily sucked in a breath, sending new agony racing through his body. It was pain that he felt despite the other injuries, a focused and sharp sensation that he could not ignore.

“Yes, you will take some work.” This last seemed spoken by the Fixer mostly to himself, and Lan tried not to think about how badly he was hurt, or what it might mean for him.



## CHAPTER 21

### SOPHIE

Sophie made her way along the inside of the wall surrounding the palace, trailing her fingers along the vines that grew into the stone. The pain in her hand had retreated, healing quickly enough that she wondered if the poison hadn't been as bad as Ridaln had claimed. Every so often, she would still feel a tingling, but with each day, the pain lessened.

The vines snaked along, somehow clinging to the stone. Had Petra planted these to complement his garden? There were no flowers on the vines, and they didn't have the same fragrance that the flowers carried, but there was something pungent about them. The stems of the vines were velvety, but a strange, almost coarse sort of velvety. She avoided touching the leaves, having learned that their sharp edges could prick her fingers.

At least she had managed to finally ignore the stench that had lingered within her nostrils for days after leaving the bathing room. She'd secretly cut a few bunches of flowers to help and had decorated her small room with them. The fragrance made it easier to ignore the memory of that poisoning in the bath. It wasn't gone, not completely, but that was why she kept coming here.

She could wait and be patient as she tried to figure out the timing of leaving the palace. There had to be some way to escape, and though she hated that it was an escape, it was time for her to learn more about the city.

Since she'd last seen him in the garden, Petra had been unavailable. She stopped worrying that something had happened to him when a new planter had appeared with dozens of sprouts rising from the dirt. Maybe Petra was only avoiding her, but that didn't change how much it annoyed her.

She'd gone in search of Nessa and hadn't found her, either. Sophie wanted answers, and to find out what might have happened to her brother, but the people she knew best within the palace were no help.

Which was why she'd come here. Something about the garden was peaceful. She was able to clear her mind and hope to come up with the next step she needed to take, whatever that might be. If that involved finding a way to escape, searching for patterns to those who might come and go through the garden gate, she would do it. Unfortunately, she'd found none, as the gate was often watched.

The only patterns she'd noted were those in the garden itself, especially in the arrangements of the flowers. She tried to ignore them, especially as Petra had claimed they didn't exist, but each time she came here, the patterns seemed to have changed. Maybe they were simply her imagination. How could the patterns change that frequently?

She glanced up at the sky. Maybe it was sunlight that changed them rather than anything to do with the flowers. That would make more sense. Papa had understood that she loved Nana's stories, but he'd wanted her to think through problems to find the most logical explanation. In this case, the most logical explanation was that the shifting sunlight changed something about the flowers, but Sophie didn't know enough about gardening. Maybe that was why Petra denied that there was a pattern, because there wasn't.

She paused at the gate, testing the handle and finding it locked. Sophie hadn't expected otherwise, but at least now she knew it was locked, confining her to the garden. There had to be another way out of the palace. Maybe that was something she could ask Nessa the next time she found her.

There was another person she could ask, and she wondered why she hadn't considered going to Oleda before. The cook knew most of the gossip within the palace, and she was connected in ways that Sophie never would be.

She'd wasted enough time in the garden for the day. It was time to find answers, though if Oleda didn't have them, she would need to try to push Ridaln.

She made her way to the kitchen and found a flurry of activity. Dozens of cooks hurried around, and she smiled at each, greeting them by name as they passed. One of them, a younger girl Sophie had gotten to know, seemed especially frantic.

"What is it, Lucy? Why is everyone so busy today?"

Lucy shook her head. She had her dirty-blond hair tucked into a bun, and a brown ribbon tied it in place. She had high cheekbones, the kind that reminded Sophie of royalty, but Lucy claimed she was as common-born as they came. "There's going to be a banquet tonight. A delegation from Dunvale has come. I'm sorry, Sophie, but I can't talk." She forced a smile. "I'll find you later, I promise!"

Lucy hurried off, and she left Sophie standing in the kitchen amid all the others hurrying around her, feeling as if she was in the way. She didn't want to be in the way, and she didn't want to cause trouble for Oleda or those working for her.

Sophie moved to hover along the edge of the kitchen as she searched for Oleda. Now that she was here, it couldn't hurt to ask. And all she really wanted was to have Oleda help her look for her brother. How could that be much of a problem?

She found the cook near the oven, moving quickly from place to place as she supervised the work. Oleda was as focused as Sophie had ever seen her, and it made her hesitate to even consider interrupting her work.

She couldn't be that selfish, could she?

Nana would have been angry. Sophie knew better than to interrupt a woman like Oleda when she was as busy as she

was.

When she started to turn away, she heard Oleda's voice. "Pastries are in the pantry. You don't have to feel bad about asking."

Sophie turned back to Oleda and smiled. "I didn't actually come for pastries this time, but thank you."

"Not for pastries?" Oleda paused with a large spoon resting on one forearm. It dripped a clear liquid, likely broth, from the smell of the kitchen. "Are you feeling all right, girl?"

Sophie smiled. "I feel fine."

"If you're not here for food, then you can see we're a bit busy. The king has agreed to hold a banquet with a delegation from Dunvale." There was more than a hint of annoyance in Oleda's tone, and Sophie wondered whether the cook disagreed with the king's willingness to meet with the western people.

"I can see that. I won't bother you."

Oleda considered her for a moment before walking over to her. She leaned close, a worried crease on her brow. "Out with it. I can see something is bothering you. At least with this, you seem interested in asking for help."

"It's my brother. We came to the city together, but I haven't seen him since. I don't know what's happened to him, or if he's even well."

"What's his name?"

"Lan Varison. We came in with Ridaln's soldiers—"

Oleda's eyes widened. "Oh. If you came with them, I don't know that I'll be able to help."

"I understand."

"It's not that I don't want to help, mind you. It's that I don't have the same gossip outside of the palace as I have within it. Your best bet is to ask Ridaln. He's the one who brought you here, isn't he?"

Sophie sighed. “He is, but I’ve never had the feeling that he’s interested in providing me with any answers.” She met Oleda’s gaze. “I still don’t even know why he brought me here. I met Caitlyn, who claims that he brought me because I’m young and pretty, and Nessa thinks that I’m some sort of pet, but neither of those fits with what I’ve seen from Ridaln.”

“No. That wouldn’t fit my experience of him, either.”

Oleda guided her away from the center of the kitchen, keeping her out of the path of all the other cooks as they continued to work. She kept her eyes up, scanning the kitchen, and Sophie suspected Oleda kept track of everything happening in her domain.

“Do you know why I’m here?” Sophie asked.

“No better than you do, I’m afraid. Girls come through here quite often but never stay long. Ridaln has been mysterious ever since he came to the palace.”

“How long has he been at the palace?” She knew barely anything about Ridaln. Everything she’d heard was probably nothing more than rumor and gossip. She needed real information.

Oleda waved her hand. “Oh, Ridaln has been here for decades, but he wasn’t originally from Neylash. The king has always listened to him, probably because Ridaln has provided sound advice.”

“You like him?”

“‘Like’ might be a strong word. I don’t know that any know Ridaln well enough to like him, but I respect him.”

With Oleda, Sophie suspected that meant almost as much.

“I don’t think he’ll tell me why he brought me here.”

“Have you asked?”

“I’ve asked, but whatever reason he has for bringing me here is still a mystery to me. There are other women who have been brought here, aren’t there?”

Oleda sniffed. “Don’t you go comparing yourself to some of those other girls. They were brought to the city, but not by Ridaln. It was he who started bringing girls to the palace, but then others decided to follow his lead. Now there’s a certain measure of jealousy for those he chooses.”

“I don’t know that I was chosen at all. He brought us here because of the attack.”

“Ridaln chose you. That’s a certainty. Most of the others think they’ll bring young nobles to the city and they’ll get the attention of the king, but it never works that way. Most of the time, the nobles are quite content to stay together.”

“What do you mean by ‘nobles’?”

Oleda studied her for a long moment. “That’s what you are, isn’t it?”

Sophie shook her head. “I’m no noble. I was raised on a farm outside of the village of Halith.”

Oleda pressed her lips together, frowning deeply. “That is... unexpected.”

Something crashed to the floor, and Oleda jerked her head around, noting a tray of bread rolls had spilled all over the floor.

“Blasted Oshen,” she said, cursing the god of trickery. “You and I will have to talk later. I will listen for whatever word I can of your brother, but as I’ve said, it can be difficult for me to hear anything outside of the palace.”

As she scurried off, Sophie watched, wishing that she had the same type of purpose as Oleda. In the palace, she had none. She was granted leisure and luxury but had no responsibilities. It was no different from how life had been in the village for her.

She started away, wondering what Oleda had meant by the gathering of nobles. Could her not being noble be part of the reason for others’ irritation with her presence. Nessa certainly hadn’t made that clear, but would she have? Or would she simply have kept her annoyance to herself? And what of others, like Caitlyn, or even Carolyn? They had allowed her to

join them while weaving, but had they done so only because they wanted to know how she served Ridaln?

She made her way toward the weaving room and found several women sitting in a circle, with six or seven chairs empty. Caitlyn was one of the women in the room, and she smiled when Sophie appeared, waving her in.

Sophie hesitated. Should she enter the weaving room, especially when she didn't have any of her supplies? She could visit, and perhaps she might find out whether what Oleda had said was true, though Sophie didn't actually doubt the cook. Oleda had never lied to her.

"You're not preparing for the banquet?" Caitlyn asked as Sophie took a seat.

Sophie rested her hands on her thighs, looking at the other women. All were older than her, and she only recognized one other, a woman with auburn hair and pale green eyes who went by the name of Amanda. Sophie had spoken to her once before. The other women were new to her, which meant that she needed to learn their names.

"I came through the kitchen, if that's what you mean. I saw the preparations that Oleda was making."

"I'm sure she's quite busy with this banquet," Caitlyn said with a hint of annoyance.

Why would Caitlyn be annoyed by the activity in the kitchen? Other than not having a chance to ask Oleda her questions, there wasn't any real reason that Sophie could perceive to be annoyed.

"Are you going?" Sophie asked Caitlyn. She scanned the other women, and none looked up from her weaving. Each woman was far more skilled than Sophie, and one of them, a thin woman with silver hair who reminded her of Nana, had what appeared to be an entire blanket draped over her legs, a checkered pattern woven into it. A weaving like that would have taken forever, and Sophie couldn't begin to imagine how difficult it would have been to create.

"Me? No. The king doesn't want my presence there."

“Why not?”

Caitlyn cocked her head to the side, considering Sophie for a moment. “I don’t think he wants me around his friends from Dunvale.”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

Caitlyn glanced at the others. “Maybe you should ask your friend.”

She somehow managed to make the word *friend* sound distasteful, and Sophie tried to ignore the implication, but it annoyed her that Caitlyn continued to imply that there was something more between Sophie and Ridaln. It took her a little while to realize what Caitlyn had implied, but when she did, she found it disgusting.

“Maybe I will,” Sophie said, standing. She turned to look at the other women sitting around the circle. Now wouldn’t be the best time to get their names. Besides, if they were friends with Caitlyn, Sophie wasn’t certain that she wanted to know them. Maybe it was better if she disappeared and didn’t worry about who they were.

She hurried from the weavers’ circle and reached the hall heading toward her room. When she saw Ridaln coming toward her, she veered away, making her way back toward the garden, somewhere she could hide.

The garden was awash with activity now. Dozens and dozens of people she didn’t recognize wandered among the flower beds, most dressed in strange clothing.

She was standing there, frozen, when a hand grabbed her arm and turned her.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Petra said in a whisper.

“Why not? What is this?”

“This is the delegation from Dunvale. You don’t want to be here.”

Sophie looked around the garden. Everyone wore formal attire. The men were in jackets with embroidered pants and shined boots, and the women were in fancy dresses, many of



them made of silk or other fine fabrics. A few of the women wore large hats that flopped around them, protecting them from the sun. As they made their way through the garden, a murmur of activity trailed them.

“I don’t know. They don’t seem all that bad.”

“Trust me, Sophie. This is not for you. Please?”

She stared at Petra. He’d gone from welcoming her to the garden to annoyed that she was there to now seeming to try to protect her in some way. It was all so confusing.

“Fine. I’ll leave you to your fancy guests.”

Petra shook his head. “It’s not like that. Just trust that you should return to your room.”

“For how long?” They wanted to hide her because she wasn’t fancy enough? Was it because she wasn’t a noble, like Nessa or Caitlyn? She didn’t deserve treatment like that, even if she wasn’t a stupid noble.

“I’m sure Ridaln will let you know when you can once again explore the palace.”

She glared at Petra but decided to say nothing to him, and she hurried from the garden, back toward her room, hoping that she wouldn’t run into anyone else along the way who might see the tears streaming down her face.

## CHAPTER 22

SOPHIE

The banquet smelled delicious, and Sophie tried to avoid it, not wanting to interfere with the celebration the king had planned, but her nose drew her forward. She smelled Oleda's cooking, and while she could get food from the kitchen, and it might be easier, curiosity pulled her forward.

Music drifted down the hallway as she followed the smells toward the banquet hall. She had discovered from the cooks that the banquet would be held there, though Sophie wondered whether they would take the celebration out onto the lawn as well. There had been enough people out there for that.

The steady murmuring of voices reached her, and she hesitated. Should she approach? She'd found a gown in her closet that she thought would be suitably festive, a pale yellow that shimmered in the lantern light, and had even brushed out her hair, leaving it trailing down the dress. Against the color of the dress, her hair faded from dirty brown to a bronze, almost gold appearance. Had she a mirror, she would have liked to look at herself, but those were rare, even here.

She made her way along the hall, hoping the flowers she had rubbed on her wrists and neck to mask any stink weren't too potent. She was still hesitant to go into the bathing room, not wanting to endanger herself any more than necessary. As far as she knew, the bath was safe to return to, but what if someone decided to poison it again? She still hadn't heard anything more from Ridaln about the poisoning, though she'd struggled to find the man in the first place. When this banquet

was over, maybe she would need to seek him out and ask questions about what he'd learned about the poisoning. It was possible that he wouldn't share anything with her, but didn't he owe it to her to tell her what he'd discovered? She *was* the one who had realized there was something off about the bath.

At the end of the hall, Sophie noted a pair of elegantly dressed women. Both were adorned with golden necklaces, and their hair was pulled up, revealing long necks, as if to draw attention to their jewelry. Sophie should have tied her hair up, but she hadn't considered doing so before now. She had been so focused on finding a gown, and so pleased when she'd found one, and so surprised to learn that it fit. Who had lived in her room before her? Whoever it was had left this beautiful dress, as if intending it for Sophie.

She made her way quietly forward and couldn't help but overhear the conversation. When the women looked in her direction, Sophie lowered her gaze quickly. Her stomach fluttered constantly. This was *not* the kind of place she belonged.

"Can you believe that he welcomed Dunvale *here*?" This came from the older of the two women. She had a fan, which she waved in front of her face, but it did nothing to abate the perspiration dripping down her cheeks.

"I don't think he had much choice, considering the course of the war."

"The course of the war? It has been practically decided for years."

"That's not the way I hear it," the other said, leaning closer and lowering her voice. "There's pressure along the front, and even without their sorcerer, they've managed to throw bodies at us. I can't imagine how many they have sacrificed, but Waynas tells me that they can't fight like that for much longer."

Sophie moved away, not wanting to listen. What did she care about the nature of the war? Nana had told her something about the war, but Nana had preferred to speak about it in different terms.

Sophie continued along the hallway and rounded a corner. She spotted Ridaln speaking to a pair of strangely dressed men. She paused near a tall ceramic vase, hiding behind it so that he wouldn't see her. Did it matter? Did he cast a furtive glance her way, as if acknowledging that he had seen her? She couldn't tell. She didn't want to risk angering Ridaln, especially as she doubted she was meant to come to the banquet, but the closer she came to the celebration, the more the smells dragged her along.

Sophie tried to move off to the side so that she couldn't be seen, and someone touched her on the back.

She spun to see Nessa standing behind her, and her heart lurched.

With her orange hair tied up and her pale skin, she looked every bit as regal as when Sophie had first seen her. She wore a silver necklace that complemented her skin color and reminded her of Ridaln's eyes.

"You decided to come," Nessa said.

Sophie glanced around her, nausea threatening again. What would Ridaln say when he realized that she had come? Would he be angry, or would he send her back to her room?

"I came for the food."

Nessa stared at her, as if trying to decide whether Sophie was joking. "You're always eating, but you don't look as if you actually eat that much."

Sophie looked behind Nessa, where she could still see Ridaln. Was he looking in her direction? He didn't like it when she spoke to Nessa as it was, so with her not only being where she wasn't supposed to be but also speaking to Nessa, she worried he'd be doubly angry.

"My family called me solid. They said that was why I ate as much as I did," she said absently. When she realized what she had said—and to Nessa—a flush spread over her face. What was she doing talking to Nessa like she was some normal person?

Nessa offered a hint of a smile. “I wouldn’t call you solid, either. Well, if it’s food you’re after, you will find all that you can eat here, though I didn’t think you needed to leave the kitchen to get Oleda’s best snacks.”

Sophie tried to control her racing mind and hide the heat working up her cheeks. She didn’t want to say anything too stupid—at least, anything *else* too stupid. She’d already said too much.

“Oleda feels sorry for me, I think.”

“I doubt that. That woman has the pulse of the palace, maybe even more than Ridaln. If she’s letting you sneak her pastries, it’s because she’s taken a shine to you.” Nessa smiled strangely. “Enjoy the banquet, Sophie Varison.”

When Nessa left her, Sophie turned and made her way through a door off to the side, slipping into the back of the banquet hall. She stepped forward and promptly smacked into a man standing near the wall, dressed in a plain midnight-blue jacket and pants.

“I’m sorry...” she started as he began to turn. When he faced her, she smiled. “Dannith?”

His eyes narrowed. “Sophie Varison. I imagine you’re here for the pastries,” he said with a hint of a smile.

Sophie laughed and realized that it was too loud when a group of people nearby turned to her. She clamped a hand over her mouth, flushing again. “Are there pastries here?”

Dannith grinned. “It wouldn’t be a banquet without pastries, would it?”

Sophie shook her head. “Is that why you’re here?”

Dannith arched a brow at her. “There are a few reasons I have come, though the pastries would be a compelling reason on their own, wouldn’t they?”

Sophie smiled and turned toward the banquet hall. She had thought there were a lot of people in the garden, but the number of people here surpassed that. There had to be hundreds. Her heart sank. All were dressed much more

formally than she was. Most reminded her of Nessa, dressed as elegantly, and while they might not be nearly as stunning as Nessa, they were much more formal than Sophie in her dress.

“What is it? You look like me when I realize that Oleda doesn’t have enough treats.”

She looked over at Dannith. He had his hands clasped over his belly and was surveying the room. She knew he was a servant, but who did he serve? When she’d first seen him, it had been in the portrait hall and near enough to the royal quarters that she’d thought he *might* be one of the royal servants.

“I’ve never been to anything like this before,” Sophie admitted.

“That shouldn’t matter,” Dannith said. “A banquet is little more than a large party.”

“With people from Dunvale.”

Dannith winked. “There is that.”

“Why is that? Why have they come here?” Sophie asked. She was comfortable near Dannith. There was something about him that reminded her of Papa. Around him, the racing in her heart began to slow.

“Probably the same reason other delegations have come,” Dannith said.

“I haven’t been here for any other delegations.”

“I suppose not.” He turned to her. “They seek to affirm alignment to the throne,” Dannith said. “The war has gone on long enough, and there are some regions that aren’t interested in sending any more men.”

“Why would holding a banquet ensure that they were aligned to the throne?”

Dannith frowned. “It’s not *all* about the banquet. They come to see those held in the palace, and they come to be paired off.”

It took a moment for what he'd said to set in. Was *that* what Oleda had meant about nobles being brought to the palace? Were they held here to ensure their realms fought in the war?

What of the other part of what Dannith had said? Could they really use the women to bind them together?

In Nana's stories, wasn't that what happened? Didn't princesses marry princes to bind nations together? How would this be any different?

"I'm glad I'm not a noble," she said.

Dannith glanced at her. "Not a noble, and yet you're in the palace. Why would they have brought you here?"

"Ridaln did," she said.

Dannith's eyes narrowed. "Did he? I would suggest that you be careful, though if you know Ridaln, you likely have been careful." Dannith bowed slightly to her. "If you will excuse me, Sophie, I am afraid that duty calls."

"You're serving here?" she asked.

He nodded. "A servant to the realm," he said, then bowed his head with a bit of a smile. "Perhaps we can speak later. If you happen to find the pastries, don't take them all before I get a chance to find them."

She smiled. "I won't. And I'll leave any rhubarb pastries alone if I *do* find them. I wouldn't want to upset the king."

Dannith chuckled. "No, you wouldn't want that."

When he left her, Sophie made her way through the crowd of people. She was amazed by the clothing of everyone around her. Some wore military dress and carried swords, which made her think of Lan. Most of the men wearing swords were older, already gray or at least graying, and a few had gruesome scars, maybe from serious battles. Thinking of Lan with such scars made her uncomfortable.

She was thankful she didn't see Caitlyn. If she had, she would have turned the other way. She didn't care for her and didn't want to deal with questions—and attitude.

The food filled a table along the back wall, and Sophie stayed there, nibbling at a dozen types of meat and cheese, before making her way toward the end, where she found the desserts. There were two different cakes, a bowl of fruit, and then the pastries. She looked around the room before grabbing a few of the pastries, feeling as if she were doing something she shouldn't by taking them.

When she bit into the first pastry, juice dribbled down her chin, and she quickly wiped it away, but it stained her dress. That was stupid of her. Why would she have used her sleeve to wipe the juices off her face? There was a pile of cloth napkins that she could have used, staining them rather than her beautiful dress.

“Was that you speaking to the king?”

Sophie turned to see Nessa watching her. She still looked as elegant as ever, and of course, she didn't have a stain on her dress.

“To who?” Sophie asked. She hadn't seen the king, though she wouldn't have recognized him if she had. “I haven't been speaking to anyone.”

Nessa's gaze lingered a moment. “Perhaps not. You were too interested in the food, weren't you?”

Sophie let her gaze run along the length of the table, pausing as it reached the desserts. “I guess I was,” she said. “Shouldn't I be?”

She took another bite of the pastry and chewed. Blueberry. These were quite tasty. She could tell when one of the other cooks had made them, rather than Oleda. They never had the same flakiness as when Oleda prepared them. This was definitely one of Oleda's.

“What do you think?” Nessa asked. “I imagine this is your first banquet.”

Sophie looked around the room again, shaking her head. “There's too many people for my liking, and I don't want to know who they might make get married.”

“And what if it's you?”



Sophie stopped chewing. They couldn't do that, could they? She was too young for marriage. Even in another year, she'd still feel too young.

"Relax," Nessa said. "It's not you, but any could be chosen. That is the nature of these banquets. They choose who you will be paired with."

"What if you disagree?" That never happened in any of her stories, but she could see how it *might* happen. What if the person a woman was paired with was terrible? Would she have to agree to it?

"There is about as much choice in that as we have in being here."

Sophie had never considered Nessa an angry person. She might be irritable, and she had a strange sense of humor, but she had never seemed angry. However, there was real bitterness in what she said.

"You can't leave?"

Nessa frowned at her. "Leave? I'm here, Sophie Varison, whether I want to be or not. I will be here as long as I need to serve." She looked around, smiling widely. "As you will be."

"I'm not a noble," she said. She felt like she had to keep saying that to others, as if to convince them of the fact that she couldn't—and wouldn't—be chosen in the same way.

"Not a noble, yet you're here. That tells me they have expanded the scope of those they choose. I haven't learned what that means, but it must be all part of the same plan," she said.

"What happens if someone chooses me?" Sophie asked. She'd wanted to know *why* she was here, and had always been bothered that she didn't know, but that was a far cry from this discomfort.

"Then you will do the same as any of us will need to do, Sophie Varison. You will serve as the rest of us have been called to serve."

"Or?"

Nessa looked at her with real sadness in her expression.  
“There is no ‘or.’”

# CHAPTER 23

## SOPHIE

Sophie waited by the garden gate, this time less cautiously than she had before. The garden around her was mostly quiet, and she was determined to sneak through the gate. She didn't quite know where she would go next, but she *would* leave the palace. The banquet had made her nervous.

She didn't have to wait long.

While she remained near the side of the garden, trying to make it appear as if she were doing nothing more than looking at the flowers here, she watched the gate. One of the older gardeners, a thin woman named Margy, who had long brown hair and often wore a dress that matched, reached the gate and slipped a key into the lock. She pulled it open and started through.

Sophie darted forward.

When Margy tried pulling the gate closed, Sophie reached for it and pulled back.

The woman peeked through the gate at Sophie, who smiled widely at her. "Thanks. I was just trying to get—"

"I don't think you're meant to leave the garden," Margy said.

Sophie did her best to look incredulous. "I'm not? Why wouldn't I be able to leave the garden? Ridaln told me that I should get outside and see some of the city, but if you'd prefer I tell him that you didn't want me outside the garden, I certainly can."

She didn't like the idea of pulling in Ridaln's name, but it was one thing that would likely make Margy allow her out. She didn't *want* to draw Ridaln into anything any more than she needed to, but if she wasn't granted access outside to the city, she might go mad.

"Ridaln wanted you to see the city?"

Sophie nodded. She doubted the lie would work on anyone else in the palace, but she had seen the gardeners' deference to Ridaln often enough that she suspected one of them *would* allow her to leave. That was her hope, at least.

"I suppose if he wanted you to see the city, you shouldn't be stopped."

Sophie smiled. "Thanks."

She scooted past Margy, holding her dress up so that it didn't drag on the ground, and hurried beyond the gate before Margy got it into her head that she needed to go and check whether Sophie should be allowed to leave. She wasn't a prisoner here. She *should* be allowed to leave.

The street outside the palace looked different from what she remembered. It bustled with activity as crowds of people moved along. Sophie picked her way carefully through, dancing around a cart and pausing to watch a horse pulling a carriage. She wondered whether there was some noble inside or whether it was a visitor to the city. Then she decided that she probably shouldn't linger too long. If it *was* a noble, they might see her outside the palace walls and then tell Ridaln. She didn't want to deal with him getting upset with her, though she also didn't want to be stuck in the palace.

She didn't have an agenda. What she most wanted was to know whether she could get outside, and now that she had, the hopeless feeling that had begun settling through her began to lift. She didn't have to be trapped in the city. If she wanted, she could leave, find a horse and ride back to Halith. In time, she would be able to reach the farm, and then... what would she do?

Anything other than marry some random noble. That was something she didn't want to do. She wasn't certain what she would do, but it wasn't that.

She followed the flow of the crowd, moving as quickly as she could, trying not to let them push her out of the way, and reached an intersection. The palace was now behind her, stretching away into the distance. *Which way now?*

She didn't have anywhere that she needed to be, but she also had to be careful not to get stuck outside the palace. Otherwise, she would have to fight her way back in, and maybe she'd have to reveal to Ridaln that she'd left. What would he say? Would he care? Would he even do anything?

She found an outdoor market. Nana would have loved it. There were dozens of stands, each selling different things. Some were farmers selling vegetables, and others sold flowers, while still others looked to sell cloth or yarn. Sophie hurried past each stand, avoiding them as they sought to draw her in, and reached the other side of the market.

When she did, she thought she saw someone she recognized. It looked like someone from the kitchen, and from this distance, it might even have been Oleda, but that wouldn't make any sense. Oleda would have too much work keeping the kitchen in order to be out in the city in the middle of the day. She might come to the market, but Sophie doubted that she did so until later.

She followed, curious. If it wasn't Oleda, maybe it was another of the kitchen workers, and she was curious where they would acquire their supplies. Did they come from the market, or did they come from some other place? Maybe Oleda had a particular merchant she preferred. Sophie imagined that the king was particular enough with what Oleda made that he would want some consistency. That might be how Oleda always managed to make such delicious pastries.

As she followed the person away from the market, she realized that they couldn't be from the kitchen. They were heading too far from the shops and the crowds. Sophie had

started to turn back, not wanting to venture too far from the palace, when she heard the sound of metal on metal.

It was one that had a distinct clang. Fighting. Or sparring, more likely. Sophie had never heard it before, but she had heard enough stories to guess it was swords smacking against each other. Was this where she could find Lan?

She hurried along the street, making her way toward the sound. There was something of a rhythm to it, almost a dance, like those Papa had tried teaching her. Unlike with weaving, she was good at dancing.

She stopped at a low wall. The sound was coming from behind it.

Curiosity made her move forward. Even if Lan weren't on the other side of the wall, she allowed herself a hint of hope that whoever was there might know where to find him. The man who'd taken them from Halith would have to have brought him somewhere like this to train, wouldn't he?

Sophie made her way around the wall, looking for an opening, and found one facing the opposite street. She tested the gate, and it was unlocked.

Sophie slipped inside.

What she found on the other side gave her pause. There were several dozen soldiers here, each wearing heavy mail and each battering another with his sword. None looked like Lan.

She didn't see anything here that fit with the men who had taken them from Halith. Those soldiers had worn the dark gray that she attributed to the Taihg, while these men were dressed in shiny armor. These soldiers must be a part of the delegation.

Which meant that this wasn't where she would find her brother.

She had started to turn when the door opened, and another soldier entered. This man wore dark gray armor, though it was different in design from that of the men she'd seen in Halith. An energy radiated from him, and she stared, unable to take her eyes off him. The others around the area fell silent, as if they didn't want to interrupt when this person entered. The

man wearing the armor strode forward before pulling off his helm.

Not a him. Her.

Bright red hair streamed down to touch the armor. She had milky skin and pale lips. A few freckles covered her face, but only a few. A hot anger flashed in her eyes as she surveyed the men working.

“Did you find anything?” one of the men asked as he approached.

The woman shook her head and tossed her helm to the side, where one of the other men caught it and quickly placed it on a shelf. “I found nothing. There was evidence of their passing, but that’s it.”

“Just their passing?” the man asked.

The woman stared at him for a while before frowning. “That’s it. Did you think I’d pick up evidence of their magic? They’ve concealed it well enough until now that I won’t be able to detect anything. It’s a good thing we can blend so well with these delegations, otherwise we’d have to find a different safehouse to train.”

“I just thought—”

“I know what you thought, Darin. It’s fortunate you took the time to think. Most of the time, you don’t bother.”

The man grinned, and Sophie found herself laughing.

The woman must have heard her laughing, because she turned to Sophie, a question blazing in her pale eyes. They were nearly silver, much like Ridaln’s. Did that make them somehow related?

“Who are you, and what are you doing here?” the woman snapped.

Sophie’s voice failed her, something that had never happened before. Sweat moistened her back, and her heart started racing. Faced with this woman who looked so much like what she imagined the Pale Princess would look like, how else was she to react?

Yet she had made a similar mistake once before, when she had thought Nessa to be the princess. There was no way this woman was her, regardless of how she looked. Maybe there were lots of women who had a similar appearance.

“Can’t you speak?”

The woman stopped in front of Sophie, and now Sophie had an opportunity to look her over. She was a little taller than Sophie, and the armor made her look much bigger—and much more intimidating. Her hair had gentle waves in it, though it was stained with sweat. Her eyes carried iron when she looked at her, a gaze that Sophie couldn’t look away from. When Sophie said nothing, the woman looked over her shoulder at the man she had been speaking to, who shrugged.

Heat from a flush worked through Sophie, loosening her tongue. She hated feeling embarrassed like this. “I can speak,” she said.

“Ah, there it is. The girl does have a voice.” The woman took a step toward her. She seemed to radiate heat, though that was probably from the armor and her sweat. “Why are you here?”

“I heard the sound of practicing. I came looking for my brother.”

The woman’s brow furrowed. “Why would you think your brother would be here?”

Sophie shook her head. “I didn’t know if he would or not. I hoped that he would, but I didn’t know.”

“Does your brother train with us?”

Sophie glanced past the woman and looked at the other soldiers. None of their armor looked quite right. Maybe they weren’t the soldiers that her brother had left with, but if they weren’t, would they know how to find Lan anyway?

“He came to the city to be a soldier.”

The woman offered a slight smile. “There are many who come to the city for a similar reason. Not too many of them amount to much.”



“He’s strong. He would have amounted to something.”

“Is that right? Strength is only one part of serving as a soldier. You have to be smart.”

“Lan is smart enough,” she muttered.

“I’ve not been given any reason to think that he is... or that he isn’t. All I know is that some strange girl in a palace dress has come down to *my* yard. I think you need to disappear before we escort you back to the palace.” She cocked her head, another smile coming to her face. “Now, considering the look on your face, I don’t think you want us to do that.”

“Go ahead,” she said. What good would it do if she objected? All she would do was draw more attention to her, and she didn’t want to do that.

“A bit of an edge. I like that. I have a bit of an edge myself.”

“How did a girl learn to be a soldier?” Sophie asked.

Two men had approached and stood behind the woman. At the question, both of them eyed Sophie, and their mouths dropped open.

“A girl?” the woman asked. There was a dangerous tone to her voice, and Sophie realized she might have overstepped the limits. She hated that she did it so easily.

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” she said, lowering her gaze but trying to look up enough to see the woman.

The woman snorted. “You didn’t offend me. What offends is the idea that my gender has anything to do with how easily I can kill someone.”

“I just thought that with boys being stronger...”

Sophie realized she was digging herself an even deeper hole. That wasn’t the kind of comment this woman wanted to hear. Would she be mad at Sophie for making a statement like that?

“You think strength is all that matters?”

Sophie shrugged. When she'd wrestled with Lan, his strength had always won out. It wasn't that she was weak—far from it—but Lan was just that much stronger than her.

“It matters enough. I've got a brother who used to show me how much his strength mattered.”

The woman considered Sophie a moment before turning to one of the men with her. “Elign. Show me how much your strength matters.”

The man was large—easily larger than Lan—and he shook his head as he unsheathed his sword. The woman followed, and a dance ensued, but it was one where the woman managed to land far more blows on Elign than he managed on her. When he slipped, the woman darted forward and mercilessly began hacking at him with her practice sword until he raised a hand.

“Enough,” Elign muttered.

The woman backed away and slid her sword back into her sheath. “Yes. It seems his superior strength mattered quite a bit, didn't it?”

“I'm sorry,” Sophie said. The sweat along her back was increasing, though it wasn't that hot out today.

“I don't want apologies. You shouldn't think you can't do something because of your gender. Darish knows that if you want to fight, then you should be allowed to fight.”

Sophie found herself smiling nervously. At least this woman celebrated a god she was familiar with. Darish fit her, too. “How did you learn to fight?” Sophie asked.

“I had no choice,” the woman answered.

“Could I learn?”

The woman eyed Sophie from head to toe. “Dressed like that? I doubt any could train one of the palace nobles. You'd be better off agreeing to the arrangements they want to make on your behalf.”

Sophie glared at her. That was exactly the reason she *would* want to fight. There would be no arrangements made on

her behalf, not if she could help it.

“Even if I were a noble, I would *not* be agreeing to any arrangement.”

The men standing nearby began to snicker. The woman glanced over her shoulder and silenced them with a glance.

“None?” She turned back to Sophie. “That’s a bold statement. If they decide you’re to be paired, there’s not much you can do to avoid it.” The woman watched Sophie for a moment longer before waving her away. “Now, get out of my yard. Get yourself back to the palace before someone notices you’re not where you’re supposed to be.”

Sophie didn’t want to go, but what would she do if she stayed?

Having no other choice, she turned away. As she closed the gate behind her, she could hear more snickering.

# CHAPTER 24

## LAN

The room was cold, and Lan wished for his jacket, something thicker than the thin shirt the Fixer had given him. The shirt he'd been wearing when he'd come here had been bloodied and shredded. The Fixer had not been willing to let Lan keep it.

The cold left him aching. His body throbbed where he'd been struck, and the places on his arms and face where the Fixer had stitched him itched. Still, Lan felt better than he'd expected, considering everything that he'd gone through.

"What are you doing with him?" Lan looked over at the table where the Fixer worked. There was an older man, probably in his mid-twenties, with short brown hair, lying on the table. Two other soldiers had brought the man here and left him. The moment they'd dropped him on the table, the Fixer had begun working on him, rubbing creams into the man's wounds and starting to stitch them closed.

"I'm trying to fix him," he said. "This one is far enough along that it might not be possible."

Lan stood and made his way over to the cot. The man's face was bloodied, and one of his bones had been shattered, leaving the white end of it protruding from the skin of his forearm. The same thing had happened to Lan, but the Fixer had somehow restored him. Lan's leg hurt, but not as badly as it should have.

"Far enough along what?"

The man looked up at him. "The road to death."

The Fixer pushed on the injured man's arm, sliding the bone back beneath the flesh. He rubbed his hands along the skin, mumbling something under his breath, and then began stitching up the wound.

"You were able to save me," Lan said.

"I was. I shouldn't have been able to, but I was."

"Why shouldn't you have been able to?" Lan asked.

The Fixer paused in his work and stared at the injured man. When he spoke, he did so softly, his words slow. "Your leg shouldn't have healed the way it did."

"It's not healed. It still hurts."

"Yet you walk."

Lan shrugged. "Should I not?"

The Fixer looked at him, an unreadable expression in his eyes. He turned his attention back to the injured soldier lying on the cot and began ministering to him again. "It is what it is. And now you can't stay here."

"I don't know where else to go," Lan answered.

"I'm certain you'll find someplace. You're not to fight or do any training until you're fully healed. Stay out of the way until then."

Lan blinked at the dismissal. He wasn't wanted here, either. It felt as if no one wanted him around, and that bothered him. After getting beaten by the boys sharing his bunk room, he didn't know whether he could return. A part of him didn't want to leave, because then he'd have to start his training again.

This was a mistake. He should have stayed in the village, and he should have agreed to become a farmer, and he shouldn't have fought Papa over it nearly as much as he had. Why hadn't he simply agreed?

He exited the room and went down the corridor toward the door out of the building. He still had a slight limp. The injury to his ankle from his earliest days trying to survive lingered,

but he was able to walk. Was the Fixer right? Should he not be able to?

His leg had been shattered. So how was it that he had recovered?

For now, he had a reprieve from training and fighting. *Until the Fixer decides otherwise.* He didn't know when that would be, but he could wander a bit.

Outside, he walked into the dirt courtyard filled with men training. A few of the boys were there battling with swords, dancing with none of the efficiency of the veteran soldiers, using blades that had long ago dulled. Despite that, the boys wielding them had cuts along their arms. A few of the older soldiers leaned against the brick wall, watching. Occasionally they would laugh, and rarely they would offer advice.

Lan took a seat on a bench near one of the walls and tried to make his long, lanky self small to stay out of the way. As he watched, he recognized one of the boys from his bunk room. His single eyebrow made him look chronically angry. He was bigger than the boy he faced, but slower. Each strike with his sword was deflected. He had a few spots on his arms that bled, whereas the other boy was unharmed.

“You have to rejoin them.”

Lan turned to see Tohm standing nearby. One of his arms was wrapped, as if he had recently returned from the Fixer, and his face carried his usual grim expression.

“So that they can beat me again?”

“Only if you let them.”

Lan grunted. “Let them? Now it is my fault that they jumped me?”

“Yes.”

Lan turned away, not even willing to meet Tohm's gaze. “Is that why you brought me here?”

“I brought you here because I saw potential. We need others like you, with potential.”

Lan sighed. "I don't think I want to have that kind of potential, not if it means that I'm going to be attacked like that again."

"Then stop them," Tohm said.

"Stop them? I tried to stop them, but there were too many."

"There are other ways to stop an attack."

"Such as?"

"Such as not engaging in it to begin with."

"I told you, I didn't try to start any fight. I was resting when they pulled me from my bunk."

Tohm leaned toward him, his eyes intense. "There are other ways to avoid a fight. Like I said, the best way is to simply not get into one in the first place."

Lan glared at him, wishing he could summon some of Sophie's ability, to glower the same way that she would.

Tohm nodded and sauntered off to join a grouping of older soldiers.

Lan sat there for a moment, considering what he should do. The two boys finished their sparring, and the smaller boy turned his attention to him.

Lan recognized him. It was the same boy he had fought in the yard the very first day here. He even remembered his name, something that he rarely did.

When the boy came over, Lan stood and crossed his arms over his chest, trying to appear more intimidating, but knowing that he failed.

"I'm surprised to see you standing," Jarson said.

"You would prefer that I not be?"

"It's easier that way."

"Easier why?"

"For all of us. You draw attention to us."

“How do I draw attention to you?” Even as he asked, Lan knew. He was the reason that others had been punished. Had it not been for him, they might have had an easier time during their training patrols.

“You’re older, for one. That makes you slower.”

“Not too slow to beat up on you.”

Jarson’s brows knitted together. “You got lucky. It won’t happen again.”

“I got lucky because I was able to smash you to the ground?”

He was surprised that Jarson appeared as well as he did, considering everything that Lan had put him through. He was thankful as well. Lan didn’t want to be the reason that a boy wasn’t able to walk. He couldn’t fathom being part of a group like those boys who had assaulted him. But then, many of them had been here longer than him.

“Try it with a sword,” Jarson said.

Lan glanced over at the boys practicing and wondered if perhaps he should. Was that what Tohm had suggested by telling him that he should find a way to avoid fighting?

“Let’s try it,” Lan said.

Jarson’s wide-eyed expression revealed his surprise that Lan would agree to his suggestion. Maybe he shouldn’t have. Maybe it was a mistake risking himself. He didn’t have any of Jarson’s skill with the sword and certainly hadn’t been training nearly as long as the others. But if he didn’t join in, he would always be an outsider. This could be the beginning of him being seen as one of them, even if he was older and larger.

Lan grabbed one of the dull swords and strapped on some leather bracers. They provided some protection, but probably not enough. He would need to be careful, but considering his poor swordsmanship, even that might not be enough.

Jarson moved quickly, and when he attacked, there was a fluidity to his movements that Lan wasn’t able to match. He



caught a few blows on the leather bracers, deflecting them, but they still stung, thankfully not biting into his flesh.

He tried attacking but didn't have enough skill to do so, and he was forced backward. His footing slipped—his injured leg giving out—and he went down. He barely got his sword up in front of his face before Jarson slammed down a killing blow.

“You did better than I expected,” Jarson said.

“I don't feel as if I did better.”

Jarson grunted. “Most of us have been training for years. Unless you trained before coming here—and from the looks of it, I would be surprised if that were the case—you did well enough.”

Lan wasn't sure how to take the praise but decided nodding would be enough.

He struggled to his feet, pulled off the leather bracers, and shoved the sword back onto the rack.

When he was done, Tohm came over to him, a hint of a smile on his face. “How did that feel?” he asked.

“Painful.”

“As painful as having a dozen boys jumping on you, punching and kicking you, or less painful than that?”

The look on his face told Lan that Tohm already knew the answer. He hurt, but it wasn't anything like the way he had hurt before. This kind of throbbing he thought he could deal with. His arms would be bruised where Jarson had struck him, but they would heal.

“I need someone to teach me.”

Tohm nodded.

“You'll have to do it.”

Tohm barked out a laugh. “I will, will I?”

Lan shrugged. “You brought me here, and you said that you saw potential in me, so you're going to have to be the one

to get it out of me. If you don't, I'm not sure that I'll live to see it."

Tohm laughed again. "I wasn't sure when you would show some of the same spark as your sister."

Lan frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means that your sister had a little more fight in her than you've shown so far. I've been hopeful that you would display it, but I wasn't sure you would before now."

"How weren't you sure? I survived the fighting pits, and I've lived this long."

"That's self-preservation."

"And this isn't?"

"Maybe it is, but you're showing a different sort of vigor than you did before. It's good that you are."

"Does that mean that you'll work with me?"

Tohm studied him for a moment. He glanced at the rack of swords and the pile of leather bracers stacked in the corner and then turned his attention to Lan. "Maybe I will. We've got to work on that technique of yours, or little bastards like Jarson will continue knocking you down."

Tohm started to turn, but Lan caught him by the sleeve. The larger man gave him a dangerous look.

"When?" Lan asked.

"I'll find you. And maybe you can be useful."

As Tohm left, Lan started to feel an emotion that he hadn't in quite some time: hope.

# CHAPTER 25

## LAN

Lan hurried along with the rest of the trainees. He marched quickly, careful to ensure that he didn't fall behind. He did not want to feel the smack of the wooden stick on his leg again. For the most part, he had done well in avoiding it, but the longer he marched, the more the pain in his leg changed the nature of his gait. The Fixer might have helped heal him, but not enough for him to recover completely.

A tap on the ground from Karn caught his attention, and he pivoted, turning with the rest of the trainees.

Somewhere near him came the distinct sound of the stick striking one of the other boys on the leg, a painful crack. The boy avoided crying out, something that Lan had not been as successful at, and then Karn tapped the stick on the ground again, signaling for them to move onward.

Lan kept his focus straight ahead, unwilling to look elsewhere, or he would draw the wrong kind of attention. And it wasn't just about drawing the wrong kind of attention to him. It was about drawing the wrong kind of attention to the rest of the trainees. Wasn't that the lesson that the other boys wanted him to learn?

The fact that he had barely survived told him everything that he should know. Keep up. Don't attract attention to himself or the others, and he might fit in.

Another tap. Lan followed the rest of the trainees, turning to his left. They began to march down a long street. In the

distance, the edge of the city came into view. There was something almost relaxing about it. A part of him wanted nothing more than to wander beyond the border of the city, to see what might be out there, maybe even return to his home.

Other thoughts intruded when he began to think like that. The moment he headed out, he would leave Sophie behind, and he couldn't abandon her. She needed his help, and the fact that he hadn't heard anything about her since coming to the city left him troubled. If she had faced a similar fate to his, he didn't know how she would handle it.

Probably better than him, though.

Another tap, and he turned.

A group of children ran across the street in front of them.

It was the kind of thing that Karn hated. Not only did he despise it when people disrupted his patrol, but he had shown a sort of unrelenting violence to the children who were allowed to roam freely in the city. It was as if he hated the fact that they had freedoms that he did not.

Karn tapped twice.

Lan recognized that sound. It meant that they would surge forward, an increase in their pace. And it meant that the trainees would pursue the children.

They marched at a more rapid rate. He followed along, quietly praying to Darish or any of the gods that the children would avoid the trainees reaching them, but he didn't know if his prayers would be answered. In the time that he had been in Neylash, he had begun to think that the gods had abandoned him. Then again, Lan had never had any skill with praying. He had visited the forest, spent time with his papa, learning to pray to Darish, but Lan had never had the sense that the woodsman god paid much attention.

The trainees reached the children. Lan was far enough back that he wasn't a part of what happened, but they marched right over them, leaving fallen forms in their wake.

He suppressed his disgust.

Emotions would draw attention, get him killed. Tohm had advised that he avoid them. Fall into line. Do what the others did. Only then would he be considered one of them.

Another tap signaled that they were to slow. After a while, Lan hazarded a glance back, but it wasn't until they turned the corner that he caught sight of the children.

They were young. Younger even than Sophie. Three of them lay unmoving on the ground. Blood had already started to pool near them. He silently willed them to get up, to move on, to do anything. They did not.

Too late, he realized he had been standing in place, lingering for a moment longer than he should have. When the stick struck him, Lan winced, but he made no sound.

He fell back into line, marching along with the others.

Pain blossomed in his legs where he had been struck, and he tried not to think about whether he was significantly injured. It wouldn't matter, anyway. If he was injured, it was his task to keep marching, to ignore the pain, to continue the patrol. That was the lesson they wanted the trainees to learn—and learn well. How could he be of any assistance to those with him if he couldn't ignore a little pain from a stick striking him while marching? How would he be expected to push back attackers if he couldn't push back even this minor pain?

The patrol continued. Karn said nothing. He didn't need to. They were well enough trained at this point that they knew what was asked of them. March. Continue their course. Ignore all distractions while at the same time remaining alert. That was the real challenge, though. How were they supposed to remain alert when they were also supposed to keep their focus directly in front of them?

A sound that Lan hadn't heard in quite some time came rumbling through the streets. It was the sound of thunder, a familiar and painful sort of sound that reminded him of when the Taihg had visited his village. For a moment, he flashed back to that time, to when he and Sophie had thought nothing more of the uniqueness of the visit, wanting only to catch a glimpse of soldiers.

And here he had become one. Only it was nothing like what he had thought it would be.

A tap on the ground, and they turned. As they did, he caught sight of some soldiers leading a group of people into the city. They wore colors that Lan didn't recognize. They weren't from Halith. Where would they be from?

Even Karn paused, no longer tapping, giving the trainees a chance to watch. There had to be a hundred making their way into the city, half of them soldiers, the other half wearing formal cloaks with heavy embroidery, signifying people of stature. Flags mounted on poles at either end of the procession likely indicated where they were coming from, but Lan didn't recognize the heraldry.

"Who are they?" someone from the back asked.

Lan tensed at the question, afraid that someone would end up attacked by Karn, while at the same time thankful that it wasn't going to be him.

"It doesn't matter," Karn snapped. He tapped his stick on the ground again.

They all marched forward, heading in the opposite direction of the procession and moving quickly. The tapping came with a rapid regularity, enough that Lan knew that they were marching back to their compound, hidden as it was.

Each time they made their way back, Lan couldn't help but wonder why the compound was as hidden as it was. Why not operate more openly, closer to the palace? Why wouldn't they work with the soldiers that had to be found within the palace?

These were the questions that raced through his mind as they marched, but they were also the kind of questions that were dangerous to ask. It would be better not to ask than risk another attack.

As the compound came into view, Karn increased the tapping, marching them forward. Passing through the gate, he tapped twice, signaling a stop. It was possible that he would signal more training, and considering they hadn't been out long, Lan wouldn't be all that surprised.

Instead, he tapped again, signaling that they could disperse.

Lan remained in place for a few moments, waiting. He wasn't about to disperse until the others did, having experienced firsthand what would happen if he left first.

"How was patrol?"

Lan turned carefully to see Tohm watching. The man had a hint of a smile on his face, and he was dressed in a simple gray jacket and pants, with a sword strapped to his waist.

"It was about what I expected."

"You didn't try to stand out?"

"It's been made clear that there's no point in that."

"I thought you enjoyed drawing attention to yourself."

Lan frowned. Drawing attention to himself only meant that he would end up on the wrong side of a beating again.

"I have some time if you would like to train."

Looking around, Lan considered whether he wanted to. Working with Tohm would improve his skill, but he still hadn't gotten over the hopelessness brought on by seeing the Taihg.

He was old. They had made a point of telling him that over and over again, and if it hadn't been for Tohm, he probably wouldn't have been allowed to stay. *Do I want to stay? But where would I go?*

"That would be fine."

Tohm eyed him strangely. "I wasn't aware that I was giving you much of a choice."

"You weren't?"

He shrugged. "You need to practice. If you are to be useful, you're going to need to continue to work on your skills."

Lan swallowed. Tohm didn't care what he felt.

"Where will we practice?" Lan asked.

“Follow me.”

Lan grabbed a practice sword and followed Tohm as they headed away from the courtyard, back into the city. The sword wasn't sheathed, which meant that he had to hold it as they marched through the city. They headed back in the same direction as he had been marching in earlier.

“Why don't we ever work with soldiers in the palace?” Lan asked.

“The king is particular about how many he allows in the palace.”

“Why? Don't we offer some protection?”

Tohm cast a side-eyed glance in his direction. “It is different. We are training to be something more.”

“Not Taihg.”

“Is there a reason that you hold the Taihg in such high regard?”

“It's just that I heard stories when I was younger.”

“It's interesting that you view them the way that you do.”

“Interesting how?”

“Most within Lorant would recognize that the Taihg are dangerous, considering who they serve and all. And yet here you view them as some ideal to follow.”

“I don't view them as an ideal to follow. It's just that—”

“That you would like to work with the Taihg.” Tohm glanced over at him, a dangerous smile on his face. “Be thankful that you don't have to face the Taihg. And be thankful that you don't have to go through their training.”

“Why? What's their training like?”

“Painful.”

Lan fell silent, considering what he had gone through for his training so far. How brutal would that sort of training be?

They reached a small hillside on the outskirts of the city, and Tohm guided him up it. From the top of the hill, the city



spread out around them, giving a vantage not possible anywhere else within the city. From here, all Lan could make out of the palace was the wall surrounding it and the central portion of it. There was a series of towers, but he couldn't make them out all that well.

Tohm liked to work outside the city. Lan didn't understand why, but it didn't matter. Lan forced himself to be thankful that Tohm had taken an interest in working with him, though even in that he wasn't sure whether his faith was misplaced.

"You remain too stiff," Tohm said.

"How do you expect me to become looser with my movements?"

"You need to focus on what your opponent is doing. Follow that, allow yourself to recognize what the person you're facing might be doing, and you should be able to track them. The goal should be to end any conflict as quickly as possible. Don't give anyone the opportunity to gain the upper hand." Tohm smiled. "Even a skilled swordsman can be defeated by someone who is less skilled. All it takes is one quick stab."

With that, Tohm unsheathed his sword and darted forward, jabbing toward Lan.

Had he not been prepared—Tohm had used a similar technique before—Lan might have been struck in the belly by Tohm's sword.

Lan brought his sword up and around. Had it been sheathed, he would have been too slow, and it was likely that he would have ended up unable to block. Maybe there was an advantage to carrying a sword rather than keeping it in its sheath.

He followed the movements Tohm had taught, spinning off to the side to avoid a thrust, sweeping his sword up, and trying to find an opening where he could slash forward, intending to attack the man. He had nothing more than a practice sword, its blunted edge posing no danger to Tohm, whereas Tohm preferred to practice with his own sword. Lan had some

hesitation with that. He was fearful that if he were to catch the end of the blade, he would not get back up, but each time he fought with Tohm, he was reminded of just how much more skilled the man was than him. If Tohm had wanted to harm him, he could have.

Tohm stepped back. He lowered his sword, watching Lan for a moment. “You don’t have the aggression that you need.”

With that, he darted forward, the hilt of his sword connecting with Lan’s head.

Lan collapsed, but not before hearing Tohm say one more thing.

“Not yet, but you will.”

# CHAPTER 26

## LAN

A n energy filled the air that was more than the distant lightning flashing. Lan listened for thunder, counting the beats between the lightning and when the thunder rumbled. It didn't come very quickly. When it did, it was a deep rumbling that rolled toward him.

"Focus," Tohm scolded. The same warning Lan had gotten from each of the other soldiers he'd trained with, but Tohm didn't have the same anger in his correction, and there was no training stick that followed. Instead, he watched Lan while holding his sword out, as if expecting another attack.

"I'm trying to focus," Lan said.

"You're not maintaining it. Whatever you're doing is not enough. How many times do you need to die to get the point?"

"I haven't died."

"If this were a real battle, you would have been killed a dozen times, so don't tell me that you haven't died. I'm trying to help you so that if and when you find yourself in a real battle, you're prepared and you won't die, at least not quite so quickly."

"How often are you sent off to fight for real?" Lan asked.

Tohm shook his head. "I don't get to choose. When I'm called to serve, I go. As will you, if we can ever get you to some semblance of usefulness."

Lan thought he had already begun to show some usefulness. In the few days that he'd been training with Tohm,

he'd already begun to improve. He wasn't proficient, but he thought that he could be in enough time.

“Now, keep your body positioned in such a way that you put your sword between your attacker and you. The moment it's lowered and they get around your blade is the moment that you're dead.”

As if to emphasize his point, Tohm poked at him with his sword, digging into Lan's side. The leathers he wore protected him, but they weren't enough to keep him completely shielded, and it still hurt. He'd be bruised from it. He had enough bruises already, and each one hurt, but the leathers kept him from having his skin pierced, and he could heal from bruises faster than he could from a puncture. At least he hadn't needed to see the Fixer again.

Lan brought his sword around but was too slow and had it slapped back down by Tohm.

“See? You have to be ready to respond to any attack that comes your way. Now, focus, and we'll see if I can kill you again.”

They started through the movements again, and Lan did his best to do as Tohm had instructed and keep the sword between him and Tohm, but the man shuffled around him quickly and managed to slip past, stabbing again.

Lan suppressed his frustration. It served no purpose to let his frustration get the better of him, but he hated that he wasn't able to get through Tohm's defense.

“That's the next lesson.” Tohm gave a hint of a smile. “At least, to some. They like to say you can't let your emotions seep through when you're fighting. You have to be calm at all times, or you've already lost. I'm not sure that's necessarily true.”

“I am calm.”

“Are you? I can see the irritation on your face and hear the frustration in your voice. You *should* be frustrated, but you shouldn't let me know it. Hold it inside. Keep your mind calm, and attack with that calm. Or find the anger and use that.”

If he struggled with composure, he couldn't imagine what Sophie would have done in his situation. She *really* struggled to remain calm, so he could see her getting angry and attacking in anger. That wouldn't help her, and it didn't help him now.

"Fine. Maybe I'm not as calm as I could be, but I don't know how you're managing to keep calm. How do you keep your focus when everything is going wrong around you?"

"What choice is there but to remain calm?" he asked. "You need to find a place within yourself and maintain your sense of calm. When you lose that, you have nothing."

Lan lifted his sword, his arms aching. The leathers were hot and heavy, making it hard to maintain the focus that Tohm wanted from him. He tried to ignore the discomfort, thinking of what Tohm had asked, the way that he'd wanted him to clear his mind and find the calm, and he found that he could, but it was difficult.

When he attacked, he did so with as little emotion as he could manage. His sword flickered toward Tohm, but not with nearly as much speed as Tohm possessed. He had strength, and he pushed through Tohm's resistance, trying to force him back.

It didn't work.

Tohm managed to slip past him, and around him, and he battered him with the sword along his flank.

Lan suppressed the irritation bubbling up inside him, the same sort of irritation that he often felt from Sophie when she tried to annoy him and found that she couldn't, not easily. He swung his sword around, missing Tohm, and the other sword caught him in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

"You have no focus," Tohm said.

"I have focus. It's just that—"

"It's just that you allow yourself to lose it. With everything that you face—everything that we must face—you need to be prepared. A time will soon come when you will be asked to fight. Will you be ready when that happens?"

Lan looked down at his sword. The blade was chipped and dulled, and it was heavy. It was so different from the sword he'd found in Papa's shed, hidden beneath baskets. That sword had been light, and despite Lan using it to attack the trees, it had remained sharp. Why couldn't he get a sword like that?

Had he known what he would be asked to do, maybe he would have grabbed Papa's sword and brought it with him. It was possible that they would have taken the sword from him, as they had everything else.

"How soon will I be asked to fight?" Lan asked.

Tohm studied him. "With this war, who knows? It might be months, and I hope that it is, but it could be sooner. It all depends on the timing of the attack. You and the others like you are going to be given a great responsibility."

"What responsibility is that?" A thrill ran through Lan at the idea that he would be able to help with the war. The only things that he had heard about the war had come from Nana, stories that she'd told Sophie and that Lan had eavesdropped on. Nana had wanted him to hear—he was certain of it—and she had always spoken loud enough for him to catch what she was saying.

"You'll be informed of what's expected of you in time. Just know that you will be tasked with finding something that has been lost to us for years." Tohm stepped back and surveyed the city in the distance for a long moment before turning his attention back to Lan. "Now, resume."

Lan reluctantly complied, attacking as he was expected to, and he tried to ignore the pain in his body. He didn't think that he succeeded.

"Come with me," Tohm said, shaking Lan awake.

Lan rubbed the sleep from his eyes and followed. The bruises screamed at him, demanding he rest. If he could get a few hours of sleep, he might be able to recover from some of

the pain he experienced, but there was no break. He would continue to train. At least now he had someone willing to train him.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“You want to know what you’re going to have to do?” Tohm asked.

Lan nodded.

“Then you’ll come with me. You need to be quiet. Can you manage that?”

The sound of his boots rang off the stone with each step. Lan had heavy feet and did what he could to silence them, but he didn’t think he was effective. Certainly, he wasn’t as effective as he wanted to be. “I can try.”

Tohm paused and turned to him. “Try? There isn’t any trying. You need to *do*. If you can’t, then you can stay back in the barracks, and I’ll go alone.”

Lan licked his lips. “I will.”

Tohm watched him for a moment before turning away. As he did, Lan noted how silently Tohm moved, much quieter than Lan could manage. He tried to mimic Tohm, following him along the street, and focus on silence. The longer he went, the easier it became, but he still wasn’t nearly as quiet as Tohm.

The streets were empty at this time of night. There was distant activity, but not much. In the section of the city where they trained, they were isolated from the taverns. Lan had only rarely seen others when he was out working on patrol, as if the patrols kept others away.

If he were in the streets, they would keep *him* away. The boys didn’t appear all that intimidating, but with enough of them—and with their trainer smacking at the boys with his training stick—they made for an imposing group.

Tohm paused and turned back to him, raising a finger to his lips. Lan nodded. Tohm tipped his head to the side, as if attempting to listen, and moments passed before he continued

onward. He moved more slowly, this time keeping his steps even lighter. Lan did his best to match him and stayed a few steps behind.

After turning down a few more streets, Tohm motioned for him to move back along a wall and raised his hand, indicating that Lan needed to wait.

Lan stepped into the shadows and crouched down, staring into the distance as Tohm disappeared. Where was he going? What was the point of this exercise? It certainly seemed as if Tohm worried about him drawing too much attention, but why would he have brought Lan if he worried about whether he would be able to maintain his silence?

As he waited, he focused on the night. Since coming to the city, and being thrown into the fighting pits, he had not had much time outside at night. Most of it had been during the heat of the day, when the humidity made him sweat through the clothing they forced him to wear. Night was different.

Not only was it cooler, but the night air had a stillness to it that allowed much of the dust that had been stirred up across the city during the day to finally settle. The city felt peaceful, a surprising sensation for him, considering everything that he'd gone through.

In the distance, Tohm motioned to him.

Lan readied to follow. This would be a test. Tohm would want to see how quietly he could move, and Lan would fail. He knew that he would.

Lan remained in the shadows, moving as silently as possible, but his slight limp made it difficult. His foot dragged as he walked, forcing him to concentrate, and often overcompensate.

What was the purpose of forcing him to sneak along the street?

When he reached Tohm, the man raised his finger to his lips again. Lan didn't need the reminder and tried not to let annoyance creep up too much. Tohm had already made it clear he needed to control his emotions and find some way of



holding them in check. Otherwise, he would never be the soldier they needed. But the longer he trained, the more difficult restraining his emotions became for him.

They crept forward, moving even more slowly now, staying along the walls. Tohm trailed his hand along the stone, and Lan mimicked him. If it was effective for Tohm, it would have to be for him, too.

A streetlight glowed in the distance.

There had been none before now, only the soft glowing of the moon overhead giving light to the night, sending down streaks of silver to clear the shadows. A few windows had candlelight glowing within them, but there were not many. How late was it? It was difficult to know. With as soundly as Lan had been sleeping, he could have been out for an hour or many before Tohm had come for him.

“Move around the light. Then wait,” Tohm instructed.

Lan frowned. That seemed a strange request, but maybe it was all part of whatever test Tohm intended for him.

He started forward, acutely aware of his leg and how much it dragged, hating that it did. Each step caused pain, and he was careful how he placed his feet, to prevent making more noise than was necessary.

The streetlight loomed before him. It was close enough that he could reach it, but that wasn't what he'd been asked to do, was it?

*Move around the light. Then wait.*

The words hung in his mind the same way the command to survive and eat once had. It had to be the same sort of test.

What if he couldn't move around the light? What would Tohm do with him then? Would he stop training him? Lan needed the man to continue with his training. Who else would?

He surveyed the buildings nearby. They were all single-story buildings, with little space between them. Unlike the part of the city they had just traveled through, a few candles glowed in windows, and shadows moved behind them.

Lan veered toward one of the neighboring buildings without any lights in the windows. Maybe he could move silently near that one, and if he couldn't, maybe it wouldn't matter.

Each step required he focus on his leg. He brought it down and took another step, placing the next carefully. He was silent. Nothing disturbed the night.

When he reached the wall of the building, he felt a surge of excitement. He'd made it.

Then shadows began to shift along the walls.

Lan pressed back into the wall. Someone was coming. Maybe it was only Tohm, but that didn't seem right. The shadows were too large for Tohm, and there was more than one.

That meant there would be more than one person coming.

Lan's heart hammered. Had Tohm known? Was this all part of the training, or was this separate?

When he listened, he didn't hear anything other than his heart beating wildly. He tried to control his breathing, not wanting to make any unnecessary noise. He kept silent for the most part, but anyone listening close enough would be sure to hear him.

The shadows shifted again.

This time, they came from a different direction.

Lan scooted back, trying to avoid detection, but the walls around him allowed him to hide only so much. Any other movement he attempted was bound to draw even more attention, which he didn't want, not until he knew whether this was part of Tohm's test. He didn't think it was. Why would Tohm want him to hide near the light if there were others coming this way?

The movement continued toward him.

Now it was clear that it was movement. It was more than just shadows slipping around him. It was soft footsteps making

their way along the cobbles, the same sound he had been working so hard to hide.

Lan looked around and found a place between a pair of buildings where he could conceal himself—if he could reach it. The space was a few steps away from him, enough that he would have to move quickly, which meant he might need to make some noise.

Did the streetlight seem dimmer? He thought that it did, but then that could be his imagination.

Lan dashed forward and reached the space between the buildings.

His heart hammered. Had he made too much noise?

He pressed back into the alley, trying to conceal himself deeper in the shadows.

Something touched his shoulder.

Lan suppressed a scream and spun, striking out with his fist.

Tohm caught it, an amused expression on his face.

He raised a finger to his lips again, once more silencing Lan.

Lan swallowed, licking his lips as Tohm moved past him. How had the man made it to the alley? How had he done it without the shadows seeing?

Tohm stood near the mouth of the alley, looking out at the street. His posture was stiff, and one hand reached for his sword. Even though Lan wasn't skilled with the sword, he would love to have had some sort of weapon with him—especially if Tohm was nervous.

“What did you see?” Tohm asked. His voice was barely more than a whisper and could have been nothing more than a gust of air.

“Shadows moving along the street,” Lan said. He tried to match the volume of Tohm's voice and wasn't sure that he succeeded.

“Are you certain?”

“I’m sure.”

“Too soon,” Tohm muttered to himself.

“What is it?” Lan asked.

Tohm didn’t answer.

“Tohm? What is it?” He spoke too loudly and knew that he did, but nervousness put him on edge and made him unable to control himself as well as he should have.

Tohm turned toward him and fixed him with a hard expression. “The Taihg. That’s the Taihg.”

Lan looked beyond Tohm, eyeing the street. *That* was the Taihg?

# CHAPTER 27

## SOPHIE

Sophie planned to use the same exit to leave the palace the next day.

She knew she shouldn't, and she should be more careful, but now that she had gotten beyond the walls of the palace, she wanted to know what else there was in the city. It wasn't only the shops and the smells and the sounds. There was so much *more* out in the city. Certainly, there was more than what she had found within the palace.

She couldn't shake the image of the woman from her mind. She had been amazing, the kind of woman that Sophie wanted to be. Confident enough that the men followed her without question. Well, maybe not without question, but she *was* confident, and Sophie imagined she was a dangerous warrior in battle.

Maybe the woman was part of the Dunvale delegation. She hadn't heard of Lorant having women for soldiers, so that seemed unlikely, though not impossible.

"Where are you going dressed like that?"

Sophie turned carefully, her body tense, and saw Caitlyn watching her. She wore the same arrogant expression she often did, and she was dressed incredibly well, with a gold necklace hanging between her breasts. "Dressed like what?"

Caitlyn approached and motioned toward her. "I don't know what you're wearing, but I've never seen you dressed so much like... *that* in the palace. You'd better be careful, or Ridaln won't want you anymore."

Sophie clenched her jaw. She would not let Caitlyn get to her, regardless of how hard she tried. “Ridaln doesn’t want me now. He barely even talks to me.”

Caitlyn smiled, as if pleased that she’d gotten to Sophie. “Not dressed like that he won’t. If you want, you can come with me to my rooms, and we’ll see what we can find for you. I’m sure I can come up with something that will make you more presentable for him—though if we do that, you might be chosen by someone else, especially if we can keep you away from the food.”

“You almost sound as if you want to be chosen.”

“I…” She twisted the fabric of her dress for a moment before looking up at Sophie. “It’s an honor to serve the kingdom, regardless of what they ask of me.”

“I don’t intend to get chosen to marry.”

Caitlyn shrugged. “Which makes it all the more likely you will.”

“Why is that?”

She shrugged again. “Most of the time, it’s the women who don’t want to go anywhere but here who end up claimed. I wouldn’t be surprised if one of the upcoming selections sees you getting claimed. You’re young, which means you can be trained.”

Sophie shivered at the thought. “You don’t have to be so smug about it.”

“I’m not being smug. That’s what I’ve seen. Some have been here for years, and we’ve seen what happens over time. I wouldn’t be surprised if you *were* chosen, and it might be for the simple reason that it would irritate Ridaln.”

“I’m *not* Ridaln’s property.”

Caitlyn grinned. “So you say, but he’s the one who brought you here, and he makes sure that we leave you alone.”

That was news to Sophie, and she wondered what it meant. “Where are you headed to?” She wanted nothing more than to change the topic.

Caitlyn grinned at her, seeming to know what she was doing. “A bath. Some of us take baths. You should try it sometime.”

Heat rose in Sophie’s cheeks, and she looked away. It *had* been a while since she’d had a bath, but that was because she wasn’t certain how safe it was to bathe. She didn’t like the idea of stepping into poison and having her flesh boiled off. Had Sophie not visited the tub that day, how long would that person have been there? What would have happened to others who might have made the mistake of getting into the tub?

She didn’t know how many would have been poisoned. Maybe the next person would have realized what was happening, and they would have climbed out, but maybe they wouldn’t have, and they would have suffered the same fate.

“I’ve bathed.”

“Not recently.” Caitlyn held her nose. “I’m sure Ridaln would prefer it if you found a bath.”

Sophie ignored her as she made her way down the hallway. Maybe she needed to do something different before wandering back into the city. She didn’t want to stink, and as much as she hated it, Caitlyn had made a good point. She did stink.

She reached the kitchen and sought out Oleda. She found the cook where she often did, pounding dough on one of her counters. She barely looked up as Sophie approached.

“Heard you were outside the palace the other day.”

Sophie’s eyes widened. “You *heard*?”

Oleda did look up then, and she smiled widely. “I hear many things, Sophie. The palace has ears.”

That wasn’t what Sophie wanted to hear. She knew the palace had ears. She had just hoped that it didn’t have eyes as well. If she couldn’t sneak outside the palace without someone knowing, how would she ever be allowed any sort of freedom?

“Don’t worry. I won’t say anything.”

“Thank you.”

Oleda started working at the dough again, pushing it out and down, spreading it into a circle. “What brings you to the kitchen this late in the day?”

“I need to know where else there might be a bath.”

Oleda looked up, a frown creasing her brow. “There’s a bath in the ladies’ hall. Unless you don’t want to use that one for some reason,” she said.

Sophie met her gaze before looking down. Shifting from one foot to the other, she tried to frame what she would tell the woman. “Do you remember that thing that I didn’t want to talk to you about?”

Oleda nodded. “I remember there was something that bothered you, but you didn’t want to talk much about it. I figured that’s your prerogative.”

“Well...” She let out a deep breath. “It had to do with the bath.” She spoke in a rush.

“And that’s why you don’t want to use the ladies’ bathing room?”

Sophie glanced up briefly, wanting to tell her more. Of all the people in the palace, Oleda had been the one to welcome her the most. She was always kind to Sophie and always made her feel welcome. Sophie felt she owed the woman.

“That’s the reason,” she said.

“I’ll admit that you now have me curious, but there is a servants’ bathing room on the lower level. I can’t say that the ladies of the palace have used it before, but you would be welcome to it.”

Sophie sighed. “That would be fantastic.” At least that way, she wouldn’t have the memory of what she’d experienced in the bath haunting her as she tried to get clean. How could she ever get clean when she would be thinking about the possibility that she could be poisoned and that her flesh might peel from her bones?

Oleda shook her head. “There will come a time when I might need to hear more about whatever happened.”



“I understand,” Sophie said.

“You don’t have to look quite so sad about it. I’m not going to force you to tell me anything that you don’t want to.”

“I know that you won’t. It’s just... I’m not sure how much I’m supposed to say.”

“This is from Ridaln, I assume.”

Sophie nodded. “I don’t think he would be upset with me telling you, but...”

“No. I don’t want you to get in trouble with Ridaln. For that matter, *I* don’t want to be in trouble with Ridaln. It’s best we not do anything that might upset him.”

Sophie nodded. She was thankful that Oleda wasn’t going to force her to share what she didn’t want to, though she had not expected her to. But it seemed Oleda would wait until Sophie was absolutely ready to share.

Sophie started away from the kitchen and toward the servants’ quarters, and she only knew where they were from overhearing the cooks and some of the other palace servants talking about them. There was a narrow staircase leading down a level to a place in the palace Sophie hadn’t explored. She trailed her hand along the stone wall as she made her way down the stairs, thankful for the lanterns providing enough light to see.

There was a bath here? It wouldn’t surprise her, especially as there were places all throughout the palace that she hadn’t yet explored, but it would be difficult to service a bath here, even more than it would be on the main level of the palace.

She counted the doors along the hallway until she reached the one that fit with what Oleda had told her. As she reached for the door, she heard a strange rumbling and saw a flash of light at the far end of the hall.

Sophie knew better than to pursue it, but curiosity—as it often did—got the better of her. She approached the end of the hallway carefully, focusing on the door there and noting that it was different from the plain wooden doors otherwise around her. The rumbling came again, though there was no flash of

light. The hair on her arms stood on end, and the air changed, becoming heavier.

Sophie hesitated. *What am I doing?* Coming this way, without knowing what was out here, was incredibly dangerous.

Light flashed once more from beneath the door, and Sophie shook her head. She had to find out what that was. She was far too curious.

When she reached the door, it felt cool to the touch. It was not metal or wood, but almost damp, as if made from the same stone as the walls around her.

There was no handle, though there was an outline to the door. She pushed on it, but it didn't budge.

The rumbling came again, and this time she felt it through the door.

Sophie jerked her hand back, staggering away from it.

What was it? What did she detect here? Whatever it was created something that reminded her of what she'd experienced in the forest when they'd been attacked, and there was enough of it that she could physically detect it through the stone.

She began backing away, at first slowly and then picking up speed. When she reached the door to the bathing room, she hurried inside and closed it. There was none of the steam that there was in the bathing room on the upper level, but the air smelled clean, of soap mixed with a hint of a floral scent, and she stoked the flames of the coals, bringing the temperature of the bath up. The tub was made of a simple metal frame, nothing quite as ornate as was found on the upper levels, but that suited her more.

As she soaked, she tried not to think of the strangeness at the end of the hall, pushing thoughts away, letting the warmth of the water embrace her. She tried not to remember the last time she had been in a bathing room, not wanting to think of the dead woman, and who it might have been. She couldn't

shake the sadness she felt that she didn't know the woman's name.

Sophie waited, but there was no additional rumbling in the hallway.

After soaking for a long time, and finally feeling as if the days of filth had washed off, she climbed out of the tub and quickly towed off, scrubbing herself more vigorously than necessary, and dressed. She probably should have cleaned her clothes before slipping them back on. Now it was too late. She sniffed them. They could use some of the floral perfume in the bath.

When she stepped out into the hall, she glanced down toward the doorway, but there was nothing there. Whatever had been rumbling and had caused a flash of light under the door was no more.

As she started to turn away, prepared to leave, the door began to open.

Sophie sucked in a breath and darted behind the door to the bathing room, but she kept it open a crack so that she could peer out.

She waited. It seemed as if she had to wait a painfully long time, but finally there was movement, and someone strode past the doorway.

As they passed, Sophie dared to pull the door open a little more. All she wanted was a peek, just a glimpse of whoever had caused the strangeness behind that doorway at the end of the hall. There was nothing natural about it, and if it was something magical, she wanted to see it.

She noted the swishing of robes and stepped back, slowly pushing the door closed. She had recognized the person on the other side.

Why should she be surprised that it was Ridaln?

The rumors were true. He *was* a sorcerer. But why would he have been down here doing his magic?

Sophie stayed leaning on the door, controlling her breathing. Ridaln was never cruel to her, but if he were to find out that she had been spying on him, she didn't know how he would react. It was possible that he might lash out, and she had heard enough stories of sorcerers and their magic to fear what he might do to her.

Enough time had to have passed. It had been several minutes since Ridaln had gone past. He had to have kept going. There would have been no reason for him to linger—unless he had noticed her spying on him.

She waited another minute just to be safe. It was better to do that than to risk it.

When Sophie did pull the door open, she did so carefully and hesitated as she looked out and down the corridor. Her gaze drifted toward the strange doorway at the end before she turned and jumped back with a gasp.

“Ridaln.” Sweat beaded on her back again, and she looked past him, searching for some way to escape if it came down to that.

He tipped his head toward her. “Sophie Varison. This is an unusual place for you to bathe.”

“Oleda allowed me to bathe here,” she said quickly.

“And why would she do that, unless you told her of the experience you had in the ladies' bathing room?”

Sophie flushed as she shook her head quickly. She didn't need him upset with her about the possibility that she had shared something that she was not supposed to.

Another thought came to her then. With it came a surge of irritation. “Have you found out who it was?” Sophie asked.

Ridaln considered her for a painfully long moment. Something about his silver eyes seemed penetrating, as if he could peer below the surface and know what she was thinking.

“I have looked into it. That matter is not of your concern.”

“I think it is of my concern, especially as I was the one who found her, in case you don't remember that.”

“I remember it quite well.”

“Why won’t you tell me, then?”

Ridaln’s gaze narrowed. “It is not for you to concern yourself with.”

“No? And I should only be concerned about the fact that you have me here so that I might get paired with some strange nobleman?”

“That is not the reason that you are here.”

“If that’s not it, then what is? Why have you brought me here?”

Ridaln sighed, scanning the hallway as if looking for others. “Perhaps it is time you began to understand. I had hoped to keep it from you, but it seems life in the palace draws you in, despite my best intentions.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I would rather have you wait, but perhaps it’s not possible.”

“Wait for what?”

“For the reason the Karell came after you.”

# CHAPTER 28

## SOPHIE

Sophie followed Ridaln cautiously. She was no longer thinking of leaving the palace grounds to find the redheaded warrior woman, as she was more intrigued by Ridaln, and what he might have for her. Was she actually about to get answers? She had waited long enough, and she deserved answers, but he had kept them from her for so long she found it difficult to believe he would share them now.

They reached the stone doorway, and Ridaln pressed on it. It sprang open just a crack, but enough for him to get his fingers around the door and pull it open.

“Is this some sort of magical portal?” Sophie asked.

“You have heard far too many stories.”

“What’s wrong with stories?”

Ridaln looked over his shoulder at her. “Nothing is wrong with stories. It’s just that sometimes stories are not what you think.”

As Sophie watched the soft glow around the doorway increase, she smiled to herself. “And sometimes they’re more than you think.”

Ridaln nodded, but Sophie couldn’t shake the sense it was a grim nod.

He pulled the door open and stepped inside. A winding staircase led up, and Ridaln took the steps two at a time, moving fluidly up them. Sophie followed. Each step left her

feeling less and less certain of what she was doing. The hair on her arms stood on end, and there was a heaviness in the air, making it more and more difficult to breathe.

After a dozen steps, she felt she couldn't go on.

"Ridaln?" She looked up at the man, but he continued up the stairs, oblivious to the struggle she had trying to keep up with him.

Sophie licked her lips and tried to push forward, but she couldn't, as if she had reached some sort of barrier and her legs could not push her past it. Ridaln had disappeared around the spiraling stairs. She heard his steps thudding up the stone, the only evidence she had that Ridaln was still there.

She was not about to get left behind, not when she was so close to getting answers.

Sophie fought, ignoring the strange sensation resisting her, and took a step. Then she took another.

The resistance eased, and tingling washed over her skin, like a severe chill. It reminded her of what she'd felt in the forest when confronted by the Karell. Now that she was freed, Sophie moved more quickly up the stairs toward Ridaln and whatever answers he had for her.

As she made her way up the stairway, she finally saw a flash of his robes and climbed even faster, wanting to catch back up to him before the strange sensation returned and prevented her from reaching him. Ridaln didn't notice that she had only now rejoined him. Didn't he care that she'd been trapped by whatever that was? He moved with deliberateness, and Sophie followed, deciding not to interrupt. She did not want to anger him, especially not this close to her answers.

The stairs finally ended and let them out onto a small platform with another door, matching the one on the lower level. Once more, Ridaln pressed on the stone, though this time she noted a surge of power, an unmistakable energy flowing from him into the door. With another flash of cold light, the door opened a crack. Ridaln squeezed his fingers into the gap and opened it all the way.

How had she detected anything as far below as she had? With this door and the other, there should have been no way to see the strange flashes of light or to feel the rumbling from this high up in the tower.

Ridaln stepped forward and then took one more lingering look at her, as if debating whether to allow her access, before nodding to himself.

“If there had been any question about whether you should be allowed access to this tower, the mere fact that you are here has answered that.”

“Because I could climb the stairs?”

“Because you were able to overcome the natural barrier of the stairs.”

“You knew about that?”

“Knew about it? I placed it.”

“I almost wasn’t able to make it.”

“And yet you did. Others have tried and failed, but you did not. That tells me all that I need to know.”

The room was massive, with rows of tables scattered with strange items. Collections of books were stacked on some of the tables, and in other places, jars of liquid and powders. In still other places were sculptures, strange tapestries, and even some delicately painted portraits. Had Ridaln been the one to make the paintings in the portrait hall?

Whatever this was, Sophie could tell it was some place of power, but what, exactly?

“What is this?” she whispered.

“This is called the Sorcerer’s Seat,” Ridaln said.

Her breath caught for a moment. “So you *are* a sorcerer.”

“I have never tried to conceal that, Sophie.”

Sophie tried to ignore the annoyance she felt. That was easier to do now that she was here, in a place few visited. “Why did you bring me here?”



“You have been questioning the reason that you were brought to the palace.”

Sophie arched a brow at him. “I’ve been questioning that for quite a while. Why are you bringing me here now?”

“Because of the Dunvale visit.”

“What does that have to do with anything? I wasn’t chosen to be paired with anyone.” The idea of it sickened her. She hated the thought of being asked—or forced—to marry, especially at her age. She was far too young. Even in Nana’s stories, girls her age didn’t get married.

“You didn’t, but it’s possible that the next time you will. I can protect you only so much.”

Sophie laughed. “Protect me? I don’t think you protect me at all.”

“More than you have realized, Sophie Varison.”

He looked at her for a moment, holding her gaze, and Sophie turned away, feeling uncomfortable. How would he have been protecting her? She couldn’t think of any way in which he might have. He had ignored her for the most part, only interacting with her when he ran into her in the hallway or when she had come to him for help with the body in the bath.

“Does this have anything to do with the poisoning in the bath?”

“There is much you need to know. Take a seat.” Ridaln motioned toward a high-backed wooden chair. It had been heavily lacquered at one point, but over time that had worn away, leaving the imprint of the hundreds of people who had sat in the chair over the years.

Sophie shifted in the seat of the chair, trying to get comfortable, before deciding that she wasn’t meant to get comfortable in this chair. It was clearly designed to keep her from getting *too* comfortable.

Ridaln dragged a stool over to her and sat on it with his elbows resting on his legs, his hands clasped in his lap, and he

considered her for a long moment. “What do you remember of your childhood?”

Sophie shrugged. “You saw where I spent my childhood. Halith was—”

“Not that village. Before.”

Sophie leaned back in the chair and let her eyes fall closed. What *did* she remember of her time before Halith? Most of what she thought she remembered was fuzzy, as if she remembered it through a veil of smoke. They were memories that she had tried to recall so many times over the years, but she had never been able to come up with anything more than the faintest scraps.

“I don’t remember much from before Halith. I was too young when I went to live with my grandparents.”

“Yes. About that. *Why*, exactly, did you go to live with your grandparents?”

She shifted in the chair. What did this have to do with why Ridaln had brought her to the palace? She couldn’t think of any reason why it would matter, which made it unlikely to matter whether she shared with him. “My parents were trying to get us away from the border. The war was too dangerous. When we fled, they were... they were...” She couldn’t finish the sentence. Tears that she’d held back for years came forth, despite every effort to ignore the emotion.

“That was what you told me. You’ve wondered why I brought you to the palace, and that is the reason.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Clearly. When you were faced with the Karell, you were identified, as were many of the young women who are now in the palace.”

“You brought them all here because they saw the Karell?”

“Not all of them were brought by me.”

The comment Caitlyn had made began to make a different sort of sense. “Then why?”

“Do you know what the Karell do?”

“Magic,” she breathed, looking all around her. “Like you.”

“Not like me. They have a different power. But they found you and identified you as someone who might have a similar magic. You are not the first, and I doubt you will be the last. They search for those who have potential, because they would harness it. As would I.”

“You haven’t tried to harness anything!”

Ridaln smiled at her. “Don’t mistake my study of your potential for not trying. Besides, you are too young to reach magic, or so I had thought. It’s rare for a child to access power.”

“I’m not a child.” Sophie was tempted to stick her tongue out at him anyway.

“For what we’re dealing with, you are. Do not take that as an insult. There is nothing wrong with being a child. You are allowed an innocence that others are not. It is something taken from all of us far too quickly.”

She sat quietly for a moment. “Why tell me this now?”

“Because you drew attention. And because my last student is gone.”

“Gone? Was she selected by Dunvale?” Could that be why Ridaln suddenly wanted to work with her?

“Unfortunately, she suffered a different—and worse—fate.”

Sophie’s breath caught. “The tub? That was your student?”

“Yes, and I’m sure it was no accident. I am uncertain, but there have long been forces within the palace that would undo my work. And that work is important, regardless of what you might hear. Without it, we would face the threat of the Raven Queen.”

“I thought the war was over.”

Nana had told her about the Raven Queen. She was a dangerous woman who possessed powerful magic.

“The natural barriers between our lands protect us. For now. That will change. War *is* coming. That much I have cried. I am doing my best to prepare, and to buy time for those preparations.”

“What sort of preparations?”

“The Raven Queen has been solidifying her grasp on the lands around her, lands far more magically advanced than ours. She has swept through, creating an empire where before there has never been unity. They are lands that have warred for hundreds of years, broken up only by uneasy peace. Now they are united behind her. Which is why we must do the same.”

That was a different kind of story from what Nana had told her. Did she dare believe it? Could she not?

“That’s why the delegations come?” Sophie twisted the fabric of her gown between her fingers, looking up at Ridaln.

“That and other reasons. We show power to them that they must believe we protect. Otherwise, we will fall.”

“What sort of power?”

“That of the Pale Princess.”

“She’s gone.”

“That’s what we say.”

“She’s not?”

Ridaln turned away from her. “The princess fell during the war, but many believe we have her here with us. They see women like Nessa and others, and...”

“What does this have to do with me?”

Ridaln considered her a moment. The hairs on her arms stood on end again, the same way they had when she had come up the stairs to Ridaln’s tower. “It is the reason you have come to the palace. The Karell might have found you first, but I sense the same as they did. There is potential in you, Sophie Varison. Much potential.”

“*Magic* potential?”

He nodded.

She started to smile, but he wasn't joking with her. "I don't have any magical ability."

"Perhaps not yet, but you have the potential."

"You want me to learn magic?"

"Not only learn magic." He leaned forward, his face becoming more serious. "I need you to help us convince others that we hold the Pale Princess."

# CHAPTER 29

## LAN

Lan's body ached from fresh bruises, Jarson's newest attack having left him throbbing and sore. He paid no mind to it. All he could think about was the Taihg.

How could he combat something like that?

He was training to be a soldier, learning how to fight, but even with everything Tohm had shown him, he didn't see a time when he would have learned enough to be of much use against the Taihg.

Rolling over, he looked up at the ceiling, his mind racing. This wasn't what he'd wanted when he'd thought about what it would take to become a soldier. This wasn't the way he'd thought he would train. None of this was what he'd expected.

The door opened, and he looked up, ready to protect himself. It was Tohm.

"Get up."

"I can't."

Tohm loomed over him. "Get up. You're going to train."

Lan wanted to argue but couldn't. What was there to say?

As he sat up, Tohm waited for him by the door. Lan followed him out of the barracks and to the training ground on the hill. Tohm tossed him a practice sword, and he took it, but he didn't have the energy. His body hurt, throbbed, and he didn't want to do anything.

When Tohm leaped forward in attack, he dropped his sword.

Tohm's sword struck his shoulder, and then his side, before finally nearly crashing into his face.

Lan barely blinked.

"You've regressed," Tohm said. "You were getting decent, and now it's as if you don't care what happens to you."

Tohm stepped forward, drawing Lan's attention to his face. He'd been looking at the ground, staring at the stones, or the rocky ledge that overlooked the city, or the swirls of dust in the air, anywhere but at Tohm.

"What happens if the next attack takes off your head? Will you care then?"

"I'll be in the After."

Tohm grunted. "The After? What if there's no After? What if you die and there's nothing more? Don't you want to fight against nothingness?"

What could he even say? Could he question Tohm about why he'd shown him the Taihg? Could he admit that he didn't think he'd ever be able to face the Taihg?

"You lose your voice again? I thought maybe you'd found something of your sister, which is why I offered to bring you. Maybe I should have chosen her."

"You won't touch her." He spoke without thinking.

Tohm grinned. "Good. That's what I'm looking for. You can't let me beat on you and not fight back."

"I'm fighting back."

"Are you? It seems to me that you're letting me hit you as often as I want. You *were* getting better, and now you're barely bringing your sword up to resist."

What would be the point of responding?

Then again, if he said nothing, he wouldn't get any answers. Those were what he wanted more than anything.

“What’s the point?” Lan asked.

“The point?”

“The Taihg. How am *I* supposed to fight them?”

“Maybe you’re not, but we weren’t going to leave you behind when *he* wanted her.”

The idea that anyone had wanted his sister angered Lan. Then again, he still had no idea what had become of her. Hopefully, she did better than him, but would she have survived the fighting pits? She was stubborn enough that she might have been able to. What about the rest?

If anyone could have, it would have been Sophie.

“Then why did you let me in if you wanted her?”

Tohm snorted. “We’ve had a hard enough time recruiting the right age, but when I met your sister, I saw the fire we needed. If anyone could make it through those first trials, it would be someone with a fire in them like that.”

What did it mean that he wasn’t even the one they had wanted? Lan had thought he had a chance of succeeding with this training, but what if that wasn’t it at all?

“Why work with me if you didn’t want to train me in the first place?” It was the question he’d resisted asking, but now he needed to know.

“It’s not that I didn’t want to train you, but we’ve rarely found someone your age who has any potential. You get too old, and there’s only so much your muscles can learn.” Tohm jabbed at him with his sword, and Lan smacked it away. Tohm smirked at him. “It’s like learning to talk. You raise a baby in Dunvale, and they speak Dun. You raise a baby in Thaln, and they speak their tongue. You raise a baby in Vaarn, and they speak Vaarnish. That’s why we try to find the younger ones with potential. You wait too long, and there will never be the same potential.”

Lan stared at his sword. Was that why he struggled when the other boys didn’t? Would he always be slower, because he hadn’t been born to it and hadn’t the necessary training? He



*had* improved, but maybe he wouldn't be as quick with the sword as Jarson or Tohm, regardless of how much he trained.

What would become of him, then? If he couldn't meet whatever standards they had, what would he do?

"What about the Taihg?" Lan asked.

Tohm watched him and jammed his sword back into his sheath. "You were there that night. You would have detected what they do. That's the Taihg."

"I don't know what that was, only what you told me."

"The Taihg are powerful soldiers and gifted almost as strongly as the Raven Queen herself."

"I don't want to serve the Raven Queen."

Tohm studied him. "No? Then why would you want to run off with the Taihg?"

He hadn't wanted to run off with them. "I just wanted to be \_\_\_"

"A soldier." Tohm laughed, a dark gleam in his eyes. "You thought the stories you've heard of soldiering were true. Maybe even the stories of the Taihg. You probably thought that if they could teach you the same magic, you would be unstoppable. You wouldn't be the first to think that way."

Lan didn't mention the real reason he thought Tohm had kept him away. That would only irritate the man. He had been scared, the same as Lan, though at least Tohm knew what he was facing. Lan was scared because he *didn't* know. There was a difference.

"You wanted to protect me from them?" he asked.

"I damn well didn't want you taken by them."

"Why?"

Tohm frowned. "Why? I don't want those Taihg bastards attacking any of my soldiers."

Lan didn't know if he should take that as a compliment. Tohm had been afraid of the Taihg, but there was something

more that he wasn't telling Lan.

Why had the Taihg been here?

They were supposed to serve the Raven Queen in Reyash.

“Now, let's get back at this. Do your best. And this time, I want to see everything you have. Stop holding back with me. Treat me the way you treat Jarson.”

“I don't want to harm you.”

“Do you think that you can?”

Lan glanced at Tohm's sword. He hadn't even come close to hitting him yet. “I don't know.”

“You won't get to anyone if you don't have any aggression. How did you survive the pits in the first place?”

“I didn't have any other choice.”

“Do you think you have one now?” Tohm asked, a dangerous edge to his voice.

Lan hesitated. Maybe that was the key. He didn't have the same fear as he had before. When he was in the pits, he had been taught to survive so that he could eat. While Lan wasn't sure that he wanted to become that person, it had brought him this far.

“I don't want to go back into the pits.”

“Then find something else to fight for. Find that anger within you.”

“They want me to control my emotions.”

“That's one way to do it,” Tohm said.

“You want me to fight angry?”

Tohm shrugged at the question.

“Is that how you fight?”

“Controlled anger makes people powerful,” Tohm said, “especially when the other person wants to kill you. Or perhaps in your case, they want to take your sister, use her, maybe do things with her.”

Lan swallowed. Tohm might be the only person in the compound who knew that Lan wanted to find out what had happened to Sophie. Now he was going to use that against him?

“What do you think is happening to her now?” Tohm asked softly.

“What did you do to her?”

“It’s not what I did to her. It’s what *they* will do to her. I can just imagine a girl her age, a pretty little face, the spirit that she has. A girl like that would appeal to quite a few.”

“Stop.”

“Are you sure? You don’t want to hear about the kinds of things that they have likely done to your sister? Think about what we did to you, and imagine the same—and worse—happening to her. There is a very different type of abuse that happens to girls. You asked why the delegations came to the city, and that’s—”

Lan took a step toward him without meaning to. “Stop.”

“Or what?”

“Just... stop.”

Tohm grinned at him, darkness flashing in his eyes. “Why should I stop? Do you think your enemies will stop, Lan? Do you think those enemies will take a step back rather than hurting your feelings? So sensitive when it comes to your sister. Perhaps I should find where they’ve kept her, bring her to the pits, make you watch.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t I? Don’t mislead yourself for a moment in thinking you know what I would and would not do. My job is to ensure you are trained. If it takes that, then...” Tohm shrugged. “I’m sure I could find where she’s been taken. Perhaps she’s in no shape for the pits, but then we might have another use for her. The men on patrol get lonely, you know.”

Lan lunged forward.

Tohm brought his sword up, swinging it toward Lan. “Good. Use that aggression. Find your way of—”

Lan’s mind went blank. All he could think of was the things Tohm had said, how he had talked of using Sophie. Those fears haunted him in dark moments at night, leaving him wondering if he would ever be able to see her—help her—ever again.

Coming to Neylash had been a mistake.

He brought his sword around, swinging it with a furious energy. He slammed into Tohm’s blade, trying to push it off to the side.

Tohm only grinned. “What do you think your sister would say if she saw you like this?” Tohm asked softly.

Lan screamed and ran toward Tohm, swinging his sword wildly, not caring about technique, only about hurting Tohm. He wasn’t about to let the man—or anyone—use his sister like that.

Tohm blocked his sword, forcing Lan to spin around. As he did, he swung his sword up, trying to connect with Tohm, rage and anger flowing through him. He kept Sophie in the front of his mind and tried to do what it would take to help her. If that meant fighting, attacking on her behalf, then so be it. He would do that.

Tohm twisted, forcing Lan off to the side.

“She really does have quite the pretty face. I can only imagine the things that have been done—”

Lan dropped the sword and jumped, launching himself at Tohm.

The man brought his sword around and buried it in Lan’s belly.

Lan grabbed at the blade, but the pain was too much, and he slipped back, falling to the stones. The edges of his vision began to blur, and Tohm leaned over him.

“*That’s* the kind of anger you need to harness.”

# CHAPTER 30

LAN

When he came around, Lan recognized where he was. It was the Fixer's room, but he worried that this time he was even more injured than the last time. How could he not be, considering that he'd had a sword jabbed through his belly?

He coughed, his throat raw and ragged. A soft murmur of laughter caught his attention, and he rolled his head to the side to see the Fixer watching him. The old man pushed his glasses up his nose, a wry smile curving his mouth.

"I didn't expect to see you back here quite so soon," the Fixer said.

"I didn't, either." Lan rolled to stare up at the ceiling. There were splotches of darkness on the ceiling, and it took him a moment to realize they were blood.

*How much of mine is staining the wood?*

"At least you weren't beaten quite as badly. This, at least, I can help with. Took a few days for you to recover to a reasonable degree, but you should be fine."

Lan glanced down toward his belly. "You can help with someone stabbed in the stomach?"

The Fixer shrugged. "This kind of injury I've seen before. The last... well, let's just say that the last attack you faced was something a bit more brutal."

"It was brutal because everyone attacked me."

"Interesting."

“Interesting?” Lan tried to sit up, but there was too much pain in his stomach to do so. Everything hurt, though surprisingly not as badly as after the last attack. If he survived having his bowels carved up, he might make it out without any further complications. “Why is that interesting?”

“There are only a few reasons that so many would turn on one.”

“I know. They view me as the weak link.”

“Or they view you as a threat,” the Fixer said.

Lan rested his head back, staring up at the ceiling. “I doubt they view me as a threat.”

“Why is that?” The Fixer made his way closer to Lan. He had a strange presence to him, an energy that left Lan feeling uncomfortable.

“I’m too old.”

“Old for this, perhaps, but not too old to become useful.”

“Why is that?”

“The training you are going through is designed to—”

The door to the Fixer’s room opened, and Lan looked over.

Tohm entered, glaring at the Fixer, a hint of annoyance on his face. “He’s awake. Good.”

“He remains injured. It will take him some time to fully recover from this, and that’s if he *does* fully recover.”

Tohm glanced from the Fixer to Lan. “You don’t think he can?”

“As I said, it will take him some time. I had to stitch up his belly, along with his innards. An injury like that can be fatal without the proper attention.”

Tohm held the Fixer’s gaze for a long moment. “I’m sure he received the proper attention.”

“Of course. Why else would I be here?”

“Indeed. Why else would you be here?”

Tohm stormed over to the cot on which Lan was lying, and he stared at him for a moment. “Get up.”

Lan shook his head. “I’m not sure that I can. My stomach —”

Tohm nudged him. “And he can’t show weakness. Not with what we’re trying to do. He needs to be ready.”

“It’s not about showing weakness,” the Fixer said. “It’s about allowing recovery.”

“And how long do you think he will require?”

“It’s hard to say. With a wound like he has suffered, the chances are good that it might take him weeks.”

“He doesn’t have weeks.”

“He should take the time that he needs to recuperate. It was your blade that pierced him, I believe.”

“The how of the injury doesn’t matter. And if you had done your job, he would have recovered more rapidly.”

“I did my job.”

Lan glanced from the Fixer to Tohm. What choice did he have but to go?

The Fixer watched him, shaking his head. “You’re going to end up back here again.”

Lan didn’t want to show weakness. Wasn’t that what Tohm was trying to teach him? Show strength. Be strong. Ignore pain. Not so much that he wasn’t supposed to feel pain, or any emotion, but he was expected to use that pain and that emotion to find the aggression he needed.

“Probably,” he said.

He nodded to Tohm, and when they were out in the narrow hallway outside the Fixer’s room, Tohm looked over at him.

“You lived.”

Lan blinked a moment. “Is that a surprise?”

Tohm shrugged. “There was a possibility that you wouldn’t. As he said, an injury like you sustained can be

fatal.”

Lan wasn't sure whether he should be thankful he had survived or alarmed that the situation had been so tenuous.

“I lived. Isn't that enough?”

Tohm glanced over at him before nodding. “You will be useful. That's all I ask.”

“Useful for what?”

“For what must be done. Come on now.”

Out in the courtyard, nearly fifty soldiers had gathered, all of them armed with swords and prepared for something. Lan glanced at Tohm, hoping for an explanation, but Tohm merely signaled Lan to get in line. He hesitated a moment before doing so. There were several trainees, all young like himself, or even younger. This wasn't the usual patrol.

As Lan looked around, he saw Karn with several of the other squad leaders, talking softly, and the man glanced in Lan's direction, his gaze lingering for a moment before moving onward.

Lan could practically feel the irritation in the man's eyes.

Lan hadn't had the opportunity to check his bandages, but moving around caused pain to surge through him, enough that he doubted he would be of much use. As much as he wanted to pretend there was no pain in his stomach, that was all he was doing—pretending.

“I didn't think you wanted to come with us.” Jarson slid forward so he could stand next to Lan.

Anyone else would have been better. Jarson had hated Lan from their first meeting, to the point where he looked ready to attack Lan at any opportunity.

“I don't know that I have much choice.”

Jarson grunted. “You could leave.”

Lan turned to face him. “I don't think that I could.”



Jarson glared at him for a moment before barking out a laugh. “Look at him. He’s scared. First mission, and he’s already shitting himself.”

A figure appeared behind Jarson and slapped him on the back of the head, causing him to stagger forward. “Take a sword to your belly, and you’d shit yourself, too,” Tohm said.

Lan didn’t know whether to be thankful or offended that Tohm had stepped in on his behalf. Likely he would end up in more trouble. Maybe it would have been better if the man had stayed out of it. Lan had dealt with Jarson before, and he had managed to survive, even defeat him.

“We aren’t going to be gone long,” Tohm said. “Just a quick march to the border, to check on a few things. Do you think you can do this?”

Lan ignored the pointed look aimed in his direction. He purposely ignored Jarson. “I can.”

“Good.”

The way Tohm looked at him suggested that he had no choice. If he had said no, what would Tohm have done?

Lan’s eyes darted down to the sword strapped to Tohm’s waist. Probably the same thing that he had already done to him once. Another sword through his belly.

That might have been done as part of Tohm’s way of convincing Lan he needed to be more aggressive. If he failed again, it was possible he wouldn’t end up with the Fixer.

“Grab a blade.”

“That’s it?” Lan looked up at Tohm. He was still wearing the clothes he had worn when he’d gone to train with Tohm. The scraps of bandage that peeked out were soaked with blood, enough that he wondered if maybe he should refuse to go along. Then again, if he refused, what would the man do? The Fixer had used some of his most powerful herbal tinctures, but even those shouldn’t have helped him recover as much as it felt like he had.

“What more do you need?”

“I don’t know that I’m fully prepared.”

“You will be assigned leathers before we leave.”

“Just leathers?” He thought of the mail and the armor that he’d seen Tohm wearing when they had ridden out to his part of the world. Why wouldn’t he be given the same sort of protection?

As his gaze drifted around the boys with him, he understood. They weren’t as important as the fully trained soldiers.

“You don’t have to worry about getting attacked, if that’s what you’re thinking about.”

“I’m not exactly sure what I should be thinking about,” Lan said.

Tohm smiled. “Good. That’s the mark of someone who recognizes their place.”

“And what place is that?”

“A place where you follow orders.”

Lan could only nod as Tohm moved off.

There was quiet whispering near him, though he was careful not to engage in it. Doing so would put him in danger of drawing attention from Karn, and he had no interest in being attacked for talking. Let these fools suffer that fate.

After a few moments, someone began to make his way along the lines of men, and when he stopped in front of Lan, he handed him a leather jacket and leg wraps. “Put them on.”

Lan hurriedly slipped them on. The jacket was a little snug, and he had to strain to fit the leather leggings around his thighs, as they were designed for the younger trainees. The soldiers, men like Tohm or Karn, all had helmets and armor.

What was going on?

He didn’t have an opportunity to ask.

A loud tap rang out, and his training kicked in. He fell into line. A rapid series of taps followed it, one after another, and

he reacted, surging forward with the rest of the soldiers, knowing exactly what they wanted from him. Through it all, he ignored the pain in his stomach. What choice did he have?

They streamed out of the courtyard and onto the street, and they made their way south, away from the city. When they reached the edge of the city, Lan risked glancing to his right to see the hillside where Tohm had taken him to train, where he had ended up with the sword in his belly.

He forced his attention back in front of him, unwilling to stare in that direction for too long. If he did, he would end up with someone slamming into his back, which would result in a stick to his side—or worse.

They marched for the better part of a day. In all that time, no one said anything. Lan refused to speak. He followed orders, pausing when the others paused, drinking when the others drank, eating the meager hunk of bread and dried meat he was given. His stomach rumbled, a familiar sensation since he'd started training. Lan had long ago given up on ever feeling a full belly again. One more way they controlled the trainees. Follow orders. Fall into line. Eat.

There were more soldiers here than there were in the compound, but that wasn't surprising. Lan didn't think he'd seen everyone, and there were always more soldiers coming through.

*Survive. Eat.*

This was no different. He needed to survive.

As the day drew on, the pain in his stomach surged, to the point where he wondered if he would be able to tolerate it. At one point, he glanced down, touching his belly. Fresh blood had seeped through the dressings.

Had the stitches the Fixer had placed broken free?

It was best he not look. It was best he ignore it, the same way he had to ignore everything.

*Survive.*

Wasn't that what he had been taught?

Everything around him was bleak and dry. He didn't recognize the landscape, but then, they had come up to the city from a different direction when he had traveled with Tohm and his sister. That journey had been one filled with sadness but mixed with hope. At that time, Lan had believed he would eventually become a soldier, and he had never imagined his training would be anything like this.

Sophie had believed... what?

He had no idea what Sophie had thought about coming to Neylash.

He fixed her memory in his mind. If Tohm wanted to use his sister against him, forcing Lan to think on her to survive, he would latch on to that, let memories of her fill him, give him strength.

When they camped for the night, it was little more than hard-packed earth, a small fire, and an opportunity to rest. Lan didn't get more than an hour or two of sleep. At one point, he was forced to stand guard, but he still didn't talk, knowing that wasn't his place.

The next day was another march, much like the first. It passed slowly, the landscape gradually rolling past. It would have been easier for them to go by horse. Lan knew better than to question his superiors' decisions.

Days passed like that. At least the pain in his stomach began to lessen, though perhaps it wasn't so much that the pain improved as he grew better at ignoring it.

He had lost track of how many days they had been outside Neylash when they came across a village. Lan didn't even know if they'd reached the border yet.

Tapping sounded, and it came quickly.

Lan knew what to do. He paused. Another tapping came, this one a signal he'd rarely heard during his training.

*Unsheathe.*

He reached for his sword, and as he did, his heart started to pound within his chest. He wasn't trained well enough to

attack. Regardless of how much he might have worked with Tohm, he didn't have the necessary skill to fight someone, but what choice did he have?

Another tapping, and the soldiers surged forward.

He was surprised when men suddenly appeared within the village—a dozen... two dozen... twice that many, all streaming out of buildings.

Someone kept pace, tapping with the cane, a rhythm forcing Lan forward. He did as he was instructed, following the command.

Swords rang out, clanging against wood.

It wasn't sword against sword.

That thought intruded, but only for a moment. Someone appeared in front of him, an older man armed with a hoe.

A farmer.

An image of Papa appeared in Lan's mind. That was who this man was—he was Papa.

Lan couldn't fight him, could he?

The man lunged at Lan, and he turned to the side, trying to dodge, but the pain in his stomach tore through him. The movement ripped free the stitches the Fixer had placed. He cried out as he fell. The old man swung the hoe toward him, and Lan braced for the impact. It certainly couldn't hurt any more than a sword through the belly, could it?

The strike never came.

Lan looked up to see the old man impaled on a sword, Tohm on the other end of it.

“Get up,” he said.

Lan scrambled to get to his feet, and Tohm spun away, moving on to fight another person.

Lan could only watch.

None of the people that they were attacking were soldiers. They were villagers, all of them, and they were being

slaughtered.

The fight didn't last very long. How could it? The soldiers were all well trained, and the villagers carried nothing but farming implements, nothing of much danger to men armed with swords.

Lan stood frozen in place, his heart hammering.

Was that what he was to become? Was that what he was to do?

He wanted nothing to do with it. That wasn't the kind of soldiering that he wanted to be a part of.

Tohm stepped in front of him, glaring at him. "You hesitated."

"He was a farmer," Lan said, instantly regretting that he had challenged Tohm.

He tensed, waiting for an attack, something that would hurt, bracing for a blow or worse, but it never came.

"You thought of your family."

"How could I not?"

"What if I told you that these villagers have been housing the Taihg?"

Lan looked past Tohm. The village was small, a couple of dozen homes, maybe an inn near the center, and a circular temple to the gods off to one side. A half dozen soldiers moved through, heading into buildings, and they appeared back outside moments later. Lan tried to ignore the blood dripping from their blades, but he couldn't. Whoever they encountered would be slaughtered. The same way that the villagers who had attempted to defend themselves had been slaughtered.

"You understand what that means."

"I don't. I thought—"

Tohm took a step toward him, getting right up into his face. "The Taihg serve the Raven Queen. Anyone who supports them serves the Raven Queen."

“So they have to be killed?”

“The Raven Queen has ways to influence her followers. Anyone who has succumbed to that influence is already lost to us.”

Lost. The same way that he had been lost.

“You understand?” Tohm asked.

Lan tried to look away, but memories of the villagers flashed into his mind. How could he understand?

“It’s people like this who would harm your sister,” Tohm said.

He couldn’t help but look down at the fallen farmer. He had a lean face and calloused hands that still gripped the hoe, and blood splattered his clothing. Despite that, there was something about him that reminded Lan of his grandfather. Papa would never have harmed Sophie. He would never have harmed Lan. He had taken them in, protected them, offered them a place when their parents had died.

And yet what choice did he have?

*Survive. Eat.*

It was clear to him what he needed to do, and despite the fact that he wanted nothing to do with anything like this, he also wanted to live. How else would he discover what had happened to Sophie?

“Do you understand?” Tohm asked.

Lan stared at the fallen farmer for another moment before tearing his gaze away.

*Survive. Then eat.*

He fixed Tohm with a hard gaze, forcing himself to meet the man’s eyes. “I understand.”

Tohm watched him for a long moment before nodding and smiling. “Good. Because the next time, I won’t be there when you fall.”

# CHAPTER 31

SOPHIE

The tower hummed with energy. Sophie could feel it, though she still wasn't certain why she could detect it. She stood across from Ridaln, attempting to hold the pose he demonstrated, but not nearly as effectively as Ridaln wanted.

He studied her, then made his way over to her and corrected her posture. There was something about the way she had placed her hands that he didn't like, and when he moved them, the briefest surge of energy ran through her.

"You must hold your pose for only a moment to summon the energy," he said.

"I'm *trying*," she snapped.

"Yes. Trying. What I need is for you to succeed."

She glared at him, but it did nothing to correct her posture. When she managed to hold the pose as he had instructed, there was no questioning that she did feel it. The power came from somewhere deep inside her, and light-headedness washed over her with a flash of cold tingling, the same way as when she had been confronted by the Karell, and the same sort of sensation that she'd had when she had climbed the stairs to the tower the first time. The subsequent times had been easier, now she knew how to push through the pressure.

Sophie moved her arms again, this time mimicking the pose Ridaln had shown her. She thought she did better, but his hands shifting her arms so they were above her head in a



specific way—the prayer pose, as Ridaln called it—proved that she had not been successful.

“Maybe you need to use someone else,” she said. “I don’t even look like the Pale Princess of the stories.”

“That doesn’t matter. *You* aren’t the Pale Princess. We have others who fill that role.”

“Nessa.”

“Yes. And as she cannot use magic, what matters is the power. That is why I need *you*.”

Sophie turned to him, ignoring the pose. “Is that why Nessa is angry with me?”

“I think she fears she’ll lose my protection.”

“Why would she lose that?”

“Eventually, we will need to prove the power of the Pale Princess remains. I can’t do that in a way that those who know power will believe.”

“Who?”

“The Raven Queen. We need to have power for the Raven Queen to refrain from attacking.”

“And if we don’t?”

“Then the Raven Queen will do to us what she has done to so many others. She will destroy us.”

“I still don’t understand how you think that one person—*me*—can be enough to keep her from attacking. Why would I be able to prevent her from attacking us?”

“It’s not you. It’s the threat of the Pale Princess. There have been rumors that the Pale Princess survived and came to side with Lorant, but now there needs to be more. There needs to be proof. That is why I have you.”

The stories about the Pale Princess had always confused Sophie. In some she fought for Lorant, but in others, it was *against* Lorant. In all versions, she was powerful.

“But I don’t *look* like the stories.”

“As I said, it’s not *your* look. If you manage to do what I tell you, others will believe the Pale Princess still lives. Now, the prayer pose. Again.”

Sophie tried to create the pose, and once more she failed. It was painful, and she couldn’t get her arms in quite the right places. She knew where they were supposed to go, but getting them in place didn’t work as she wanted.

She threw her arms down in frustration.

“You learned to weave,” Ridaln said.

“Not very well,” she said.

“But you learned.”

Sophie shrugged. “I didn’t have the patience for it that Nana wanted.” She didn’t even have the same patience as Lan. That had always annoyed Nana, but what could Sophie do? She wasn’t her brother, as much as she looked up to him and often wished that she could be more like him.

“But you have some skill. Carolyn observed it with your weaving.”

“What does my terrible ability with weaving have to do with holding the prayer pose properly?”

“It has everything to do with it. When you weave, you need to place your yarn in just the right positions, much like when you hold the pose. You must place yourself in just the right positions. If anything, they are quite similar.”

Sophie grinned. “You should have taken Lan, then. He has much more patience than I do. And he was even better with weaving than I was.” Lan would hate that she had shared this, but he wasn’t here. He was probably enjoying himself learning how to become a soldier, as he had always dreamed.

“Your brother? I didn’t realize that he had learned how to weave.”

Sophie shrugged. “Does it matter?”

Ridaln’s eyes narrowed. “No. What matters is that *you* find your technique.”

She tried again, and once more she failed to hold the proper pose. “Why can’t *you* be the one with the Pale Princess?”

“There are limits to an illusion, but it is more about the fact that the Raven Queen recognizes my signature. She would know when it was me.”

“Since you’re training me, won’t she recognize me the same way?”

“It doesn’t work quite like that,” he said. “There are many individual differences that form as you learn to control your power. Each difference adds up, making for a unique signature. When the sorcerer is strong enough—and I can assure you that the Raven Queen is strong enough—they are able to detect those differences. It is the reason that I have not challenged her directly.”

“You’re afraid of her.”

Ridaln nodded slowly. “I am afraid of her. As you should be.”

“Is that why you won’t face her yourself?”

“I will face her when the time is right, but for now, she fears the Pale Princess. That is where you must serve. Now, focus!”

Sophie tried the simple prayer pose again, but there wasn’t anything simple about it. She was able to shape her body into the position, but there was never the surge of power when she did so, not until Ridaln shifted her hands to release the energy. When it did release, there was never much power to it, not anything like what he possessed. If he wanted her to create a threat, she would need to be much more powerful than she had managed to be. Even then, if the stories that Sophie had heard about the Raven Queen were anywhere near the truth, she would need more potential.

When she had tried a few more times without success, she threw her hands up and shook her head. “It’s just not working for me. I can feel it, but I can’t make it work.”

Ridaln made a slow circle around where she stood in the middle of the upper level of the tower. As he did, he repositioned her, changing her from the prayer pose to something else. It required that she have her hands bent in at the wrists, with her fingers pointing down and her elbows out. It was awkward, and she felt her arms begin to burn.

“Do you feel this?”

“I feel how uncomfortable this is.”

“Power is not comfortable. The moment that it is becomes the moment that you lose control. Always remember that you must hold on to power.”

“I am *trying*, but I’m not what you think.”

Ridaln stepped to the other side of her, pushing on her hips. She stood with a strange posture, her body unbalanced. How was this supposed to help her reach any sort of magic? All it seemed capable of was making her fall over. If she did, she would smash her face, especially with her arms bent funny like this.

“You are what I think. You would not be able to stand here if you were not. Focus.”

She shook her head. “It’s not a lack of focus. My body doesn’t want to make the posture that you’re trying to put it into.”

“Your body is unaccustomed to what is being asked of it. That doesn’t make it any less true that you are capable of this. Now, this is the teeter pose.”

“No kidding.”

Ridaln shot her a heated look. “This is where you can summon your power. You can draw from it once you are settled, and you can pull it from your feet, all the way to your fingers, where you will release the power.”

“Where does it come from?”

“You are summoning the energy of the world. It is what binds us all together. These poses are how you concentrate that energy.”

“Is this how you work your magic?”

“Once.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I no longer need to manipulate my body in order to concentrate magic. Now I am able to concentrate it in other, more efficient ways.”

“Why don’t you teach me those?”

“You must first learn to crawl before you learn to walk.”

“And what you do is walking?”

Ridaln nodded.

“And the Raven Queen?”

“What she does would be best considered running. Now, crawl.”

Sophie held on to the pose. Her arms burned as she balanced, the strange teetering keeping her in place. As unstable as she felt, she didn’t fall. That surprised her.

As she held it, something swelled in her. At first she thought it came from the burning required to hold on to her posture, but no, this was the same flush of cold she had experienced when Ridaln had shifted her position.

Could she be reaching it?

“I think I feel it.”

“Good. Hold it until it flows all the way through you. When it does, you must push it from your toes and into your fingers. Let that control the power. Feel it so that you can know it. Become familiar with that power.”

Sophie tried to do as he asked, but what she felt swelled up like water pushing out of a leaky bottle. There was nothing she could do to push it into her fingers and toes. It simply came.

“Ridaln?”

She barely had a chance to get his name out before it exploded from her.

There was a burst of light, a steady rumbling, much like what she had heard in the hallway before realizing that Ridaln had been the cause of it, and everything shook.

When it passed, Ridaln was holding himself perfectly still. Only his lips moved. A shimmering hung around them, something like a veil, which slowly dissipated.

“Ridaln?” she whispered. Her throat was raw from the energy that had exploded from her, and she took a deep breath, trying to settle herself. “What happened?”

He said nothing for a while, then finally opened his eyes. “That was more than I expected.”

“More? I thought you said I would need to push it through me. I couldn’t push on anything. It exploded through me!”

“You must have shifted.”

“What?”

“You must have shifted your posture. That is the only way you could have concentrated enough power to cause it to explode from you. It is dangerous doing so.”

Sophie looked around. Nothing was damaged, but she had a sense that had Ridaln not done whatever he had, the power that had come from her would have smashed up the room.

“How did you keep the power from getting too much?” she asked.

“I have been at this a long time,” Ridaln answered.

“But you didn’t move.”

“No. As I said, crawl before you walk.”

The only thing she had seen him moving was his mouth. Was that how he concentrated power? Would she be able to learn to do the same? Not now. She had no idea how to even create power in the first place, so concentrating it with only her words would be impossible, but at least she had hope that she would one day be able to do what Ridaln had done.

And if he was that powerful, how powerful must the Raven Queen be? If Ridaln walked while the Raven Queen ran, the

amount of power she would be able to concentrate and control must be immense.

And somehow he thought Sophie would be able to stop the Raven Queen?

No. She didn't have to stop her. She had to create the *threat* of stopping her. And as soon as she did, then she would become the target, wouldn't she? Was that what Ridaln was training her to become? He would have to know she would become a threat.

"I don't want to do this," she said.

"I don't want to do this, either, but we are called to do difficult work."

"I wasn't called. You brought me here from my home."

"Halith was never your home."

She didn't think that he meant his words to be harsh, but that didn't change the fact that they were. The words were painful to hear, but no less true for it.

"You might not like it, but you *were* called to do this. The Karell finding you has called you to this. The fact that you have the potential that you do has called you to this. You will serve, and you will do this to protect the kingdom that is your home now."

She thought of what had happened to his last student, but Ridaln refused to talk about it. "What if I fail?"

Ridaln stepped toward her, the first movement that he'd made since she had released the explosion of power. "You cannot fail. We are unprepared for the Raven Queen. If this fails, then the kingdom falls. It is as simple as that."

Sophie looked at him a moment before settling back into the prayer pose. She was determined to make this work, even if she doubted whether she could master the power she needed. At least she no longer questioned whether she could create the energy that Ridaln believed her capable of.

Ridaln watched her for a while as she fought with the pose. She felt a slight flicker, but it disappeared, gone as if it had

never been there. Ridaln stepped toward her and changed her position, helping her to form the pose that she needed. When he did, the steady surge of energy built through her, this time familiar.

Sophie knew a moment of excitement. If she could find a way to reach power, then did that mean she could be a sorcerer like Ridaln?

Maybe not at first, but she hoped it would mean she could eventually.

“Focus, Sophie Varison,” he said.

She took a deep breath, attempting to do just that.



## CHAPTER 32

SOPHIE

The long strand of purple yarn dangled to the tile floor, and she tried wrapping it around her wrist to get a better sense of how much extra she had. *Still far too much.* What had Sophie been thinking, unspooling this much yarn? She didn't want to come across as wasteful, but that was bound to be the way it looked when she used this much. She shifted in her seat, trying to hide what she was doing, but she didn't think she succeeded.

Thankfully, the weavers sitting around her paid her no attention. She continued to create her weave, threading the yarn in a steady rhythm, but not nearly as steady as it needed to be. For this type of weave, her hands had to be incredibly still. After working with Ridaln for the last week, she was determined to be steady. Maybe she could finally do what he had asked of her, though the longer she worked with him, the less she expected to succeed. She *had* created power—and more than once—but holding the poses was incredibly difficult. It required the sort of patience she had never managed.

Carolyn looked over and smiled. The older woman sat with a stiff back and had such nimble fingers as she created her weaves. It reminded Sophie of Nana, though Nana had even more skill, barely needing to focus on her task as she worked through her weaves.

“You seem distracted,” Carolyn said. She spoke softly, and the words were meant only for Sophie, but in the silence of the room the weavers' circle occupied, it was practically a shout.

Sophie forced a smile. There wasn't anything she was allowed to say about her time with Ridaln, and even if she could have spoken about it, would she have been believed? How could anyone believe that she was working with the sorcerer? *She* could barely believe it.

"Only thinking about my brother," she said.

"You said he came with you to train with the soldiers?"

Sophie swore under her breath as she made a mistake, sending one of the needles under rather than over as she worked through the pattern. It was a mistake that would stand out, especially with the color of yarn she used. "What was that?" she asked, glancing up.

Carolyn's hands paused. What appeared to be a blanket rested on her lap, with a line of yarn leading away from it. "You haven't spoken of him in some time."

Hadn't she? It was hard to remember, but then again, she couldn't remember how much she had spoken of him before. Had she made a point of talking about Lan to everyone? She knew that she'd spoken to Oleda and Nessa, but had she revealed anything to the weavers' circle? Considering how rarely she came, that seemed unlikely, but then, she *had* been missing him—especially lately.

"I would like to have gotten word about him," she said, keeping her gaze on her weave. Thinking of Lan left her feeling guilty that she hadn't gone looking for him before now. Didn't she owe it to him? Heat rose in her cheeks, and she was determined not to look up. "It's just that..."

"He's a soldier, dear." Malay was an older woman—most within the circle were—who had deep brown eyes and graying hair. "The soldiers train, and then they go off to serve. You might hear from him next week or next year. You had best get used to that."

There had been a time when spending too much time with Lan would have annoyed her, but he was still her brother. She wanted to see him, but it was more than that to her. After losing their parents and now their grandparents, Lan was the

only family she had left. The thought of losing him left her hollow deep inside.

“Don’t tell her that, Malay. You see your brother all the time,” Carolyn said.

Malay’s mouth wrinkled as she smiled. “Not as much as *you* see him.”

Carolyn shook her head. “It’s not the way you imagine it to be.”

“No? You had barely covered Rogran with his shawl for the After, and you move on to Nalem.”

Carolyn picked up her needles and started weaving again, letting out a soft sigh. “I have not moved on. And Rogran has been gone for nearly five years, so if I *were* to move on, why would it matter?”

Malay snickered. “It doesn’t. Not to me. But think of the line of suitors you would have were you to announce that you’re open for courting? I think that brother-in-law of yours wouldn’t have to try so hard to make a pairing work then, would he? The moment you take off the shawl...”

The shawl Carolyn always wore made a different sort of sense to Sophie. If Carolyn had lost her husband, it would be a mourning shawl, a marker that she was not finished with her grieving. Some women chose never to remove the shawl, though even in Halith, that was uncommon. Most women mourned and then moved on, wanting the security of a husband.

What would have made Carolyn wait so long? Sophie glanced quickly at the woman before looking back at her work. Five years was a long time, but she imagined it had as much to do with her not wanting to deal with the courting. Or maybe it was more than that. Maybe she used the shawl as a way to prevent the king from pairing her off with someone else. Having a shawl would keep her from a forced pairing, as custom required that only the shawl bearer decided when they were ready to end their time of grief.

“I don’t see my brother,” Caitlyn said.

Sophie looked up. She had forgotten that the woman was even here. Caitlyn fixed Sophie with a brief smile—so brief that Sophie wasn't sure it had even been there—before wiping the corner of her eye.

“He was called off to war like so many have been. He serves at the front. I don't even know whether he still lives. It is... terrible.”

A somber silence fell over the circle until Malay snorted. “You never cared for your brother when he was around. Why should we think you care for him now?”

Caitlyn shot her a heated look. “Brothers and sisters argue. That doesn't mean I don't care for him, especially now, when I'm trapped here with nothing else to think about other than...” She wiped the corner of her eye again, and when she removed her hand, her eyes were reddened.

“Look what you did,” Aladya said. She reached over and patted Caitlyn on the hand. She was a thin woman of short stature, and her deep brown hair was pulled back in a matching ribbon. “There now, girl. You'll be brought back together with him soon enough. Once this war is over and we all get to see those we've loved and lost.”

“What makes you think this war will ever be over?” Malay asked.

Carolyn glanced over at the other woman. Her eyes demanded she fall silent.

Malay ignored her, keeping her gaze fixed on Caitlyn. “And you. You make it seem as if you and your brother were so close before. You're the reason that he was sent to the front in the first place. You thought you would gain your father's favor, but now you're here. No different than the rest of us.”

Caitlyn glared at Malay but said nothing. Was there anything Caitlyn could say? Malay was well respected within the weavers' circle, and any response could bring on a reprimand. Worst of all would be Carolyn's. Of all the weavers, Carolyn was the most respected.

“The war will end. Eventually, all wars end.” Carolyn didn’t look up from her weaving. She made a pattern Sophie hadn’t seen before, a tight weave that created a spiraling effect. “Now, whether we are on the side of victory is a different matter altogether.”

Malay snorted again and returned her focus to the weaving.

Sophie looked around at the others, but everyone had fallen silent, choosing not to say anything to upset Carolyn. As she was the king’s sister-in-law, most feared she would be offended by something they said. That hadn’t been Sophie’s experience with her at all. Carolyn might be his sister-in-law, but she wasn’t easily offended.

Sophie tried to continue her weaving but made more mistakes as she went, partly because she glanced up every so often to look at the other women.

After a while, Caitlyn stood, and she gathered her yarn and her needles, stuffing them into her sack, before spinning and heading out of the room. She glanced back, and her gaze bored into Sophie, as if she blamed her for what had just transpired. Sophie looked away, not wanting to upset her, and not needing to confront Caitlyn. Doing so would serve no purpose.

“Ignore her,” Carolyn whispered.

“She seems to be angry with me.” Sophie pitched her voice just as softly as Carolyn had.

“I don’t think it’s you that she’s angry with. She’s angry with the situation, as many are. With what she’s been through...”

Sophie looked over at the door, frowning. “What has she been through?”

“The same as most, I suppose. She was brought here thinking that there would be something exciting about the palace, and when she got here, she found things were quite a bit less exciting than she had been led to believe. Most of us end up spending our time with busy work, practicing our

weaves, and waiting. People like Caitlyn wait for the right suitor, hoping for a favorable match.”

“With an attitude like hers, it’s unlikely that she’ll ever find the right suitor,” Malay said.

“Be nice,” Carolyn warned her.

“Nice? I’m being honest.”

“You know how long she’s been here,” Carolyn said.

“She told me she’s been here for months.” Sophie glanced between the two women, looking for confirmation, but it didn’t come.

“She’s been here for a few years,” Malay said with a snort. “The problem is, new girls keep coming. Most of the time, they’re younger than her, and many of them are prettier.” Malay looked up and regarded Sophie for a long moment.

“I’m not here to be courted and paired,” Sophie said. Her voice was softer than she wanted, and it lacked the confidence she needed.

“Everyone is here to be courted and paired,” Malay said. She glanced at Carolyn. “Well, perhaps except for her.”

“Why?” Sophie didn’t have the answer to the purpose behind the pairings. She only knew that they seemed to serve some purpose. “Why do they force the young women of the kingdom to marry?”

Malay and Carolyn shared a glance without saying anything.

“Is it because of the Raven Queen?”

A few of the others sitting around the circle glanced up before turning their attention back to their weaving.

Carolyn studied Sophie for a moment before shaking her head. “That is not something that we speak of. Not here.”

“Why not?”

“Speaking of *her* runs the risk of drawing her attention.”

“You think that even mentioning her name can draw her attention to us?” Sophie asked.

The two women shared another glance. That surprised Sophie. She didn’t see Carolyn as the kind who would be so superstitious about such things. She seemed so practical.

“You have spent time with Ridaln.” Carolyn stared at Sophie for a moment. “Think of what you know of him.” She lowered her voice to barely more than a whisper.

When Sophie had been with Ridaln, he hadn’t been bothered by mentioning the Raven Queen, but maybe that was because they had done so in his tower. Was it possible that he was even more concerned about the Raven Queen than she realized?

“What is it?” Sophie asked.

Carolyn looked up briefly before shaking her head once more. “As I said, it’s not anything that I can talk to you about. Just know that we don’t talk about her.”

“But the reason that all these women are here is her, isn’t it?” Sophie asked. She touched the small scar on her cheek, rubbing the firmness of it, as she often did.

“What do you know about her?”

“Just what Ridaln has told me.”

“Then you know as much as any of us. She chases a dangerous power—”

“The same can be said for that brother-in-law of yours,” Malay said.

“Hush,” Carolyn said. Looking at Sophie, she forced a smile. “The unions between Neylash and the provinces are to keep us safe. That’s all.”

“That’s not all,” Malay said.

“And I said hush. Don’t worry Sophie about such things.”

Sophie frowned. She didn’t like the idea of being told that she shouldn’t pay attention to certain things, much as she hadn’t liked it when Lan had called her too young and kept

things from her. It wasn't as if he had been particularly skilled at more things than her. Well, maybe he was more skilled at weaving than her. If she had his patience, and his ability to sit and focus on his weave, she might be better able to do what Ridaln asked of her, instead of struggling to hold each pose.

“Neylash needs to have allies, Sophie,” Malay said, breaking the silence. “The king recognizes this, and because of that, he has brought nobles here to try to ensure that we have the safety that we need. If that requires us to create alliances that aren't always natural, then so be it. If it brings us safety when we finally gain her full attention, then it will have been worthwhile.”

Carolyn stared at Malay, and she said nothing, though she didn't really need to say anything. A chill worked through Sophie at the words. As much as Ridaln had claimed he intended to prevent others in the palace from knowing the truth about the Raven Queen, the secret was more widespread than he believed.

Somehow Sophie had to help stop her. Even if she mastered some of the basic poses, she didn't have anywhere near the skill—or the time—needed to eventually defeat the Raven Queen. Wasn't that what Ridaln wanted from her? He wanted her to stop the Raven Queen by pretending to have the Pale Princess's power.

How much time did they have before the Raven Queen realized that the Pale Princess was gone? If there were already attacks now, what would happen then?



# CHAPTER 33

## SOPHIE

The streets of the city were not nearly as busy as they had been when the Dunvale delegation had been here. Merchants solicited outside their shops, attempting to coax customers inside, to entice them to visit their store rather than any of the dozens of others lining most of the streets.

Some were more aggressive than others. They all seemed to smile more than the customers, and they were all better dressed, wearing silks or finely cut cloaks, clothing more suited to the palace than to the streets. Sophie would have thought the attempt to draw people in would be ineffective, but it appeared the slickness worked.

Occasionally Sophie passed a pair or sometimes a trio of soldiers as they marched along the streets. All were armed with short swords, and their uniforms were neatly cut. None had armor, and none wore the helmets of the soldiers who had brought her and Lan from Halith. For that matter, none of the soldiers she saw dressed the same way.

What had Ridaln said about those soldiers? They were trying to emulate the Taihg but weren't nearly as skilled, didn't have the same magical connection. Those soldiers had been intimidating, but if what Ridaln had said was true, then the real Taihg would be even more so. How terrifying must they be?

Sophie wandered through the streets, listening for sounds of swordwork, thinking she might find the red-haired woman. She had been fearsome and had intimidated Sophie in ways that men never managed to. It was mostly because the woman

had been so confident. After spending time with Ridaln, Sophie suspected why the woman trained the way that she did. Like Nessa, she was also supposed to play the part of the Pale Princess.

Sophie's path led her away from the palace, but she made a point of keeping it always at the edge of her line of sight. If nothing else, she could turn and make her way back toward the palace, but if she lost sight of it, in a city as massive as Neylash, she might lose her way entirely. What would happen if she were stranded outside the palace walls? Would anyone come looking for her? Would Ridaln? Or would it be some sort of test, his way of determining whether she was competent enough to find her way back?

Now that she knew the extent of his powers—and that he truly was a sorcerer—she didn't think she could hide her leaving the palace from him. It was likely that he knew, just as it was likely that he wanted her to explore the city.

The city itself stank. Maybe she was too accustomed to the fragrance of the flowers growing in the palace garden, or maybe she had become too comfortable with bathing and washing the filth from herself, but out here she noticed the stench, a hint of rot mixed with the stink of hundreds of unwashed people. It was a stink that no amount of perfume could cover.

Had she come so far along her path to snobbery to feel that way about others? Had living in the palace changed her so much? What would Lan say when she saw him next? Maybe nothing. She would grumble at the way he stank and make some comment that would offend him and send him running back off to wherever he had gone.

She stopped at a stand and bought a hunk of bread and meat with the last of the money she'd brought with her and absently chewed as she made her way through the streets. Even the food had changed for her. Oleda and her amazing cooking had made her pickier about street food. She knew what Lan would say if he heard that. Likely he would tease her mercilessly, and she couldn't even deny that she deserved it.

Thinking of him made her miss him even more. While in the palace, trying to work through the various poses that Ridaln had her practicing, allowing herself to believe she could pretend to have the Pale Princess's power, it was easy to forget what she had been through and how she had lost all her family.

And then there was her time with the weavers' circle. Most of the women there had been welcoming, but spending time with them always made her think about her nana, though she thought about Papa less now than she had in the days after he had passed. How much longer would it be before she stopped thinking even of Lan?

She didn't believe that she ever would. How could she?

Sophie had reached a dirtier section of the city. The rows of buildings here were squatter than those near the center of the city. Few had fresh paint, and fewer still had windows. Occasionally she would see doors open, and faces would peek out. Even the people inside were scruffier here. Most of the people in the streets moved quickly. There weren't nearly as many shops as there were in other parts of the city. Sophie was just turning around when she ran into a patrol of soldiers.

She stopped and watched how they were training. This had to be what Lan had been up to. Could this be where he was training? She watched the men marching through the street—not men. Most of them were young, probably younger even than Lan. Yet though they might be boys, they marched with a steady precision, with each turn made decisively. Few of them looked around as they marched, most keeping their gazes focused straight ahead. A man carried a slender stick, and occasionally he tapped it on the ground, as if keeping time.

Lan would enjoy this. She knew that about him, just as she knew that he would find purpose in the work, the kind of purpose he had failed to find when working with Papa on the farm. He'd never wanted to stay. Sophie tried to tell herself she would have been content to remain in Halith, but she didn't know if that was the truth.

Now that she had spent time in the palace, she doubted that she would have. Especially now that she had some potential with magic, returning to the village was impossible.

When the soldiers had moved past, Sophie followed them.

She knew she shouldn't and should return to the palace. She had been warned the city could be dangerous, and she believed that. Oleda had cautioned her about the types of people who lived in the city, warning her of the dangers. But she felt compelled to follow. It was more than wanting to see where the soldiers went, and to understand what Lan might be up to. The desire to see her brother overwhelmed her.

She kept pace with the soldiers, trailing them as they marched along the streets. Every so often, the man with the stick would tap it on the ground, and they would change their pace. It didn't take Sophie long to understand the rhythms.

It was odd that she could detect that pattern and not others. She could recognize the pattern to the march and the tapping, and yet when it came to the proper weaves, she struggled. Then again, there was a pattern in the garden, regardless of what Petra claimed, though she didn't know if it mattered. It was likely nothing more than matching colors.

She tried to keep a respectable distance, concerned about how they would react if they became aware of the fact that she trailed them.

It was strange to see such confidence from boys who were no greater than her in age. Lan might have been too old to join these soldiers. Ridaln would have said something to her, though, if that were the case, which meant that he hadn't been too old.

When they turned again, Sophie waited, counting to twenty before she followed. She wanted to give enough space before she approached. Turning the corner, she ran into the rear soldier with the stick.

"Careful," he warned.

"I'm sorry. I was only—"

“You don’t speak to us,” he sneered, turning his attention away from the soldiers and toward Sophie. He swung the stick at her.

The suddenness of it shocked her. *He would attack her?*

She reacted without really intending to and reached for the stick.

It struck the palm of her hand. Pain swept through her, and something snapped. Sophie cried out and wasn’t aware of the next blow until it connected with her leg, sending pain like she had never experienced before shooting through her.

“Stop!”

She barely managed the word, her voice ragged as she shouted, and she was uncertain he’d even heard her. If he had, it didn’t change anything. The beating continued, each blow slamming down with an agonizing intensity.

Her mind went blank. All she could think about was the pain ending.

Then it stopped.

She gasped for breath, trying to get air to fill her lungs, and sharp pain stabbed her. Sophie cried out, hating that she did. She wanted to be stronger than that, but the pain made her weak.

When she finally opened her eyes, she looked up, praying to Darish that the young soldier was gone.

The pain colored her thoughts. Though she should be careful, all she could think of was getting away. But her body was broken, and the slightest movement made her gasp.

The street was empty.

Why hadn’t anyone helped her? There had been people on the street when her beating had begun, but they must have turned away, unwilling to intervene. Why wouldn’t they help when someone needed it?

She tested her legs and her ability to stand and was pleased that she could.

Her wrist throbbed the most, and the way it was bent told her she'd broken it.

That wasn't quite right. *She* hadn't broken it. The stupid soldier had broken it.

All she had wanted to do was follow and see what she might be able to learn about her brother. Anger started bubbling up within her, mixed with tears.

What had she done to deserve a beating like that?

Nothing.

If her arm hadn't been broken, she would have chased after them and attempted... what, exactly? Did she think she could use the poses that Ridaln had been teaching her? She could barely hold them when she wasn't injured, let alone now.

Her gaze drifted to the palace. What she needed was to return.

With her good hand, she wiped away tears from her face and looked at her sleeve. Blood caked it, smeared into the fabric. Her dress was dirty and torn. There were splatters of blood all over the fabric.

How would she explain what had happened?

It wasn't her fault, but she *had* been outside the palace without permission. Ridaln might even be angry with her rather than the stupid boy who had attacked her.

Somehow she would have to hide what had happened, but she wasn't sure how. Maybe Oleda could help. The cook had helped her often enough, and she was tight-lipped enough that Sophie didn't fear her saying anything to get her into trouble. She would need an explanation, though.

Walking toward the palace was difficult. She had thought her legs weren't injured, but her hip throbbed with each step, making her limp and increasing the pain. Rather than winding through the city, she took a direct route, not paying attention to what street she took. She wanted only to reach the palace as quickly as possible.

When the path forced her to turn, she staggered to a stop at the sight of soldiers marching up ahead, fearful they were the same ones.

Sophie backed into the wall of a nearby building, not wanting them to see her again. Maybe they weren't the same soldiers, but she worried how much more she might be hurt by them if they were.

While standing there, nausea rolled through her. It started slowly, little more than a gnawing in the back of her throat, before working deeper into the pit of her belly.

Boots pounded on cobbles near her. Soldiers.

When she tried to look up, she leaned over, unable to help herself, and braced her arms on her legs to keep from falling. Pain raced through her injured arm, sharper than before, and she collapsed.

Sophie tried to stay near the edge of the building, to keep out of the street, but the boots thundered closer.

The pain became unbearable, and she heard no more.

# CHAPTER 34

SOPHIE

Sophie opened her eyes to a softly glowing lantern. The light gave off some warmth, but not much. She tried moving, but her arms didn't work the way they should. It took a moment for her to remember her injuries.

*Where am I?*

The lantern didn't give off enough light to see easily, though what she could see told her she was in a small room. The walls were wooden and bare. She rested on a hard cot, though a soft blanket that smelled of damp earth covered her, a not entirely unpleasant scent.

*Can I move?*

She attempted to sit up and was rewarded with a wave of nausea causing the room to spin around her. Fighting through it, she forced herself to keep focused and let the nausea pass. It had to pass eventually, didn't it?

Moments passed, and the room still spun.

Sophie was tempted to lie back down, but she feared any movement would only cause the nausea to return.

*Just how bad was I hurt?*

Badly enough that she had passed out. Her wrist was broken, and she remembered blood on her dress, though that could easily have been from where the stupid soldier had struck her face. Head injuries bled a lot. At least, Papa had always said that. He hadn't had the same stories as Nana but liked to share other knowledge. Most of it had to do with



treating injuries, and she was thankful for that now. A broken bone needed to be splinted, though she didn't know whether she could do that herself. With as painful as it was, she doubted that she could. What about the other injuries?

She needed a mirror. Then she could look at herself and see what had happened and how badly she was injured.

First, she needed to figure out where she was. Then she could figure out if there was some way to get help.

The nausea started receding.

It happened slowly, with a steady withdrawal from the pit of her stomach, leaving her with an unsettled feeling, but not the sense she might vomit. The dizziness passed with it, the room no longer spiraling around her.

It gave her the chance to look around, but she couldn't tell where she was. There was only the semidarkness of the room.

Could she stand?

When she had attempted to make it toward the palace, she hadn't been able to stand for long. It wasn't that her legs hadn't worked, more that the pain that throbbed in her hip with each step had made her stagger. Hip injuries could be dangerous, and she had already discovered how excruciatingly painful they could be.

Sophie tried standing and managed to get off the cot.

Her legs held her, and she took a few careful steps. The pain remained in her hip, but it was not as bad. Each step sent shooting pain down her leg, but not as sharp as she remembered.

The arm that had been broken was now splinted and wrapped in a tight binding. That was why she hadn't been able to move it when she had come around. Whoever had bound her arm had some skill with it, and she hoped that it would heal straight. Papa had warned of injuries that didn't heal the right way, and he had cautioned her about how, when healed, they were often just as bad as the initial injury.

What other injuries did she have?

She didn't see anything obvious, but with as much pain as she had been in, it was possible that she wouldn't know without having the opportunity to climb into a bath and examine herself. She wouldn't do it anywhere else.

If she could return to the palace, then she could sink into a bath. She would find Oleda and ask the cook for help, and try to find a healer to examine her as well. Eventually, she would have to go to Ridaln and admit that she had been outside the palace and in the city, but she wouldn't do that any sooner than necessary.

She reached the door to the room and tested the handle. Could she have been captured after the injury? There was no telling what kind of person would have found her on the street, and there was no telling what they would do to her. It was possible someone would think to confine her.

But there had been the sound of boots thundering toward her.

The soldiers.

She cast a glance back at the lantern and the cot. Both were simple, the kind of thing she would expect a soldier to use.

But if it was the soldiers who had brought her here, why would they have taken the time to bind her injuries, especially since that stupid soldier had been the one to cause them?

Maybe she had been found by other soldiers. Maybe even Lan.

That seemed too much to hope for. More likely was that some shopkeeper had taken pity on her and brought her inside. She had to hope.

Sophie pulled open the door.

There was a long hallway outside the room. Other doors lined the hall. Lanterns hung from hooks along the wall, and she realized that they glowed softly, but not with any flame. Were they magic lanterns? She reached the first one and leaned toward it to study it.

“You should not be up.”

Sophie spun and nearly toppled over. Pain surged through her hip with the movement, and she was forced to suppress another wave of nausea. Her breath caught when she saw the person behind her.

“You!” She peered at the woman with deep red hair and pale skin.

The woman snorted. “Me. And you are you. I think we have that settled, don’t we?”

“Where am I?”

“That’s your first question?”

The woman grabbed Sophie by the elbow on her uninjured side and guided her along the hall. Sophie sagged as pain raced through her hip again, and the woman propped her up, lifting her with ease.

“You shouldn’t be up.”

“I shouldn’t be a lot of things, but I am,” Sophie said, trying to sound more forceful and confident than she felt, but the pain made it difficult.

“Is that right? And what do you think you are?”

Sophie felt another wave of nausea wash over her. “It doesn’t matter.”

The woman chuckled, and she looked over at Sophie, amusement shining in her pale green eyes. “It doesn’t? Then why did you say anything?”

“I shouldn’t have said anything.” Sophie looked around, keeping her gaze on the lanterns. There was something strange about them. Maybe it was magic, and maybe it was something else. It was possible that there was nothing more than a strange oil that burned within them. In her mind, she liked the idea of something magical about the lanterns. Maybe Ridaln had a hand in them. She wouldn’t have put that past him with what she knew of the man. “Where are you taking me?”

The woman chuckled to herself. “So many questions from someone who looks as if she has been assaulted.”

“It’s because I was assaulted that I have questions,” she said.

“Yes. I have similar questions. What happened to you? Why were you attacked?”

“I... I don’t know. I was following some soldiers who were training, and—”

“You were following soldiers?”

“My brother is training to be a soldier. I was hoping that I could follow them and maybe find where he is.”

The woman paused, and a deep frown became etched upon her face. “Who is your brother training with?”

“I don’t know. When we came to the city, he was taken away, and—”

“Who took him away?”

Sophie looked over at the woman, and she continued to frown. “I already told you that I don’t know. I lost him somewhere on the way into the city.”

“And you? How did you end up in the palace?”

Should she share with this woman that she had gone with Ridaln? Sophie didn’t see the harm in revealing that, but she had a strange sense that telling the woman might upset her, and Sophie might also reveal something that she wasn’t allowed to. Ridaln hadn’t forbidden her from sharing that she had come to the palace with him, and almost everybody in the palace knew that she was with him, but maybe there was a reason that he wouldn’t want this woman to know.

And what did Sophie really know about this woman? She had seen her in the city and had come across her training, but it seemed to Sophie that she had been doing so in secret.

Sophie regarded the woman for a moment. “Who are you?” she asked.

The woman smiled. “Now you decide to develop a spine.”

“I’ve always had a spine,” Sophie said.

The woman stared at her for a long moment. “Good. You will need one if you are to remain here.”

Sophie shook her head. “I can’t remain here.”

“I thought you had intimated that you wanted to learn to fight. I can teach you. You have enough fight in you that you might actually prove to be valuable. Maybe even more valuable than some of these fools they’ve been sending me.”

“You think that I could learn to fight?”

The woman shrugged as she looked upon Sophie. “I don’t see why not. Anyone can learn to manage a sword. Besides, you were beaten pretty badly, yet you still managed to stagger through the city.”

“I was trying to—” Sophie cut herself off to avoid revealing too much. If she said anything, she might divulge that she was trying to get back to the palace, and though the woman had recognized that she came from the palace when she had first seen her, Sophie didn’t want to give her any more reason to question that connection. She didn’t know if it mattered. She only knew that she didn’t know anything about this woman.

“And just what were you trying to do?” the woman asked. “When I saw you last time, you had come from the palace, so I assume that the same was the case this time.”

They entered a room. This one was larger than the one Sophie had been in before, with a table off to the side and a wardrobe occupying one wall. The woman went to the wardrobe and pulled it open. She grabbed a silver robe, which she handed to Sophie.

“Put this on.”

“I don’t need your clothing.”

“You need something. Your dress was shredded in the attack. If you don’t want to tell me what happened, at least put on some clothing so that you are not wandering back to the palace half-dressed. As likely as not, you’ll end up being attacked again.”

Sophie sighed and took the robe, then slipped it over her shoulders. The woman had known that she was heading back to the palace, regardless of Sophie's intention to keep that from her. Maybe it didn't matter, but she didn't like the idea that she was so easy to read.

With the robe on, she kept one arm outside. The robe simply draped over the injured arm's shoulder. "I don't know why I was attacked."

"Because you trailed them."

"That doesn't make any sense. Why would they attack me simply for following them?"

The woman shrugged. "Who is to say what goes on in the mind of young soldiers? Most of them think they need to be aggressive and violent, and they rarely use their brains, rarely attempt to think through whether they even need to attack. Had they bothered, had they even taken a look at you, they would have recognized that you posed no threat. You're a palace girl, and you will likely end up married off to the next noble who comes to the city. I've seen it often enough to know."

"I will *not* be married off."

The woman smiled at her. "See? There is the fight that I saw. As I said, I suspect you could learn to wield a sword, but only if you wanted to."

Sophie shook her head. Fighting wasn't something that she had ever wanted. That was what Lan wanted. She wasn't entirely sure what she wanted. She was only sure that it wasn't sitting in the palace and waiting for some noble to think he should claim her. She didn't think she should even wait for anyone to save her. Was she meant to continue to work with Ridaln?

She wasn't sure what she wanted. She didn't want to be used—that much she knew—and she liked the idea of being able to harness magic, even if that meant she was destined to take on the power of the Pale Princess. Besides, Ridaln had made it clear she wasn't going to be the one taking on the Raven Queen. It would be him.

“I can’t do anything with my arm broken like this,” Sophie said.

“Injuries heal. Those who recover from them often end up stronger than they were before. I’ve seen it time and again.”

Sophie stared at the woman, really stared at her this time. The woman was quite beautiful, with her deep red hair falling in waves around her face. Her pale skin bore freckles around the corners of her eyes and down her nose. She had a strong jaw, and there was something about the way that she watched Sophie that screamed of strength.

This was the kind of woman who should be the Pale Princess. Sophie understood why Ridaln had chosen her.

“Who are you?” She wanted to give the woman a chance to admit her role with Ridaln, but she didn’t know if she would.

“I am no one but a simple soldier.”

It was Sophie’s turn to snort. “A simple soldier? I saw you in the yard. I saw the way that you fought off that man, who was considerably larger than you. You’re more than just a simple soldier.”

The woman winked at her. “And you are more than merely a palace girl, aren’t you?”

“What do you think I am?” Sophie asked.

“I think that you have been out in the city more often than most of the palace girls are allowed. I think that you’re dressed in much finer clothing than that of a servant. You don’t have the look of nobility about you, and you have more of a confident edge to you than most of the nobles I’ve ever observed. Nobles are generally confident, but there is an arrogance to it. Yours does not come from arrogance.”

Sophie swallowed. “Who are you really?”

“I’m someone who was asked to play a part, and I have chosen to do it in a way that they would prefer I not.”

“The Pale Princess.”

The woman frowned. "That's nothing but a story."

"I like stories. My nana would tell me stories like that. I especially like the ones about the Pale Princess. My nana watched over us after our parents died. She kept us safe in the village of Halith. Were it not for my nana, we would have been stranded, no one to watch over us."

"And your nana, where is she now?"

"She's gone," Sophie said.

"How?"

Sophie didn't know enough about this woman to share the details of how the Karell had attacked Nana and Papa. "It doesn't matter. She's gone."

The red-haired woman smiled. "So many mysteries about you, palace girl. I find you intriguing."

"There's nothing intriguing about me. You're the one who's intriguing. You won't even tell me anything about yourself, not even your name."

"Names matter little. It's what one does that matters."

"Names matter. Without a name, how will I know what to call you?"

"And why would you need to call me anything? You've already shared that you have no intention of serving as I have suggested."

"The way you suggest is that I serve as a soldier. I'm no soldier. I'm barely able to..." Sophie forced a smile, afraid to reveal too much.

"There it is again. Intriguing."

Sophie looked around her. Other than the wardrobe, the table, and a single lantern, the room was bare. "Do you intend to force me to stay here?"

"And why would I do that?" the woman asked.

"Because you think that I should study with you."



“Is that your experience? Do people who feel you should study with them force you to remain with them?”

“No. It’s just that I don’t know what you intend for me.”

“If you refuse to remain, then I won’t hold you here. You can return to the palace, and you can return to your life of... whatever you have been doing. Not servitude.” The woman glanced at Sophie’s uninjured hand and then back at her face. “You’re too soft to have been a servant. Yet you’re too hard to have been a noble. Again, I find that intriguing. I can’t think of why you would have been brought to the palace if it weren’t for service or for—”

A smile peeled apart her lips. She made a circle around Sophie, coming to stand behind her, and started chuckling. “You have none of the appearance of the others.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He’s trying a different approach this time, isn’t he?”

Sophie twisted to face the red-haired woman. Her hip cried out as she spun, pain jolting through her. When she left—and it was a *when* and not an *if*—would she even be able to walk all the way to the palace? Would she be able to withstand the pain that surged through her, or would she fall, requiring someone to prop her up and assist her back to the palace?

“You should advise him that he is far too obvious with his plans. He’s changed his tactic. I find that quite interesting. Now he wants to find anyone with magic to convince her? Does he think that he can fool her by doing so?”

Sophie debated how much to reveal about herself. If she shared that Ridaln had brought her to work with him because of her ability to reach for magic, would she be exposing more than what she should?

“I don’t know why he brought me to the palace.” It was safer to at least acknowledge Ridaln had been the one to bring her to the palace. From there, she could claim ignorance about other things, and hopefully not reveal more than she was supposed to.

The woman considered her for a long moment. There was a weight in her gaze and an edge of a smile on her lips. “Perhaps you don’t. Perhaps he hasn’t shared with you his plan for you yet. When he does, maybe you’ll return to me.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because your new master doesn’t know nearly as much as he likes to think he does. He thinks he controls power, when in reality, it controls him. What makes him dangerous puts others at risk.” She flashed a smile, and there was a beautiful sort of menace in her expression as she did. “You will see. Now, run along.” She chuckled, glancing down at Sophie’s hip. “Or perhaps walk. Either way, return to your master before he starts to question why you’ve been gone as long as you have.”

“Why won’t you tell me anything?”

“I think I’ve shared with you much more than I had shared with me when I was in your shoes. Just know that you should trust the questions that you have. Don’t allow yourself to be used—at least, not unless you want to be used.”

“Why would anyone want to be used?”

The woman’s smile widened. “Why indeed?”

# CHAPTER 35

## SOPHIE

Sophie looked up at the outer wall of the garden. Sweat streamed off her brow from the effort of making her way back to the palace. Each step had been agony. She had managed reasonably well up until the last few streets. They had been more difficult than anything she had ever attempted. She did her best to withstand it, but along with the sweat, tears streamed down her face.

She reached for the gate. For some reason, it wasn't locked. That had been the other fear she carried during her walk back to the palace. Had the gate been locked, she would have needed to figure out some way to get back in, and she wasn't entirely certain how to approach the palace from a different direction. Could she have simply gone to the main entrance? If she had, she might have needed to present herself as Ridaln's servant, but Sophie bristled at that thought, hating the idea of being anyone's servant.

Inside the garden, she shuffled along the path and took a deep breath, inhaling the fragrances of the flowers. Petra had done an amazing job, and she marveled at the patterns present in the flower beds.

She staggered along, taking deep breaths as she went, wanting nothing more than to make it inside the palace and to find someone—preferably Oleda—to help her into a bath, and from there, all she wanted was to get into a bed and sleep. Her body ached in ways that she had never experienced before.

“Sophie?”

She turned carefully. Petra stood near one of the flower beds, his back stooped as he kept his hands in the dirt, and concern was etched into the deep lines on his brow.

“Yes?”

“What happened to you?”

She tried to smile but failed. Even her face hurt. She had been suppressing the nausea she’d felt ever since leaving the red-haired woman, and with each step, she felt a resurgence of it as it attempted to overwhelm her.

“It was nothing,” she said.

Petra dusted his hands on his pants and hurried over to her. He slipped a hand around her waist, unmindful of the fact that she was a young woman and he was a much older man. The way he did it was tender, almost fatherly. Given Petra’s age, probably more grandfatherly.

“It wasn’t nothing. Whatever happened to you...” He shook his head and supported her along the path. “Ridaln is the one who brought you to the palace, isn’t he?”

Sophie nodded slowly.

“And I will take you to Ridaln. Darish knows that he has an obligation to keep his charges safe.”

“I’m not his charge, and don’t take me to Ridaln.”

“If not to Ridaln, then where would you have me take you? Darish knows that I can’t leave you out here in the garden.”

“Oleda.” She wanted to say more. She wanted to beg him to bring her to Oleda rather than Ridaln. Eventually, she would have to go to Ridaln, and when she did, she would get questions. She didn’t have answers for those questions—not yet. More than that, she had questions for Ridaln, and she would rather have a chance to recuperate before she asked them.

Petra considered her for a moment, then nodded, bobbing his head slowly. He wiped a hand across his brow, smearing it with dirt. Sophie wondered how dirty he had gotten her, but it didn’t matter. All that mattered was she’d made it back. She

had a chance to finally recover. She had found someone who was willing to help her. That mattered far more than she'd thought it would.

Tears streamed from her eyes again, and this time not because of pain but because of a mixture of relief and gratitude.

“Don't worry. I'll get you to Oleda in just a moment,” Petra said.

Sophie rested her head on his shoulder as he helped bring her through the garden. “Thank you, Petra.”

“Don't you worry about it. Whatever else has happened, we'll see that you get the help that you need. From the looks of it, you did a number to your hip.”

“How did you know?” The way that he carried her, propping her up, told her that somehow he had recognized her hip was bothering her. The way he lifted her up took the pressure off that hip so she didn't feel the same excruciating pain.

“I have some experience with injuries from my time serving in the war,” Petra said. “Most men do.”

“And some women,” she said.

Petra glanced at her, a strange expression on his face. “What was that?”

“Some women served in the war,” she said.

Petra paused, for barely a moment. “What makes you say that?” he asked.

“Only that I came across a woman—a soldier. It can't only be men who fought in the war.”

Petra continued to look at her, with a question in his eyes that went unasked. He shook his head and shifted his hand, propping her up a little more so that she barely had to walk. Sophie was thankful for the help.

As they went inside the palace, everything blurred past. The smells in the palace were familiar, stone and age, the same

scents she had experienced each time she had been in the palace. As they neared the kitchen, she smelled the bread baking and heard the activity, the steady bustle coming from Oleda and the women she worked with.

“You don’t need to be in my—” Oleda appeared in front of Sophie, and her eyes widened briefly, glancing from Petra to Sophie. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Petra replied. “She said that she wanted to be brought to you, and not to Ridaln.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing you brought her here.”

“Where do you want her?”

“Bath,” Sophie managed to say.

Oleda leaned close. “What was that?”

“Bath. I want to soak in the bath.”

“I can’t go into the ladies’ bathing room,” Petra said.

“Not there,” Sophie said. If someone was poisoning Ridaln’s students, she didn’t want to be the next.

Oleda considered her for a moment and then nodded.

“Come with me.” She guided Sophie with Petra through the kitchen and down the stairs to the servants’ bathing room.

Inside, the scent of soap and the subtle fragrance of oils that were added to the water helped clear her head, and Sophie took a deep breath, inhaling those fragrances, managing to look over with a smile at Petra.

“Thank you.”

“You will come see me when you are recovered?”

“I will.”

“You have her from here?” Petra asked Oleda.

“You’ve done enough. You can return to your garden.”

“You don’t need to snap at me,” Petra said.

“Fine. Thank you ever so much for your service to our mutual friend. If you wouldn’t mind departing so that she may

disrobe and climb into the bath?” Oleda said, an edge to her voice.

Petra grunted and shook his head. “And now you’re mocking me.”

“What do you want me to say? Gods, man! Let the girl get undressed in peace.”

Sophie pulled away from Petra, who was flushing.

“You’re right,” Petra conceded. “As I said, you can find me in the garden when you’re feeling better.”

He pulled the door closed with a solid thud behind him, and Oleda began helping Sophie to remove her clothing, starting with the robe. Sophie winced as the robe came over her shoulder, brushing her injured arm. Oleda hesitated, examining the bandages on Sophie’s arm.

“What happened?” Oleda asked.

“I was attacked,” Sophie said.

“Attacked. That’s it?”

“I don’t know what happened. I was out in the city, and I saw a patrol of soldiers—”

“And you thought you could find your brother.”

Sophie nodded. “I haven’t seen him since we came to the city. I thought that if I could follow the soldiers, I might be able to see where they trained, and I might be able to catch a glimpse of him.” Now that she said this aloud, it sounded foolish, even to her. Why had she thought she could trail the soldiers to their training location? There was little likelihood she would have been allowed into the space where the soldiers trained. She knew that she must have heard it in one of Nana’s stories, but the term didn’t come to her.

“Sophie, the soldiers are quite particular about their barracks.”

Barracks. In each of Nana’s stories, there was something of a menacing nature to the barracks. The soldiers used them as

places in which to train and prove themselves. Was that what was happening to Lan?

“I didn’t follow them into the barracks. I followed them along the street, and I bumped into one of the young men. He...”

“Just bumping into them shouldn’t have elicited that sort of response. No one deserves to be attacked, and certainly not by men training to be soldiers.”

“That’s just the thing, Oleda. They weren’t even men. They were barely older than me.”

“And how old are you?”

Sophie dipped a toe into the bath and breathed out. The water was warm, not unpleasantly so, and she could imagine sinking into the warmth, falling into the tub, and simply soaking. After everything that she’d been through, that sounded wonderful.

“I’m thirteen. No... I’m fourteen,” she said.

Her birthday had come and gone while she had been in the palace, and little fanfare had been made about it. There had been a time when she would have demanded that her birthdays be celebrated. Here, it didn’t feel quite right having any sort of excessive celebration on her behalf. Besides, who would have celebrated with her?

She wasn’t sure she wanted Nessa to celebrate with her. Would Oleda? Petra might have celebrated along with her as well. Beyond that, she couldn’t think of anyone other than some of the women in the weavers’ circle.

“Fourteen? So young. Why would Ridaln have brought you here?”

“Because my nana and my papa were murdered. He brought us here with the soldiers that came to the city, and my brother went off with them to train, leaving me to stay with Ridaln.” She stepped all the way into the bath and sank up to her shoulders, unmindful that the wrappings on her arm were now soaking wet. She knew that they would eventually need to



be redone. Hopefully, she could find a healer. Oleda would have to know some healers, and if she didn't, Ridaln would.

"You're too young to be here. You know that, don't you?" Oleda asked.

"Why am I too young? I've seen all of the other girls who have been brought to the palace."

"To marry. And all of those girls are older than you. I think the youngest is fifteen, and even she is far too young to wed." Oleda grabbed a bottle of soap and squeezed some onto a towel before running it along the back of Sophie's neck. "Think of your friend Nessa. She's in her early twenties, and she's not even been partnered off."

"I don't know that she's supposed to be partnered off," Sophie said.

"And why is that?"

"I think Nessa is like me. She's part of some plan Ridaln has." It was the same way the redheaded woman had to be part of some plan of Ridaln's, though Sophie hadn't been in the right frame of mind to learn what that was. If she'd had more time... if she hadn't been injured...

She should have focused on the fact that the woman knew Ridaln. She hadn't been able to do anything. Now that she was here, soaking, feeling as if everything was starting to wash away, she was able to relax.

"A plan? What sort of plan does Ridaln have?"

Sophie shook her head. She was sleepy and allowed herself to drift.

"Sophie?" Oleda asked. There was tenderness and concern in her voice.

"Yes?"

"You mentioned a plan. What plan would Ridaln have?"

"I don't know. All I know is that he thinks to stop the Raven Queen."

“Does he? And does he think to involve you in his plan to stop the Raven Queen?”

Sophie shrugged. “I don’t know. I think that he does, somehow.” Sophie had the sense Ridaln would not be pleased that she was revealing to Oleda she had been working with him, and that she had some potential with magic.

Even Sophie wasn’t sure what to make of that. Even if she was supposed to have the power of the Pale Princess, how was she to pull it off? If the Raven Queen was so much beyond Ridaln’s ability, which was much more advanced than Sophie’s, how was she ever supposed to counter her? It seemed an impossibility. Just like the fact that she had ability with magic. That was just as much an impossibility.

“That fool. If he thinks to involve you, he’s drawing in someone far too young to be a part of this.”

“Do you know what he plans?” Sophie asked, her eyelids heavy. She could sink into the water and simply remain there and never get out. Maybe eventually her arm would heal while she was soaking, and she wouldn’t have to worry about the pain and everything that she’d gone through. Yet she wouldn’t get better. Not this way.

“Only Ridaln knows what he plans, and unfortunately, it seems that plan involves you. That, I think, will be dangerous for you.”

“That’s what she said.”

“Who’s ‘she’?”

“The woman he had working with him before. The one who looks something like the Pale Princess,” Sophie said.

“What woman? Where did you see her?”

There was an intensity in Oleda’s voice that Sophie had never heard before. Could she have offended Oleda? It was something she very much did not want to do. Oleda had been such a help to her.

“There’s a woman in the city. A soldier.”

“You saw her?”

“She’s the one who helped me. She’s the one who took me off the street and wrapped my arm. Without her...”

Sophie didn’t know what would have happened without the woman. Maybe she would have simply lain there, or maybe she would have been attacked by someone else. It was possible that nothing would have happened. One of the shop owners would have come across Sophie. They might have helped the same way the woman who was not the Pale Princess had helped. Maybe no one would have helped. Maybe she would have lain there after passing out from the pain, then eventually died.

“Do you know where to find her?” Oleda asked.

“I think I did. I’m not so sure anymore,” Sophie said. The memory of the walk back was a blur. As much as she wanted to remember which way she had come, she couldn’t. When she’d been in the city before, when she had gone searching for the red-haired woman, she hadn’t been able to find her. She looked over at Oleda and saw an unfamiliar concentration on the cook’s face. “I’m sorry, Oleda. I’ll try to remember if it’s important.”

Oleda smiled, and the intensity faded. “Don’t worry about it, dear. Focus on getting better. You soak, and I will send a healer in to you. I know a good woman who can make sure that injury is set properly, and anything else that you might have injured will be taken care of.”

Sophie smiled and closed her eyes again. All she wanted to do was sleep. “Don’t let me soak too long.”

“I won’t. It looks as if you need it. Take all the time you need. Recover as much as you can.”

When Oleda left her, Sophie let her eyes drift closed and didn’t fight the fatigue, no longer trying to stay awake. The warmth of the tub embraced her, feeling almost like one of Nana’s hugs, and Sophie smiled at the thought.

# CHAPTER 36

## LAN

“**L**ook at him,” Pagu said.

He was a smallish boy, but Lan had learned that size didn't always make a difference when fighting. Lan still wasn't fast enough.

“What do you want me to see?” Lan asked. In the days since they had returned to the city, he had been disinterested in training, as if he'd lost a part of himself when facing the old farmer in the village they'd slaughtered. Nightmares haunted him.

“Watch the way he uses his sword,” Pagu said. At least Pagu spoke to him, which was more than so many of the boys were willing to do.

Lan grunted. “I have watched it. Much closer than I wanted.”

They stood to the side of a small dirt yard quite a way outside the barracks. Lan wondered why he had come to watch Jarson and a slightly older boy named Rond practice, though it was partly to be a part of something. As Lan watched the two of them spar, it was clear that Jarson was the superior swordsman. He repeatedly slashed at Rond and caught him on his leather bracers. Each time he did, Rond slowed a little more. How much longer would Rond be able to withstand the attack?

“You might have been closer than you wanted, but you were better off than many.”

“Luck,” Lan said.

Pagu had dark skin and deep brown eyes, and his face was usually serious. He watched Lan intensely. "Luck doesn't help you nearly defeat him," he said.

"I think you're giving me more credit than I deserve."

Pagu shrugged.

Jarson finished off Rond and took a deep breath, surveying the others in the practice area. When his gaze fell on Lan, he smiled. "Does the big one want to see if his special sessions have made a difference?"

"Apparently, it's gotten out that I've been working with Tohm."

Pagu shrugged. "It's kind of hard to avoid that sort of information getting out, especially when he takes you out for the day. You get out of patrol that way."

"That was never the intent." Not that he had really stayed away from patrols. Now Tohm was pulling him into ones that he wanted nothing to do with.

"Really?"

"I just wanted to get better."

Jarson swaggered over, crossed his arms under his chest, and looked up at Lan. He had a sharp nose and somehow made it appear that he was looking down his nose at Lan, despite how much shorter he was. "What do you say? Have your special sessions helped you at all, or are you still too slow?"

Lan looked away. He didn't want to do this. After the trip out of the city, he didn't want to do any of this again. Even training didn't have the same appeal. "I don't need to prove anything to you."

"No? Then prove it to everyone else. Let us see what you've been learning, unless you're afraid to show us. Out here, no one's going to save you."

Lan sighed, squeezing his eyes shut. It might be easiest just to spar with Jarson, but he knew what would happen if he did. Jarson took sparring far too spiritedly and used it as an

opportunity to hurt Lan. He wasn't the only one who did, but he was the most skilled and the best prepared to do damage.

They were away from the safety of the barracks. If he were beaten, there would be no Tohm coming to rescue him. Maybe that was what he needed—and deserved.

“Fine.”

“Fine?” Jarson asked. “Fine what?”

“Fine, I’ll show you what I’ve been learning.”

Jarson chuckled. “Is that your way of telling me you think you’ll defeat me? If that’s the way you’re going to be after only a little extra training, I think this could be fun.”

As Lan started toward the training gear, Pagu reached toward his sleeve. “Don’t. You’re just doing what he wants.”

Lan shrugged. “What choice do I have?”

“All the choice. You don’t have to do anything. Keep working with Tohm.”

Lan jerked his arm away. He could keep working with Tohm, but Tohm had lied to him. And although Tohm might be willing to work with him, he wasn’t sure he wanted to keep working with Tohm.

He couldn’t shake the comments that Tohm had made about Sophie. There had been no girls here, so Lan couldn’t imagine what would have happened to her had she been brought to the pits. How badly would she have been hurt? Had Tohm dragged Sophie here, there would have been nothing he could have done about it. They would have hurt her. Maybe killed her.

Or maybe she would have done better than him. He understood what Tohm had said about the way younger fighters learned to use a sword. So maybe she would have been better off than him in learning what they wanted, and she might even have managed to beat up Jarson. Lan would have enjoyed seeing that.

“Now you’re getting scared? Maybe a little teary?”

Lan pushed back thoughts of his sister. What would they do for him, anyway?

“I’m thinking of how badly you’re going to be hurt when I’m through with you,” Lan said.

He quickly tied on the leather bracers and grabbed one of the dulled swords. When he was done, he turned to face Jarson. The boy stood across from him, his posture confident and bordering on cocky.

Jarson barely allowed Lan to get ready before he lunged toward him in a quick strike.

Lan jumped back, swinging his sword up to block with it as he did.

They lunged and parried. Jarson was still much more skilled than Lan. Each of his strikes was fluid, whereas Lan needed to force his. His time working with Tohm had improved his reaction time, but not enough.

Memories of how he’d been beaten by Jarson and others like him came flooding back, filling him. Anger came with it. They had nearly killed him—and he suspected they would have been thrilled if they had succeeded. This was Jarson’s way of forcing him out of his training, but Lan refused to yield.

He swung his sword, keeping the motion as controlled as he could, using everything Tohm had taught him in order to do so. The suddenness of it forced Jarson back. For a moment, Lan thought he might have surprised him.

Movement to the side drew Lan’s attention, and he glanced that way.

That was a mistake. Jarson kicked, sweeping his foot around, striking Lan on the leg. Jarson laughed as he did.

Lan was larger than him. He wasn’t going to let this *boy* harm him. Wasn’t that the lesson that he was to have learned? Fight. Survive.

And he *would* fight.

He rolled off to the side, then leaped to his feet. He kicked, trying to copy what Jarson had done, but he was slower. Old injuries delayed his movements.

Jarson blocked him easily. When he swept around with his sword, Lan barely blocked in time.

Another attack, trying to push Jarson back, failed. Lan struggled to keep the others in his line of sight, not wanting anyone else to interfere. He might be able to defeat Jarson, but Jarson along with the others would be more than he could withstand.

They circled each other, and Lan shifted the sword in his hand, preparing for Jarson's attack. He clenched his jaw, looking for an opening, but the other boy was skilled enough that there wasn't an obvious one.

Jarson grinned at him, as if he could sense Lan's growing frustration. Lan tried to keep it from his face and force emotion out of his mind altogether, as Tohm had instructed, but it was difficult. All he could think of was finding a way to knock Jarson down.

Lan lunged forward, planning to pierce Jarson with his sword.

Jarson slipped off to the side, anticipating even that, and swept his sword around in a sharp arc. It caught Lan's arm, and he nearly dropped his sword.

Jarson sensed the hesitation.

He swung with more force, using less technique, but he was still faster than Lan could react to. Jarson caught Lan higher on the arm, this time biting through the leather, and Lan shifted his stance to keep from bruising too deeply.

Jarson grinned, and his sword whistled through the air again.

When it struck, pain streaked along Lan's arms, hot and burning.

He dropped the sword.



Jarson continued to strike. Lan stumbled, and Jarson kicked him, knocking him to the ground.

The blunted sword in Jarson's hand sent agony through him as attack followed attack.

The pain reminded him of what he had gone through when he'd been jumped in the bunk room, but at least he hadn't broken anything. Yet.

He tried kicking, punching, but nothing connected. After a while, even that was too hard.

Lan lost track of the blows. When it ended, he couldn't see anything. Was it tears or blood streaming into his eyes? Maybe both.

He couldn't hear anything. His head throbbed. Everything spun around him. Someone lifted him, but he couldn't focus on them as he faded into blackness.

# CHAPTER 37

SOPHIE

The stairs loomed before Sophie, and she dreaded taking the first step. Her hip still hurt, throbbing with every step, though each day was a little better. She was hopeful that in time, the pain would fade completely, but it had been a week.

Surprisingly, her wrist didn't bother her nearly as much. The healer Oleda had brought was skilled, and she had carefully unwrapped and replaced the splint on her forearm, fixing it so it barely moved. Sophie had been instructed to keep the splint in place for the next month. She didn't know how she would be able to keep her arm clean, let alone keep the splint on for all that time. It was an impossibly long period for her to do that.

As she took a step on the stairs leading up to Ridaln's tower, she felt the energy sizzling around her. The power built with each step, matching the pain radiating from her hip and down her leg, as if they were bound together. When she passed through Ridaln's barrier, she breathed out, and with a surprising warmth washing through her, the pain in her hip lessened and became tolerable.

That was strange. Was it a deliberate effect of Ridaln's magic?

She continued up the stairs, losing track of how many she had taken, only knowing that with each step her pain was less. When she reached the top, she found the chamber empty.

*Where is Ridaln?*

She'd expected to find him here, and after avoiding him for the last week, she had decided it was time to return to her lessons. At least the bruising on her face had mostly faded, enough that she could hide it with the paints Oleda had lent her. She had remained hidden, not wanting anyone to see the bruising or the bracing on her arm. She still hadn't decided how she would answer questions about what had happened. Oleda had been no help, having been difficult to find over the last few days.

Sophie stood in front of one of Ridaln's shelves, looking at the strange sculptures that he had on it. One of them was a glass orb, and within it there was a soft blue glow. Her eyes were drawn to it, and she reached for it, curious about how it would feel in her hand, wanting to know what that blue light was—

“Don't.”

Sophie turned and saw Ridaln standing at the top of the stairs. “What is it?”

“It is something you're not prepared for.”

“That doesn't help me much. I'm not prepared for anything yet.”

“No. It appears that you are not.”

“What does that mean?”

“Only that you have made yourself scarce over the last few days. Someone who was interested in studying and improving her skills would not have abandoned her studies so soon after beginning them. Are you ready to turn away from your gift so quickly?”

“I'm not turning away from anything. I've been busy.”

Ridaln arched a brow, and his silver eyes widened. It was often difficult to tell emotion in Ridaln, and she wasn't sure whether that was due to his strange silver eyes or whether he knew some way to hide his emotions.

“Busy? It seems you've been busy getting injured. What happened to your arm and your face?”

Apparently, she hadn't been nearly as effective at hiding the bruising on her face as she'd thought. She had never applied paint the way some of the older women did. She didn't have any skill with it, and working with her off hand had increased the difficulty of the task.

"I was hurt," she said.

Ridaln regarded her for a moment before nodding. "It seems you've received the care that you needed. Now, are you ready to practice your poses?"

Sophie looked at the orb for a moment longer, longing to lift it and hold it. It was strange the way the orb called to her, and the way power surged from it, pulsing within her. Was it attracted to whatever magical connection she possessed, or was it something more basic? Was it simply that the orb was an item of power, and now that Ridaln had helped her awaken her own magic, she was connected to it?

She held her injured hand up, waving it at him. "I won't be doing any poses until this heals."

"Nonsense. There are plenty of poses that you can work on where you only need one hand. I was injured plenty of times working with my mentor."

"And who was your mentor?"

Ridaln was quiet for a long moment. "A dangerous man."

"What happened to him?"

"He chased a dark power and was stopped before he could release it. Had he succeeded..." Ridaln took a deep breath. "That doesn't matter here. What matters is that you focus, Sophie. Perform the poses as required."

Sophie wanted to hear more about this mentor, figuring that had to be a story she'd enjoy, and not just because she dreaded the idea of working on any pose that required her to stand for prolonged periods of time. "Are you sure that makes sense? I don't want to injure myself more because I can't hold a pose the way that I need to," she said.

Ridaln studied her for a moment. “Did you come here only to tell me how little you could do? Do you not intend to practice?”

Sophie breathed out. Hadn’t he warned her that a pose that went awry could be dangerous? She didn’t want to injure herself simply because she was following him without question. And she didn’t want to end up creating some sort of explosion the way that she had the very first time she had attempted these poses.

“Can you teach me how to do it without holding a pose?” If he could do that, then she wouldn’t have to torment herself with the agony of holding a pose for longer than she wanted.

“We have already talked about crawling before you walk.”

“With my injured hip, I don’t know how much I can even crawl.”

Ridaln frowned. “What exactly happened to you?”

She didn’t want to tell him, not really. She didn’t know whether she should. Yet as secretive as Ridaln had been in the beginning, he had begun to share with her, and she knew that she needed to trust him if she was to learn from him, so she told him about the attack and about coming back to the palace and soaking in the tub, and even about how Oleda had arranged for a healer to come to her. The only part she kept out was the woman. She wanted Ridaln to tell her himself.

“Now that you’ve been healed, it’s time to practice. Do you think you can do this?”

Everything still hurt, though it wasn’t as bad as it had been after the attack.

“I think so, but why the urgency?”

“The Raven Queen grows in strength, and so must we.”

“But she has the Taihg. You’ve told me that our soldiers who are attempting to re-create the Taihg magic have failed. How are we supposed to stop her when she has so much magic? How am I supposed to do anything? How are we—”

Ridaln placed his hand on her hips and twisted her toward him. Sophie gasped and then gasped again as a wave of warmth washed through her, reminding her of the warmth she had felt when climbing the stairs to his chamber. When he removed his hands, the warmth remained, but the pain had dissipated. It wasn't that she no longer felt any throbbing, it was as if the pain had never been there. She tested her hip, twisting slightly, and found no residual effect.

“What did you do?” she asked.

“I got you to stop asking questions.”

“That's the only reason? You healed me so that I would stop asking questions?”

“I healed you so that you could practice. Getting you to stop asking questions is an added benefit.”

“How did you do that?”

“It will take some time before your power manifests in such a way that you will be able to use it on another to heal them. I anticipate your magic will eventually allow you to heal yourself, but that requires an advanced pose and a focus you do not yet have. If you're going to continue to be impetuous and go into the city, you need to be prepared to heal yourself.”

“How is my going into the city impetuous?”

“You know so little, Sophie Varison. You know that you have access to power, but you don't know what that means. You ask questions about the Raven Queen without understanding who she is.”

“My nana told me stories.”

“And we've already established those were only stories. Your grandmother told you tales that are only the barest part of the truth when it comes to the Raven Queen. Let me assure you her power is incredible and quite dangerous. What I will teach you can help keep you alive.”

He stood with his arms crossed, and Sophie could feel the power sizzling away from him. Could he be intending to demonstrate just how powerful he was? What purpose would

there be in doing that when she was already well aware of how weak she was compared to him?

“Ridaln?”

Ridaln let out a long sigh. “The questions you ask are about the wisdom of my plan, and they are valid questions. I do not deny that you should be asking them. I only suggest that perhaps we phrase them in a different way.”

“What way would you have me ask them?” Sophie asked. His chiding of her reminded her of the way Nana had often chided her. She had warned Sophie that she had a tendency to be too abrupt, and combined with her impulsivity—or passion—it could come across the wrong way.

“There are limits to magic.” Ridaln started pacing, his gaze drifting across the items on his shelves. “When you begin to develop your connection to magic, it feels as if it is limitless. It was that way for me, and I suspect, as you continue to grow in skill, it will feel that way to you. But trust me when I tell you there are limits. The Raven Queen is an advanced magical practitioner. She has been working with magic for a long time—far longer than I. There are limits to how much more advanced she can become. I’m hopeful that the longer we can delay, the more I can develop, and perhaps the more I can help another develop.”

“Me?”

“You. Others like you.”

“The pretend Taihg?”

Ridaln breathed out in a heavy sigh. “There is something I’m missing. I don’t know what it is, and try as I might, I haven’t been able to discover the way the Raven Queen has trained those who serve her. You are the first person I have found who has the potential required, and I only found you because of the Karell.”

Sophie had the sense he hadn’t wanted to share that with her, and that he hated admitting he’d so far failed in finding someone who could reach magic.

“How many have you tried to find?”

“Every woman I’ve brought to the palace has been an attempt.”

“And how many succeeded?”

“Not nearly enough.”

“That’s why I’m here?”

Ridaln said nothing as he regarded her.

“What about Caitlyn?” Sophie had been trying to understand what the woman was doing in the palace, as she’d been here for a while.

“She had potential, but not enough. Few do. I suppose we must still wait to see what potential you have. There was one who came close, but then she switched sides, joining the Raven Queen.”

That had to be the redheaded woman that Sophie had met.

“Who was she?”

Ridaln regarded her with suspicion. “Does it matter?”

Sophie shrugged. “I need to know who to watch out for.”

Ridaln snorted. “I doubt you have to watch for Jalyn. She knows better than to risk herself coming to the city.”

Jalyn. That had to be the woman Sophie had met. “Why? I mean, why all of this?” she added quickly. “Why these measures?”

Ridaln clenched his jaw as he seemed to debate how much to share with her.

“When the war began, another advised the king, a powerful magic user who helped to train me.”

“What happened to him?”

“He was lost at the same time as the Pale Princess. They fought. Power was unleashed. Neither survived. After that...”

“The war was over?”

Ridaln nodded.



“I don’t understand. Why was there a war in the first place?”

“The same reason there are always wars. Power. The Raven Queen—and the Pale Princess—chased a dangerous power that should not be unleashed.”

“What sort of power?”

“I know little about it other than what my mentor described. He called it the Shavlñ, an ancient magical power that can reshape the world. In the years since the end of the war, everything I’ve found about the Shavlñ tells me it’s dangerous.”

There was something about that phrase that was familiar.

Could Nana have had a story about this as well?

“Why is there magic?” she’d once asked Nana.

“There’s a dark power in the world, Sophie. The kind of power that must be confined.”

“What happens if it is not?”

“The world will be changed. That is why there are those like the Raven Queen.”

Sophie shook away the memory. In that story, Nana had suggested that the Raven Queen had actually fought against a greater power. “If the Raven Queen gets that power?”

“With her talent, she would be unstoppable.”

Sophie shivered. “Why the delegations?”

“That was another gift from my mentor. We bring together lands that hold the key to protecting us from the Shavlñ. He left records, and since I found them, I have used those records to coordinate these delegations. We have nearly completed the list.”

“How many more?”

“Don’t worry. You aren’t in danger.”

“I’m not. Others are.”

He waved his hand. “When Alitan visits, we will have everything we need.”

Sophie had never heard of Alitan. “And why only girls?”

Ridaln blinked a moment. “It doesn’t have to be only girls, but magic manifests earliest in girls. That makes it easier to detect.”

“And the Karell?”

“They have a way of detecting those who have potential with magic. With enough power, they will be able to reach the Shavln regardless of what we do to stop them.”

Whenever she thought she understood what she was dealing with, Ridaln threw more at her. “What about boys?”

“It’s possible that magic will manifest early, but that’s why we are trying another approach to draw it out.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that there are other ways to reach them.”

Sophie studied Ridaln, a question burning in her eyes. “Is that what you’re doing with Lan?”

Ridaln glanced over at Sophie before turning his attention back to the row of shelves. He fingered a strange spiky object, pressing his thumb onto one of the spikes until he winced and withdrew his hand. A small drop of blood had beaded on the surface of his thumb. He dabbed his fingers together and whispered something softly. There came a flash of light between his fingers, which faded quickly.

“I have nothing to do with what is taking place with your brother.”

“But you brought us here. You brought him here.”

“I brought him here.” Ridaln focused on her, and then he let out a deep sigh. “His training—their training—isn’t under my control.” He sighed. “Perhaps it is time you knew the truth.”

“What truth?”

“I’ve been observing the soldiers. They are under the command of the king. I don’t have any influence over what they do or how they serve, and as much as I want to influence them, there is nothing I can do.”

“I thought you said you were trying to create this kingdom’s version of the Taihg.”

“I don’t even know if it’s possible to do that, as I’ve had no success.”

“Then where is my brother?”

Ridaln tapped his fingers together again and squeezed another droplet of blood from his thumb. Once more there came a flash of light. When it faded, he glanced up at Sophie, and she knew the answer even without him telling her.

“You don’t know. That’s what you’ve been hiding from me, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know, but I’m not hiding it from you.”

“And yet every time I’ve asked, you haven’t shared anything with me.”

“Because there isn’t anything for me to share. I would reveal what I know, if I had learned anything, but...”

“You’ve deceived me in this. You made it seem as if you knew, but you didn’t. Why?”

“I haven’t deceived you, Sophie.”

“No?” She rounded on him, placing her hands on her hips. She was tall for her age, but not nearly as tall as Ridaln, and he turned back to her, his eyes flashing with the strange silver light. She resisted the urge to take a step back. She wasn’t going to let Ridaln intimidate her and force her to look away.

“I would not share with you my ignorance if I had any intent to deceive you. I’m sharing this with you so that we can work together to determine where to find your brother.”

“Why me?” That was something she didn’t fully understand but thought she needed to. “Were it not for the Karell, would you have brought me here?”

“I don’t know. You showed spirit, and everything I’ve learned about those who have potential with magic indicates it’s necessary for the practitioners to have some spirit. If they don’t, they will end up overpowered by the magic, unable to control it.”

“And that’s why you thought I could help you with this charade to create the Pale Princess?”

Ridaln nodded.

“How long do you intend to keep creating fake Pale Princesses?”

“Until the Raven Queen is defeated.” Ridaln crossed his arms over his chest. Energy sizzled around her, the same as the barrier on the stairs to his chamber. “That’s all that matters, Sophie Varison. You don’t matter. I don’t matter. Defeating the Raven Queen and preventing her from destroying this kingdom is all that matters.”

Sophie looked at Ridaln but couldn’t hold his gaze. There was too much intensity and heat in his eyes, and the power radiating from him intimidated her.

“Now, if that is all, it’s time you resumed your training. Do you think you have the ability?”

Sophie had no more pain, not as she had been experiencing, but she still wasn’t sure that she wanted to resume her training. Something about Ridaln made her uncomfortable. She had been uncomfortable around him before, but this was different. This was a man who was focused on a task, and she was suddenly aware she was caught up in something that might destroy her.

The red-haired woman’s warning flashed in her mind. *He thinks he controls power, when in reality, it controls him. What makes him dangerous puts others at risk.* At least now Sophie had a name. Jalyn. Having a name helped, even if the woman believed it didn’t matter. Having her name meant Sophie could go in search of her. That was something she intended to do. She wanted answers, and if Ridaln wasn’t going to provide them, and if he continued to use his connection to magic to

intimidate her, she would have to go to someone else. Even if that meant going to someone Ridaln intended to warn her away from.

He watched her expectantly. Sophie needed to answer, and she needed to keep from having his attention fixed on her in that way. She flexed her arms, checking the injury to her wrist, and then twisted, trying to determine how injured she still was from the attack. She was better—at least, well enough to resume her practice.

“I’m ready,” she said.

Ridaln watched her for a moment and then nodded. “Then we will begin.”

# CHAPTER 38

## SOPHIE

Sophie stood out in the garden, enjoying the bright sun shining on her. There was a pleasant warmth to it today, and it contrasted with the cool breeze gusting through the flower beds. She stood off to the side, not wanting to draw attention from anyone who might be passing through the garden. She wanted only a chance to have some solitude to practice the poses that Ridaln had been teaching her. She had progressed to the point where she could use several poses with some degree of consistency. Most of them simply concentrated energy. She didn't know enough about what to do once she had that energy concentrated. She suspected he would eventually teach her the next step, maybe a way of pushing out the power into something useful. So far, he had not.

“What are you doing?”

Caitlyn watched her with a sour expression. Her hair was pulled back in a formal braid and slung over her shoulder. Threads of lace were woven within it. The skill of the weave was evident even from a distance. As much as Caitlyn annoyed her, there was much Sophie could learn from her, but only if Caitlyn wanted to teach, and she doubted very much that the woman had any such intention.

None of the weavers had shown any inclination to teach her. For the most part, she was allowed to sit with them and practice, but they didn't offer any demonstration of technique. Any improvement would have to be driven by Sophie learning on her own. Yet she didn't think it mattered. What purpose

would there be in her learning to weave other than to spend time doing it?

“I’m stretching,” Sophie said. It was a lie that she already had prepared. It was a reasonable answer, especially considering most within the palace knew about her injuries.

“Stretching? You seemed to be holding a position for quite a while.”

Caitlyn stood next to her and mimicked the posture, one Ridaln called the flag pose, and one not quite as obviously named as some of the poses were. It required Sophie to bend her arms at the elbows and keep them straight out in front of her while leaning forward to the point where she almost tipped over. One of her feet was supposed to turn out, but she found it hard to maintain balance for very long.

“Not like that,” Sophie said before realizing what she was doing. Why was she bothering to correct Caitlyn?

“Not like what? Why would it even matter if you’re only stretching?”

“I suppose it doesn’t.” She glanced to Caitlyn’s hair, admiring the tight braiding that made it appear even thicker than it normally did. “That’s a lovely weave in your hair.”

Caitlyn’s eyes narrowed. “Are you mocking me?”

“How can I be mocking you when I’m complimenting your hair?” Sophie shifted out of her pose and planted her hands on her hips, glaring at Caitlyn. She had grown tired of the woman and the way that she treated her. “If I were to mock you, I might comment on the way your feet point out when you walk, or I might comment on the way you wrinkle your nose when you talk, or even the way you—”

“Enough! It seems you *were* mocking me.”

Sophie let out her breath in a huff. “I wasn’t mocking you.” She shouldn’t have said what she had about Caitlyn. They already didn’t get along, and she didn’t need to be making enemies with this woman. In the palace, she had few enough friends, and she should be focusing on trying to work with her, to gain an alliance rather than to antagonize her. She

knew better. Nana had warned her about doing such things and taunting in such a way. “I’m sorry. What I said wasn’t kind.”

Caitlyn studied her a moment, as if trying to determine whether Sophie was implying something else. “You don’t have to be so cruel.”

“I shouldn’t have said that,” Sophie said. “It’s just that you’ve never been...” She shook her head. What was the point of telling Caitlyn what she had never been? It wasn’t as if Caitlyn was about to change. “It doesn’t matter. What are you doing in the garden?” Sophie rarely saw any of the women spending any time in the garden. It was part of the reason that she came here, to a place where she could practice outside, rather than being cooped up in her room with nothing but stone walls surrounding her.

“Can’t a woman come out to the garden and enjoy the fragrances of the flowers?”

“I suppose,” Sophie said. “It’s just that I haven’t seen you here very often.”

“And you are here so often that you would know when and if I come to the garden?”

Sophie bit her lip and grabbed her dress, twisting it. She was making a bigger mess of things. “That’s not it.”

“Then what is it?”

Sophie shook her head. She started to turn, wanting nothing more than to get away from Caitlyn. She didn’t want to get into an argument, and she especially didn’t want to get into one with Caitlyn, in which she doubted that she would be able to say anything that might not be misconstrued.

“You heal fast,” Caitlyn said.

Sophie’s heart skipped in her chest. “What was that?”

“Your arm. Didn’t you have a splint on your arm?”

Sophie hadn’t prepared for the possibility that someone would notice how quickly she had recovered from her injuries. She should have. She should have anticipated questions, and she should have anticipated that someone like Caitlyn would



have paid attention, especially as Caitlyn seemed to enjoy needling her.

She wiped her arm across her forehead. The sweating was from holding her pose and *not* from Caitlyn's interrogation. "It wasn't a splint. My arm was wrapped—"

"It was a splint." Caitlyn circled around so that she could get into Sophie's face again. "I've spent enough time around the physicians that I know a splint when I see one. There is only one reason to have a splint on your arm, and you don't look like someone who had a fracture."

"It was precautionary."

Caitlyn frowned. "Precautionary? Who places a precautionary splint when there's no fracture?"

"Someone who doesn't know any better," Sophie snapped. "It was only bruised. And now it's better." She waved her hands in front of Caitlyn's face before pulling them back down. She shouldn't have done that. She should have known better than to attempt to draw the woman's attention to her hands and the injury that she had sustained.

"And what of your hip? I saw the way you were limping."

Sweat beaded on Sophie's back. Ridaln would not be pleased to learn that Caitlyn paid this much attention to her. "Have you been following me?" she asked.

"So what if I have?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm waiting for you to leave, Sophie Varison."

"Why are you waiting for me to leave?"

Caitlyn breathed out in a huff. "With you here, it's less likely that I'll be chosen. Too many of these men prefer younger women. You're the youngest one here. Before you came, I was one of the younger ones."

"You're not getting any younger," Sophie said, and she immediately wished that she hadn't.

Caitlyn's face contorted, and she clenched her jaw.

“But neither am I,” Sophie said hurriedly. She doubted that would make it any better, but maybe she could take some of the anger from Caitlyn with that comment.

“Yes. I suppose that neither of us is getting any younger.”

“And why does it matter? I don’t even *want* to be chosen.”

“And as I’ve told you, just because you don’t want to be chosen doesn’t mean that you won’t be chosen. It’s the women who don’t want to be selected who end up getting taken first.”

“Then I just won’t go to the next choosing.”

“Do you think the king would allow that?”

“I don’t know anything about the king,” Sophie said, “other than he’s here and he apparently likes rhubarb pastries. Why would the king care whether I’m at his party or not?”

“Because he needs the alliances to stabilize the kingdom during the war,” Caitlyn said. “Don’t you pay attention to anything?”

“Apparently not.”

“That’s the whole purpose of having women come here. He wants to use us to solidify alliances.”

Sophie looked at the woman, tilting her chin at her in her irritation. “It seems you know an awful lot about what the king intends.”

“Because I pay attention,” Caitlyn said. “When Carolyn speaks, I listen. She sits with the king more than any of the other weavers, and she knows more than any of the others.”

“Well, it doesn’t change the fact that I don’t want to be chosen.”

“Why do you think it matters what you want? You were brought here by Ridaln, and to some, that makes you exotic. Not only are you younger than most of us, but you were also chosen by the king’s adviser, which means that he must have found you valuable enough to bring with him.”

Sophie shivered. “Ridaln doesn’t want me here to be married off to some regional nobleman to solidify the

kingdom.”

Caitlyn smiled widely. “Really? I thought you didn’t know the king’s adviser all that well. I thought you didn’t have any idea what Ridaln wanted from you.”

“Well, he doesn’t want me to be married off. I might not know what he’s after with me, but—”

“You *are* Ridaln’s pet. I thought so. You have tried to deny it, but there is only so much that you can deny, isn’t there?”

“I’ve tried to deny your lies. I’m not his pet.”

Caitlyn laughed, wrinkling her nose as she did. “You keep telling yourself that, Sophie. And then, when he grows tired of you and sends you away the same way that he’s sent away so many others before you, you will see that you were nothing more than his pet. But unlike most who have pets, Ridaln thinks nothing of getting rid of those he’s grown tired of.”

With that, Caitlyn turned and made her way along the path leading away from the center of the garden. Sophie resisted the urge to call out to her and tell her to bring her toes in as she walked.

She needed to find Nessa. She needed to know whether Ridaln would discard her if she failed. If he did, what would she do? Where would she go? She didn’t know anyone else in the palace well enough to ask for help. She couldn’t return to Halith—the village was far too distant from here.

What did that leave for her? Would she end up like these other women? Would she end up wandering the palace, waiting for some noble to choose her? Would she end up married off and sent from the palace, away from her brother, never to see him again? The idea sent her heart racing faster and faster until she forced those thoughts away, trying to settle herself down.

Sophie debated going straight into the palace and searching for Nessa, but she decided against it. What she needed to do was spend some time practicing her poses, the very reason that she had come out here in the first place. If Ridaln learned that she wasn’t practicing, he would be angry

with her. She needed to continue to learn from him, if only because discovering her connection to magic had been exciting. She liked the idea that she had something that she could do that others could not. Even if it wasn't anything more than simply concentrating power right now, eventually a time would come when she might be able to use magic in the same way Ridaln could.

She moved to a section of the palace garden where there would be more privacy, and there she focused on the prayer pose. This was the hardest for her, and she thought the most beneficial, especially as she had felt the explosion of power from this pose before.

Holding the prayer pose was difficult, not only because it meant that she needed to maintain a rigid posture and an uncomfortable position, but also because the prayer pose required a very difficult stance.

Placing her hands in just the right positions needed her to maintain focus. How was she ever going to manage to do this without the pose? Eventually, she would be able to summon power without holding the pose, so what was the point of learning these poses? That was an answer that Ridaln had not given her clearly. There had to be some purpose, but when he used magic, there was no pose, and all he did was whisper a few words and perhaps move his fingers, and he was able to do much more than she could even while holding the pose.

As she held it, the power built within her.

It started low, deep in her stomach, the same way the nausea had come when she'd been injured.

That thought nearly unsettled her, almost sending her out of the pose. She forced her mind to clear, to ignore those memories. They were just distractions. She didn't need to have anything other than a focus on the pose, and the power coming through her, starting in her stomach and working up through her arms and out through her fingers before...

Sophie shook herself and realized that she was lying on the ground. Grass pressed into her face, tickling her cheeks.

What had happened?

She knew what had happened.

Sophie had lost control. She had managed the pose and had managed to summon power, but she had lost control of it as it had overwhelmed her. The power had surged through her, building up from her stomach and out through her hands, and she had released it in an uncontrolled fashion.

When she sat up and looked around, she saw a section of the garden had been destroyed.

What would Petra say if he learned she had damaged the garden? There was no way she could hide it from him. Where a beautiful bed of flowers had been, there was nothing more than a blackened crater in the ground. It was wide, nearly two paces across, and the air stank of singed plants.

*She* had done this?

When she had released power in Ridaln's chamber, there hadn't been any damage, but then again, Ridaln had been there to corral her energy, and he had helped focus it, preventing it from spreading.

Without Ridaln here, or someone else to prevent her from releasing the power too broadly, she had destroyed part of the garden.

She shouldn't feel proud, but it was hard not to. Not only had she held the prayer pose correctly, but she had also released the energy.

She giggled softly and glanced around for witnesses to her actions. She didn't need to be caught.

The garden remained empty, thankfully. No sign of Petra or any of the other gardeners. Sophie hurried away. There wasn't anything she could do to restore the garden, so she didn't even bother trying. Had she more control over her power, maybe she could have tried to use it to heal the garden in the same way that Ridaln had healed her, though Sophie wasn't even certain whether that was possible.

Did she have only destructive magic, or could she use this power in another way?

Those were questions for Ridaln. Would he answer them?

Unfortunately, there was no one else who could help her. Ridaln was the only one that she knew had magic. Well, other than the Raven Queen, and the idea of learning from her, especially considering the stories she'd heard, terrified Sophie.

She disappeared into a section of the garden where she could continue to practice. Now that she had completed one pose effectively, and had managed to hold it and summon enough power to cause such destruction, she wanted to repeat it. If she could, would that mean she was on the path to walking?

As she hid in the garden, focusing on her pose, she tried to think about what she had done before, but the excitement of having been successful was difficult to overcome.

Sophie forced her mind to go blank, to think of nothing more than how to hold the pose, but each time she tried, other thoughts intruded.

She would continue to practice. Sophie wanted answers, and she wanted to understand what Ridaln intended for her, but more than that, now that she had successfully created magic, she wanted to do it again.

Even as she practiced, a nagging concern remained in the back of her mind. Practicing meant eventually she would need to pretend to have the power of the Pale Princess. Was that something she thought she could do? And if she did, would she have to confront the Raven Queen?

Sophie didn't think she could. Even when she developed her magic, even if she developed strength like Ridaln's, she'd never be able to confront the Raven Queen. The stories Nana had shared with her had left her scared, terrified of the Raven Queen. And probably for the best.

Turning her attention back to her practice, she focused on the pose, trying to hold it again. She focused her mind and her effort so that she could re-create the pose. As she pushed away

the distractions, she let her mind go blank and focused only on the task in front of her and not on what it would mean if she succeeded.

# CHAPTER 39

## LAN

Lan kept his eyes closed, listening. There were sounds around him, but they were muted and distant. He couldn't even be certain that he heard them at all.

What did he remember? He remembered an attack, but he'd undergone enough of those recently that it shouldn't be surprising. What else?

Maybe there was nothing else to recall. Maybe all he had known was violence.

He wasn't sure he was cut out for soldiering. A soldier should be inured to violence, but a face lined like Papa's jumped into his mind, another with cruel eyes that made his fist clench—Tohm, who used his sister to get Lan angry, and Jarson. He didn't want to be angry all the time, but if he gave it up, his anger and violence, what would happen to him?

What about Sophie? She was somewhere in the city—unless Tohm *had* lost her. He wasn't about to leave her here alone.

Then again, he had already abandoned her. She had been alone, away from him, for a long time. What had happened to her in the time that they had been apart? She had been taken by the silver-eyed man, and Lan had no idea what they wanted from her.

And it didn't matter. Nothing mattered, not so long as he was trapped with no way of getting to safety. He couldn't even move. Jarson must have thrashed him much better than he remembered. His body didn't respond the way that he wanted



it to, but even if it had, how was he going to escape from Tohm?

“You’re awake.”

Lan blinked his eyes open. An unfamiliar face loomed over him. The man had a sharp jaw, and a scruff of beard lined his cheeks. He had flint-colored eyes that pierced deep into Lan.

“Who are you?” Lan asked.

The man chuckled. “You awaken, and your first question is about who I am.”

“Are you with the Fixer?”

The man’s brow furrowed. “The Fixer? What is that?”

Lan studied the man. He hadn’t seen anyone like him before. No. This wasn’t someone who was with the Fixer.

Had he been taken captive?

That was the only other thought that he had. If he had been taken captive, who would have taken him? Why?

Better yet, *how* would they have captured him?

The last thing he remembered was fighting with Jarson, utterly failing to hold his own. Nothing else came to mind. It all faded to black. But then, they had been out of the barracks. There were no protections there.

“You’re not with the Fixer,” Lan said.

“No. I’m not with the Fixer.”

“Where am I?”

“You’re somewhere safe.”

“Safe? I haven’t been somewhere safe since...” Lan tried to think about how long it had been since he had been safe. Before Nana and Papa had died. How long ago had that been? Training, captivity, the journey, it had to have been months.

Long enough for everything he had once wanted to change.

Hadn't he wanted to be a soldier? And now, when he had been given that opportunity, when he was training with other soldiers—men like Tohm—he wanted nothing more than to return to the farm and resume the simple life.

“You're safe now.”

The man moved away from him and shuffled around to the side of the room. He returned carrying a tray with a steaming bowl. The fragrance of hearty stew wafted up with the steam, making Lan's mouth water.

His stomach rumbled, betraying his hunger. Would the man use his hunger against him? Would he be forced to fight—to survive, and then to eat—before he could enjoy this stew? Was it a new way Graychen and Tohm had dreamed up to torment him in the name of testing his ability to become something he no longer wanted to be?

“Let me help you sit up,” the man said.

Strong but surprisingly gentle hands propped Lan up, lifting him up from behind so that he rested against the wall. The man scooped up a spoonful of stew and brought it to Lan's mouth. He took a sip and sighed.

“Is it too hot?” the man asked.

Lan shook his head, afraid to say anything. Would he betray himself by admitting it was too hot? Would they take the stew away from him and force him back to hunger? Better to deny the discomfort and keep the opportunity to eat.

“Are you ready for another bite?”

Lan nodded.

When the spoon came toward him again, he braced himself for the heat and swallowed carefully. It was delicious and reminded him of the stews Papa used to make with venison, leaving it to simmer for hours, almost as if they had learned the same recipe.

Lan continued to take bites, one after another, and the rumbling in his stomach gradually eased, settling into

something else, a comfortable sort of gnawing. Eventually, even that abated.

Lan took a deep breath, then let it out. His mouth burned, but the taste of meat and the fullness in his stomach made it worth it. The man took a hunk of bread off the tray and broke off a piece to feed him. Lan chewed slowly. The bread was flaky and must have been freshly baked, much tastier than any bread that he'd had in months.

“Who are you?” Lan asked in between bites.

“Someone who wants to help.”

Now that his stomach was settled, now that he was no longer feeling the shock of waking to a stranger, Lan studied the man. He was dressed in dappled silver, his robe shimmering, and beneath it he wore simple clothes, black and grays. Was he armed? Lan couldn't see a sword, but that didn't mean he didn't have one strapped to his back or hidden beneath the robe.

“Where did you find me?”

“You were unmoving in a courtyard.”

Had Jarson left him? They had been sparring, but the Fixer would have helped him. Those boys wanted him to be banished from training, angry at his mere presence.

“You found me.”

“We found you. You were breathing, beaten and bruised but still alive.”

“Why did you help me?”

“You bear the mark.”

“I bear what?”

The man frowned and turned to place the tray on a table near him. “How badly were you injured?”

“I was... I was sparring. He got the better of me.”

“Sparring?”

“Practicing with the sword. I haven’t had much practice, and he got the better of me.”

“Who were you sparring with?” the man asked.

“Another of the trainees.”

“And what sort of trainees are these?”

“Soldiers. We were training to be soldiers in Neylash.”

The man studied him for a long moment. “Is that right? You’ve been training to be a soldier?”

Would this man accuse him of lying? Would he think that Lan didn’t have the ability to be a soldier? After what he’d gone through, Lan wasn’t even sure himself. Maybe he was not meant to be one. Since he had been bested by Jarson—who was barely older than Sophie—how would he have any chance? If he couldn’t even stand up for himself against another boy, how would he ever fight a man?

A soldier. Lan couldn’t believe he had ever imagined himself one. He couldn’t believe he had allowed himself the dream of wielding a sword. He had just been deluding himself. In Halith, there had been no harm in such delusions, but now he had come to Neylash, and now he was expected to train, his delusions only put his life in danger.

Maybe it was best that this man had rescued him from Tohm, Graychen, and the other trainees. Maybe it was best he return to Halith. Papa’s farm should still be there, and Lan could work it. He had learned enough working with Papa that he should be able to run it on his own. He didn’t need Papa to guide him.

“I was trying, but I don’t think I was much of one.”

The man studied him for a moment longer before nodding. He patted Lan on the arm gently. Everything that the man did had an odd gentleness to it. Lan didn’t know how to deal with it after the brutality of his training.

“Rest. I will return in a few moments.”

The man stood and left Lan alone. When the door closed behind him, Lan heaved a sigh and looked around. It was a

simple room, with a table on which the tray still rested, the rest of the bread lying on the tray. Lan shifted on the bed and scooted forward until he could reach the remaining hunk of bread. He was still hungry, and the bread was incredible. He had tasted nothing like it before.

As he chewed, he continued to examine his surroundings. The bed was comfortable, much softer than he had realized at first, nothing like the bunk he'd been given in the barracks. This was more like the bed he'd had in Halith, which Nana and Papa had made for him.

It was comfortable.

Everything about the room was comfortable, from the softly glowing light in the corner, to the bed, to the plush orange rug spread across the floor. All he needed was an altar to Darish, and it would complete the sense of warmth.

Lan tapped on the wall, connecting with wood as the woodsman god required, and offered a soft prayer. It had been a long time since he had connected with Darish, but he had always felt an affinity with the woodsman god. Nana and Papa had prayed to Darish, and Lan's parents—at least, so far as he remembered. His memories of his parents were vague, and for that, he suspected he should be thankful.

He tested his legs, standing at the edge of the bed and twisting. His leg had been broken twice, and each time he had healed, but he feared he might have broken it again. It supported him, and he was thankful, not wanting to suffer through the pain of recovery once more. Then again, the other times it had been injured, he had recovered much faster than he should have. Had the Fixer done something to help him heal quickly? Was there some magic involved? That seemed impossible, but then, so did the way he'd been beaten and brutalized.

The rug felt wonderful between his toes, soft and plush. He wore little more than a gown, clothing not his own. It was a silver matching the shimmery quality of the strange man's robe.

A troubling thought came to mind. What if they had him here and were being kind—practically loving—as a way to disarm him?

He should know better.

Lan tested his legs as he walked across the rug and reached the door. The door was not locked, so he pulled it open. He glanced down the warmly lit hallway. Sconces set along the wall were glowing with bright orange light. The hall smelled of perfume, a pleasant scent that reminded him of Nana and Sophie. His heart ached with fear for her.

He could do nothing for her while he was trapped here.

If this was some way of charming him to abuse him when they returned, Lan would not stay. He had no intention to be held hostage while they plied him with niceties to get him to comply. At least with Graychen and Tohm, he knew where he stood. The brutality made sense. Survive, and then eat. He knew what was asked of him.

Lan glanced back into the room, checking if there was anything he could use as a weapon, but other than pens and a few sheets of paper, there was nothing. He turned away and started down the hall. He moved quickly, padding as silently as he could, passing a few doors. He needed to find a way out. If he couldn't find an escape, he would have to return to his room before he raised questions. The man had said he'd return in a few moments. Lan didn't have long. Would the man bring others? Would they torment him? Would he be prepared to torment Lan to get information from him?

Yet the man had offered him nothing but niceties, between food and comfort and gentle hands.

Lan reached the end of the hall and found a much wider door. He pulled it open and stepped outside and into bright sunlight. As his eyes adjusted, he looked around and didn't recognize anything.

There was lush landscape all around, thriving greenery smelling of flowers and evergreens and earth. The ground sloped up, toward what appeared to be a mountain. Nothing

was as bleak and rocky as where he had been training with Tohm. A street ran in front of him, with other buildings lining it. A few people glanced at him, then went on their way.

Where was he?

This wasn't where he had been training. This wasn't Neylash.

Had he been abducted?

For what purpose? Did they think he had information? Could these men be part of an opposing army?

He had too many questions and no way of safely getting free.

“Where are you going?”

Lan turned back. The man watched him with concern on his face, mixed with a hint of sorrow.

“Where is this?” Lan asked.

“Where is this? This is safety. This is a place where you can relax. You don't have to fear another attack.”

“I don't understand. How is it that I'm here?”

“I told you. We found you in a courtyard.”

“But I was in Neylash.”

“You were in a courtyard,” the man said again, this time with more firmness to his voice. “And now you are here. We have brought you to safety.”

“But where is here?”

“Here is Reyash.”

# CHAPTER 40

## LAN

The tree had rough bark, and as Lan ran his hand over it, he felt the ridges. Deep within it, he felt a sense of life, and he wasn't sure why that should be. A squirrel skittering across one of the branches high overhead chattered at him, as if annoyed by the disturbance. Maybe he shouldn't be bothering the squirrel. This was its place, after all, and Lan had only come here to get away and think.

The ground was soft and lush beneath his feet, reminding him of the rug that he had felt in the room where he had first awoken. The room was now his room, quarters granted to him while he stayed. There had been no demands made of him, nothing other than to eat and recover. Lan still didn't know what to make of it.

He turned away from the bark and looked down at the town spread out below him. Nana's stories had described Reyash as a powerful place. Lan had never paid as much attention to the stories as Sophie did, which made him wonder what it would be like. What he saw wasn't dark and frightening, not as the men of Neylash had tried to have him believe. This was just a town, no different from any other town, other than its location.

And the people had been kind to him. That remained the biggest surprise.

Eventually, there would be expectations put upon him. Lan was not so naive as to think there would not be. They wanted something from him, and whether it was to discover more about the training he had undergone or something else, he had



yet to discover. He anticipated they would share with him their expectations.

While standing there, he heard footsteps coming along the path. Kragen approached with a smile on his face, the same smile he wore most of the time. He was kind. Lan had no other way of describing him. As usual, he had a silvery cloak thrown over his shoulders, and it shimmered. It matched the cloak Lan now wore, clothing given to him by Kragen to help him stay comfortable while here.

“I thought you might be here,” Kragen said.

“Why?”

“There is a connection to the earth here. Can you feel it?”

Lan turned his attention back to the tree, pressing his hand on the bark. He couldn't deny that he felt something, though he didn't know what it was. Was it vibrancy and life? Maybe it was nothing more than Darish making his presence known. The ancient woodsman god had often left hints of his presence, even when Lan had been in Halith, working on Papa's farm.

“You do feel it, don't you?” Kragen asked.

“I feel the presence of Darish.”

Kragen nodded slowly. “Darish makes his presence known in many ways. Anything from the birds perched high above us to the wolves prowling the forest to the trees themselves. All of them are connected to Darish.”

This reminded Lan of the way Papa had spoken about Darish. Papa would have liked Kragen. “Is that what you want me to detect?”

“I don't want you to detect anything other than what you would feel naturally. It is not up to me to determine what you should find. If you have a connection to Darish, then you do. If you don't, then perhaps you have a connection to one of the other gods.”

“Why would I have a connection to any god?”

“Because you're here. Because you live.”

Lan wasn't sure he *should* live. Everything that had happened to him so far proved he wasn't strong enough. "I don't understand."

Kragen stepped out from the canopy, and sunlight shone on his face. He smiled up at the sky, practically radiating the warmth back out. "Can you feel this?"

"Not here."

Kragen glanced over at him and motioned for him to join him outside the canopy of trees. "Come here, where the warmth can find you. Beneath the trees, all you can know is the touch of Darish."

Lan let his hand linger on the trunk of the tree. It was a solid tree, but nothing like the trees that he had known in the forest of Halith. It left him wondering exactly where he had been carried. It also left him wondering how long he had been unconscious. Long enough to have been transported far away from Neylash. Far away from Sophie. How would he ever find her again? How would he ever reach Sophie to help her? Was there any way that he could help her now? Maybe not. Maybe they were on their own. After all that time wanting to be away from her, wanting nothing more than to have her stop annoying him, she was now gone, but this wasn't the way he had wanted to gain freedom from her. Losing Nana and Papa had made him more acutely aware of the need to have a connection to Sophie. And now there was none. It was only him, in a strange land, with a strange man, and uncertainty about what was being asked of him.

Lan looked up at the sky, mirroring Kragen. He basked in the warmth of the sun. Beneath the trees, the air was cooler, damp and shadowed, but outside the canopy, there was more warmth. The wind was calm, and the sky was clear.

"Can you feel that?" Kragen asked.

"I can feel the sunlight, if that's what you mean."

"You can feel the presence of Sanash. The god of the sky grants us many gifts and works with Darish to grant us heat and fire and life."

More talk of the gods. This wasn't what he had expected at all. When he looked back at Kragen, he frowned at the man. "Which god do you follow?"

"Does it matter which god I follow? Does it matter which god anyone follows? All that matters is that you know the power of the gods."

Lan considered Kragen for a long time. "Why did you bring me here? Why are you being kind to me? Why aren't you trying to attack Lorant?"

He might have gone too far with that last question, but that was the one that burned within him. Lan didn't have answers, and he didn't know why he was here or what they might ask of him. How would they use him? He'd been used so much and just wanted it to end. Lan didn't have any connections or any specific gifts. All he had was the ability to be beaten and survive.

"Those are questions you should have asked before," Kragen said.

"Before what?"

"Before you allowed yourself to be harmed."

"I don't understand."

"You know of the war." Kragen watched him, turning his face away from the sun, but the light still reflected off him, making his skin glow. "Yes, I can see from your expression that you do know of the war. Most do, though most who have some conception of the war have more of a peripheral understanding. Yours is more direct. Why is that?"

Lan met his gaze for a moment before turning away. "It's nothing."

"Nothing? I can see pain and anguish within your eyes."

"You can see nothing," Lan said.

Kragen touched his arm and rested his hand on it. He didn't move, leaving it there. Warmth pressed out from his touch, working through Lan's skin, as if flowing from Kragen, through the silvery cloak, and into Lan.

“I can see that you have suffered. It doesn’t take one of the gods for me to see that. It doesn’t take the warmth of Sarash or the wisdom of Darish or even the insight of Hesa for me to know. I can see it lining your brow. I can see it burning in your eyes. And I can see the way it pains your heart.”

Lan couldn’t look up. How could he when Kragen knew him in ways that he should not? “My parents were lost to the war.”

“Was this a recent loss?”

Lan shook his head. “It happened long ago. My sister and I were brought to our grandparents. They protected us. They raised us. They kept us safe, but they weren’t able to keep us entirely safe.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know. There was an attack in our village. We were told that it was Karell who had come looking for...”

Lan didn’t know what the Karell had come looking for. He didn’t know anything about them other than the fact that they had power, the kind that only existed in Nana’s stories, the kind that Sophie would have believed, but before experiencing it, Lan never would have. How could power like that be real? How could magic like that be real? Yet there was no denying it. He had felt the way their power had exploded from them. He had felt the way that they had attacked, and he had felt fear burning through him, the same way that Sophie must have.

“Karell? You saw members of the Karell?” Kragen took a step toward him, tension filling his shoulders.

“I think so,” Lan said. “I don’t know with certainty that they were the Karell, but that’s what we were told.”

“Tell me about what happened,” Kragen said. There was no force to his words, and there was nothing in the man’s tone that made it seem as if Lan had to share what he had experienced, but Lan decided that he wanted to.

He described what they had gone through, telling Kragen about the sound in the forest and the way that he had been

drawn to it, and proceeding to share what he had seen of the strange woman, as well as the men with her.

“That was possibly the Karell,” Kragen said.

“They were... terrifying.”

“They can be. The Karell are tasked with a specific purpose, and they go about it with a single-minded focus. It’s one few can understand.”

“You sound as if you know them.”

“I have spent some time around the Karell.”

Lan glanced over. His heart quickened, and he felt a bead of sweat form on his brow. “*You* have spent time with the Karell?”

“How else would I have gained the knowledge I need to perform the tasks I am asked to perform if I don’t have training?” Kragen asked.

“What kind of training?”

“The kind of training all within the Taihg go through.”

Lan’s heart skipped a moment before it fell back into its normal rhythm again.

Taihg. Lan had thought that Tohm had been part of the Taihg when he’d first met him. That had been a mistake. Then he’d seen how terrified Tohm had been of them.

Lan didn’t even know whether he should share that fear anymore.

Did Lan dare believe Kragen? Was it possible that he was a Taihg?

It was possible, but Kragen had shown nothing to make him think he had magical ability. Nothing other than his kindness and the warmth he radiated.

“You’re part of the Taihg?”

“I am but one member,” Kragen said.

Lan tried to think about the stories Nana had shared with him of the Taihg. They were always powerful, and they had

the ability to defeat any enemy, but there was magic to them. When he was growing up, Lan had never known whether to believe those stories. He'd never known whether Nana had been telling him the truth or whether there was nothing within the stories to believe. What were stories but a way of entertaining Sophie?

And yet so much in her stories was based on fact. He had seen evidence of that in his time in Neylash. Neylash had been described as a massive city, one where people were crammed together, lorded over by the king in the palace, and wasn't that exactly what he had seen? There were stories of the Pale Princess and stories of the Raven Queen, and Lan didn't know how much faith to put in those. Were they true?

Sophie liked to believe that they were, but she enjoyed the stories for other reasons. To Sophie, they had been a way of escaping the reality of the farm. It had chafed her almost as much as it had Lan. She would never admit it. They had always felt there should be more. At least, Lan had thought there should be more.

"Why did you bring me here?" He kept asking the same question, but he never felt that Kragen gave him a satisfactory answer. There had to be some reason for his presence here, something other than that he had been injured. "You mentioned something about me bearing the mark. What does that mean?"

Kragen took a deep breath in, as if drawing in all the scents of the forest. "You have the mark of one who can serve the Taihg."

If he had that mark, why was he such a terrible soldier? Why couldn't he use the sword in any way that would benefit him? Why could he only succeed in accepting beatings? Why was he only able to recover from defeat, rather than defeat those who attacked him?

"What mark is that?"

"It's a mark showing the touch that allows a person to receive the gods' gifts, to connect to them. That's why I

brought you here. I thought perhaps having a connection to Darish or to Sarash might help draw out that power.”

“I have no mark,” Lan said.

Kragen pulled Lan’s hand toward him and twisted his arm. On the underside of his wrist, there were three freckles. They were darker than many of his other freckles, though he had many, much like Nana claimed his mother had.

“These form the mark. These signify you have potential. It doesn’t mean you will be granted the connection to the gods. It only means that you have potential within you. Only the gods know whether you will be granted their touch. The fact you have survived tells me that you are connected already, though you may not know it.”

Lan ran his fingers over the freckles. Could they be a mark as Kragen said? He’d had them his whole life, but he didn’t remember them being quite as dark. Maybe they had grown as he had.

“These are freckles.”

“These are a mark of the gods. I have seen them often enough to recognize them. All within the Taihg have seen them often enough to recognize them, even if the Karell were not with them.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Karell have another way of searching for those who are touched by the gods.”

Lan thought back to his first interaction with the Karell, and the way the woman had carried that wand and pointed it at Sophie. Was there something to that? The crystal had glowed. Wasn’t that what he had seen?

And they had wanted her. Hadn’t they?

“They use a crystal, don’t they?”

Kragen nodded. “You *have* seen them. Good. That tells me even more that you are touched by the gods and that you have the potential to serve.”

“Serve what?”

“The Taihg.”

Lan stared at Kragen. His mouth went dry. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to serve the Taihg. Not anymore. There had been a time when such an offer might have excited him, but now it only scared him. After his experience in Neylash, after nearly dying repeatedly, he didn't know if staying a soldier was what he wanted.

Maybe it didn't matter. Maybe what he wanted wasn't what was important, but maybe what Darish asked of him was. Would Darish be the god he was connected to?

“How do you want me to serve the Taihg?”

“The way that you were called. That is the way it is with all who serve the Taihg.”

“And do what? Fight?”

“If that is what you are called to do, then that is the way that you will serve.”

“But I grew up in Halith. Those are my people.”

“Did you? Are they? You are marked by the gods, but your features and coloring tell me that you are not of Narith. Perhaps you were always meant to serve the Raven Queen.”

“Serve her?” he asked skeptically.

“That is the purpose of the Taihg. We serve the Raven Queen. She tasks us with our purpose, and those who are called to serve will do so without question.”

“I thought you said the gods will determine where I am called to serve.”

“And the gods speak to the Raven Queen.” Kragen stared at him with absolute conviction on his face. “I happily serve my queen, knowing she speaks to the gods, and they speak to her, telling her what we must do.”

Lan turned his attention back to the trees. He didn't feel any connection to the gods, though he did feel energy from the



forest, even if that might not be real. How could it be real when he had only prayed to Darish intermittently?

“I don’t know if I can serve the Raven Queen.”

“You will. In time, you will serve.”

“Or what?” Would they banish him? Would they return him to Neylash and force him to resume his training as a soldier? Or had he gone too far from that pathway, so there was no return for him?

Kragen smiled at him, and some of the warmth that he’d always had was gone. Now there was an edge to his smile. Could Lan’s refusal to serve the Raven Queen anger him? Could it change the man? Had his peaceful attitude been nothing more than an act? All of those were possibilities. Lan decided that he didn’t want to know, not with any certainty.

What he really wanted was to return to Halith, to the farm, maybe even have Sophie harassing him, as she so often had. All he wanted was that sense of calm and peace. As he looked around him, he doubted he would ever have that back again. How could he when so much had changed? How could he when Nana and Papa were gone, leaving him and Sophie alone in a world they were unprepared for?

# CHAPTER 41

## SOPHIE

The top of the tower was quiet today. Ridaln's chamber was filled with a somber air. Sophie turned the page of the book resting on the table in front of her, disturbing the silence. She looked over to see whether Ridaln was paying any attention to her, but he ignored her. As usual, he was dressed in drab robes. One hand twisted a bracelet on the opposite wrist as he paged through a book resting on the table in front of him.

"We aren't practicing any poses today?" Sophie asked. When she had come to the tower, Ridaln had placed the book in front of her and instructed her to sit and begin reading. Sophie wasn't sure whether there was anything in this book to learn from. It had been a struggle to get through the pages. The writing was dense, and the script was awkward, forcing her to slow down as she read. It was nothing like the stories she preferred to read. This was too dry.

"You need to understand intention before you perform any poses."

"Intention? What does that mean?"

"It means what I said."

"And why do I need to learn about intention?" she asked.

Ridaln sighed and looked up from his book. His eyes were drawn and somewhat sunken, as if he hadn't slept in days. There were faint rims of redness around the whites. Maybe he *hadn't* slept for days. Sophie rarely knew what Ridaln did when she wasn't with him. And she only came when he

instructed her to. If she came at other times, she ran the risk of angering him, and she had no intention of doing that.

“I saw what happened in the garden.”

Sophie’s breath caught. “You saw that? Did you see me holding the pose?”

“I saw the aftereffects. You must have been successful.”

She nodded. “I didn’t mean to destroy Petra’s garden. I know how much time he spends trying to get it exactly right, and I didn’t want to destroy the flowers, especially with how beautiful they are, but...”

“This was the first time that you managed to successfully hold a pose on your own?” Ridaln asked.

“I’ve held the poses during my practice.”

“You might have held the poses during your practice, but you’ve never had power surge through you before.”

Sophie shook her head. “The only time that I have felt the surge of power was when you helped me maintain the pose.”

“It is good that you’re progressing,” Ridaln said, though his tone implied he wasn’t pleased. Why wouldn’t he be pleased? Didn’t he want Sophie to work on the poses and master her connection to magic? Wasn’t that the whole purpose of teaching her? “And now that you have demonstrated success, it’s time you learned about intention.”

“And what is intention?”

“Intention is your way of forcing the magic to do what you want rather than what it wants. The pose is your way of concentrating energy and of pulling it through yourself, but once it is concentrated, you need to dispel it in an intentional way. Otherwise, the magic will take hold and act on its own.”

“Why would the magic want to destroy the garden?”

“The magic didn’t want to destroy the garden. The magic wanted to be released.”

“You make it sound as if the magic were alive in some way.”

“Oh, it is alive. The longer you work with it, the more you’ll understand that it is something living, which is why you need to learn about having intention when you concentrate it.”

“If that’s the case, then why didn’t you have me learn about intention before you taught me the poses?” Had Ridaln known she might blow up the garden? If he had, why would he have allowed her to do that? Why draw attention to the fact that she was practicing her poses?

Unless he hadn’t expected her to be out in the garden. Maybe she was only supposed to be practicing in her room. It was possible that Ridaln had placed some sort of protection around her room that would prevent her from destroying it when she used her magic.

“Because I didn’t expect you to be successful this soon.”

“You didn’t?”

“It takes much longer for most to even manage to hold the poses, let alone draw power through themselves. My last... well, let’s say that it took longer than this. I don’t know why you should be successful so quickly.”

“But you thought I had potential for this. That shouldn’t surprise you, then.”

“You have potential. There are many who have potential.”

“And yet you said everyone you brought here has failed when you’ve tried to get them to connect to magic.”

“Not everyone,” he said softly.

She wanted Ridaln to talk about this student he’d lost, but he never did. “Does Petra know that I destroyed the garden?” She had been afraid to return to the garden, not wanting to have to answer questions about what had happened, and not wanting to explain to Petra how she was responsible for destroying all his hard work. She didn’t want to anger him. Petra was her friend—at least, as much as anyone could be her friend.

“The garden is repaired, to the extent I could repair it.”

“You were able to use magic to restore those flowers?”

Ridaln nodded.

“Is that something that I can do?”

“When you master intention.” Ridaln pointed to the book.

Sophie turned her attention back to the book and scanned the pages. If this was how she was going to learn how to master intention, she would read through it, search for answers, and see if there was anything about using magic in a way that was not destructive.

Knowing that the book contained that information made it only slightly easier to read through. It was difficult to spend much time focusing, especially as the writing was so strange. It was nothing like reading one of Nana’s books or reading the books that Ridaln had in his library.

“Isn’t there something you can just tell me about intention?”

Ridaln glanced up. “Some things you must learn on your own. Magic can be taught to an extent, but there comes a time when you must grow, and you must push yourself, so you do not need someone like me to teach you.”

“Is that how you learned?”

Ridaln shook his head. “I have already told you I had a mentor. He was a sorcerer of great power, enough that he convinced the king we could resist the Raven Queen’s advances. He was very nearly wrong, and he paid for that mistake with his life.”

“Who was your teacher?”

Ridaln watched her, as if debating whether to answer, before pointing once more to the book. “Focus on the task at hand. If you were successful in holding a pose on your own, then I know that you can be successful in maintaining your focus.”

“Holding a pose is different,” Sophie said.

“And why is that?”

“Because there’s the possibility that something else will come from it.”

Ridaln chuckled. “You think that nothing can come from spending time reading a book and trying to understand the wisdom of those who preceded you in magic?”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s that it’s... so hard.” Sophie turned the book and pointed to the writing. “Look at the way they made these letters. That’s not how you write, Ridaln. It’s so strange, and it looks as if it was done by—”

“A sorcerer. The writing that you see has been done by a sorcerer. It’s strange because it is written in a way that reveals his power. Were you to master your own magic, eventually you would begin to write in a way that demonstrates your power.”

“What does that even mean?”

Ridaln sighed and closed his book. He shifted his chair to sit directly across from her.

“When a sorcerer begins to master their connection to magic, it influences everything about them. It influences the way they speak, the way they walk, and even the way they write. Everything becomes a pose, if you will.”

“Is that why you don’t need to hold the poses?”

“It’s part of it. Everything I do concentrates magic.”

Sophie stared at him, trying to understand. “So in time, everything I do will begin to concentrate magic?”

“First you have to learn your poses. And then, when you do, you can begin to incorporate those into your daily routine. From there, you can modify them, and you can begin to do what works for you.”

“And what works for you?”

Ridaln smiled. “Those are secrets that a sorcerer never shares.”

“Why is that?”

“If you knew the way that I concentrate power, you would learn how to counter it.”

“But you’re teaching me these poses.”

“And these poses will be useful for now. Eventually, you will no longer find them quite as useful. Eventually, you will begin to use your own poses. They are a way for you to experience the power, to know the way it feels when you draw it through yourself, but there will come a time when you will no longer need to hold those poses, and a time will come when your power can be summoned by even the smallest movement.”

“Such as you dabbing your fingers together when you poked your thumb on that spike?”

Ridaln considered her for a long moment, and then he breathed out in a heavy sigh. “Such as that.”

“What did that do?”

He hesitated, as if debating whether to answer. When he did, he tapped his fingers together, re-creating the movement that she had seen before. “It was a scrying pose. I was using it to see if I could discern what had happened to your brother. I thought perhaps I might be able to determine where he was.”

“And it didn’t work?”

Ridaln shook his head. “Since coming to the city, since your arrival in Neylash, my scrying has been ineffective in discovering where your brother has gone.”

“Why?”

“Magic is not all-powerful,” Ridaln said. “It can do many things, and the more you become connected to it, and the more you are able to use it in your daily activities, the more you will become dependent upon it, but it cannot do everything. I can’t see everything with my scrying. It is not one of my strengths. There are others who are more powerful.”

“Like the Raven Queen?”

“Let’s hope not.”

“Why is that?”

“If the Raven Queen is able to scry what is happening in Neylash, then we run the risk of her already knowing my plan. We run the risk of her already knowing the Pale Princess is no real threat to her. We run the risk of her sending the Taihg and the Karell into the kingdom, and attempting to destroy us.”

“What if she already knows that the Pale Princess is really gone?”

“She would have already attacked if that were the case.”

“What if she is trying to understand before she attacks?” Sophie started thinking about one of the stories that Nana had told her. In it, the Raven Queen was a calculating woman, using her cunning to ensure she didn’t attack ineffectively. In that story, the Raven Queen was able to recognize outside threats and prepare for them. Then again, in some of Nana’s stories, the Raven Queen wasn’t a terrifying ruler. She was often depicted as powerful but kind.

What had the red-haired woman told her?

She had said something about how her nana must have served the Raven Queen, because of the nature of the stories she told. That couldn’t be true. They had been in Halith for nearly her entire life, long enough that she would have known whether Nana was somehow involved with the Raven Queen.

“There are certain protections that I have placed around the kingdom to alert me,” Ridaln said. “We will know when she makes her move.”

“And what if those protections fail?”

“Do you think I am so weak that my protections would fail?”

Sophie shook her head. “It’s not that you’re so weak, but everything you’ve told me about the Raven Queen tells me that she’s incredibly powerful. I just wanted to know—”

“Do not fear, Sophie Varison. You will have time to prepare for what will be asked of you.”



“And what is that? How am I supposed to help Nessa be the Pale Princess when I can barely even use magic?”

“You will learn enough. If I ever needed convincing of that, your display out in the garden did the job. And when others hear the rumors...”

“What rumors?”

“Those of the Pale Princess restoring the garden at the palace.”

“But *you* did that!”

“What matters is the rumors. The deterrence. If we can continue to deter the Raven Queen, we’ll have enough time to prepare. That is what is necessary. I have no intention of allowing her to attack. I will do everything I can to prevent her from reaching the kingdom.”

Even as he spoke, Sophie sensed discomfort in Ridaln. He feared the Raven Queen, but then again, so did Sophie. She feared the Raven Queen only because she didn’t know anything about her, other than her desire to destroy Lorant.

If Sophie had never had any access to magic, she would have chosen to stay as far away from the Raven Queen as possible. Now that she did have a connection, now that she had proven not only to herself but to Ridaln that she wasn’t helpless when it came to magic, she was involved, regardless of whether she wanted to be.

“So using your own poses to focus magic all the time is walking?” Sophie asked.

Ridaln nodded. “That is the next step in the development of a sorcerer.”

“And what about the step beyond that?”

“You aren’t ready to understand it.”

“But that’s what you’re trying to do, isn’t it? You said that you can walk, while the Raven Queen can run.”

Ridaln nodded. “That is what I said. And that is the truth. I can walk compared to the Raven Queen. What I do is nothing

like what she is capable of. Not yet.”

“Then what is she capable of?”

Ridaln pointed to the book. “Get back to reading. Learn about intention. Focus on the next step in your development.”

Sophie studied Ridaln for a moment before turning her gaze away from him, looking down at the book. That response worried her. Not so much Ridaln comparing himself to the Raven Queen, or claiming he walked when she ran, but the idea that Ridaln didn’t know what the Raven Queen did. He didn’t know what he would need to defeat her. And if Ridaln didn’t know, how was he ever to stop her?

Sophie thought she had the answer to that.

*He wouldn’t.*

That was the simple fact of the matter. As much as Ridaln wanted to take on the Raven Queen, and as much as he intended to coordinate and concentrate power in the kingdom, he didn’t know what the Raven Queen could do, not even enough to know how to stop her. If she was *that* much more powerful than him—and after all these years, he remained afraid to confront her—then how was he ever going to defeat her?

Memories of what both Oleda and the red-haired woman had said came to the forefront of Sophie’s mind. Both had given her warnings, and both had told her Ridaln was dangerous, and his plan was dangerous, and what he intended for Sophie would be dangerous for her as well.

Could she master enough of her magic to make a difference?

Maybe she didn’t want to. Why would she care?

That was a better question. Not only was she being asked to serve Ridaln in his challenge to the Raven Queen, but she was being asked to serve the kingdom when Sophie didn’t know whether there was any purpose to her serving. She just wanted to find Lan.

But that wasn’t all she wanted.

Now that she had begun to understand magic, she wanted something more than to find her brother. She wanted to continue to reach her magic.

Ridaln could teach her, but he had admitted the limits to what he could teach her.

It required her to practice. And it might require her to continue to read. She would have to find some way to force herself through something as dry as this book. To understand magic and to understand her connection to it, she would do it. She wanted to know how she could walk like Ridaln and, if possible, how the Raven Queen ran.

Sophie turned her attention back to the book, poring over the page. She forced herself to struggle through each word, trying to find some way to understand and learn from this book. If this was what Ridaln wanted her to understand about intention, she would read through it, and she would master it. Then she would be ready for the next step, whenever it came. She would be ready to walk when she had finally learned enough.

# CHAPTER 42

## SOPHIE

The streets outside the palace were quiet. It was early evening, a time of day when Sophie had anticipated there would be more people out, but the streets were silent. The stench that she had noticed the last time was still present. Thankfully, the palace was protected from the foulness of the rest of the city. How much of that protection was from the garden?

She wandered along the streets, searching for signs of soldiers. She would be more careful this time. She knew that she probably should not have returned, especially after what had happened the last time, but she wanted to find Jalyn. If nothing else, she wanted to see what the red-haired woman knew, if there was any information to help Sophie understand how she might fit into whatever was happening.

Then again, she worried about finding the hostile soldiers. If she encountered them, would they attack her again? And if they did, what would she do?

Run. That was what she would do.

She could attempt to use her magic, but she didn't know enough about how long it took for the pose to be effective, and even if it were effective and she could summon magic and concentrate it, there was the matter of intention and releasing that magic in a way that would be effective. So far, her attempt to understand intention by reading through Ridaln's book had been only partially successful. She had discovered that it required her to hold her mind focused, but how could she

focus her mind on an intention when she was trying to focus on the pose at the same time?

She hadn't discovered that answer yet.

Eventually, she would need to be able to hold the poses her way, to use them when she was doing everything else. How was it that Ridaln managed to create his own poses while walking or talking?

Around a corner, a vendor stood outside his shop, the first person she'd seen outside a storefront since she had left the palace. Now that she had seen this man, she realized how odd it was that there hadn't been more shopkeepers outside.

*What has happened?*

The storekeeper glanced at her and started to look away, but then he turned his attention back to her. "Ah. A palace girl. I'm surprised to see anyone out with the delegation visiting."

That didn't explain why the streets were empty.

"I'm just out looking."

He offered a slimy smile. "I have many things that might interest a palace girl."

"What kinds of things?" Sophie asked.

"A girl like you, I suspect you'd be interested in lace, or perhaps some of my fine ceramics."

"Why would I need lace or ceramics?"

The man's smile widened. He was missing one of his teeth, and he had oiled his eyebrows, slicking them down. A single hair protruded outward, and Sophie couldn't take her eyes off it. "Because they are pretty, much like a palace girl."

Sophie resisted the urge to turn away. If nothing else, she might be able to discover why the city was strangely quiet today. "Well, I don't like pretty things," she said.

The shopkeeper smirked. "You don't like pretty things? How is it that a pretty girl doesn't like pretty things?"

"Because this girl doesn't feel like a pretty girl," she said.

“Well, I can assure you that you are a pretty girl.”

The shopkeeper had to be twenty years older than her, and there was something slimy about him—though, if she were honest, there was something slimy about many shopkeepers. “What other things do you have for sale in your shop?”

“I have many items for sale. If you’re not interested in pretty items, I’m sure I can find some ugly items as well.”

“What would you consider ugly?”

The shopkeeper shrugged. He smoothed his eyebrows but still missed that single protruding hair. “There are simpler items, such as knives and swords, nothing a young lady such as you should concern herself with. I have less exciting items, such as books and sheets, but again, they aren’t anything that a lady like you would be concerned with.”

“Books?”

The shopkeeper studied her before a frown spread over his face. “A young girl like yourself shouldn’t be bothered with books. They are for scholars and those who can aspire to other activities. You will never need to worry yourself with knowledge.”

She glared at him. It would almost be worth it to attempt a pose and see if she could discharge her magic at him. Maybe she could destroy his shop—and his pompous attitude at the same time. “You’d be surprised what a pretty girl might be interested in.”

“Well, if it is books that you are interested in, then I have many for you to peruse.”

She glanced along the street and saw no one else. There was some danger in her going into a shop alone, especially with a man like this, who made her feel dirty simply standing next to him. Then again, she was curious as to whether he had any stories—or maybe he had something to help her understand magic.

She followed him into the shop and held her nose partially closed as she smelled the inside. It was dusty, and though there wasn’t a foul odor, as there was outside on the street, there was

a mustiness that made her wonder whether he'd ever aired out his shop.

He had lace and ceramics, as promised. She looked past them, ignoring the fact that they did appear to be high quality, and followed him as he made his way toward the back of the shop. Her heart began to flutter a little faster, wondering if he might attempt something with her. She didn't have the size of her brother. At least Lan was intimidating. All she had was her feistiness, and that had gotten her into trouble more than anything else.

"Where are your books?" Sophie asked, stopping in the middle of the shop. Near her was a row of shelves, and on them were knives made of bronze and steel. Most of them were functional, but there were a couple with decorative hilts that made them seem less than functional.

She grabbed one of the knives, pretending to be interested in the blade, twisting it slowly in her hand. If nothing else, it would provide a defense were she to need it.

The shopkeeper glanced from the blade to her face, and his smarmy smile returned. "The books are in the back of the shop. I'm afraid I don't have much interest in them. I keep them simply because they are difficult to get rid of. There aren't too many who are interested in books. Most who are go to the larger shops near the edge of the city."

There was a hint of a sneer that told Sophie how he felt about those shops.

"Well, I'm not at the edge of the city," Sophie said.

The shopkeeper glanced at the knife again and motioned for her to follow. She trailed him toward the back of the shop and behind a curtain. There she saw a row of books. From the spines and leather covers, she concluded that most were old. They were heavily bound, and mustiness radiated from them. Sophie ran her hand along the books, touching each spine before moving on. She couldn't tell what was in any of them, not without looking, and she doubted that the shopkeeper would have much patience with her examining his collection. "Do any of these have stories in them?"

“Stories?” he asked, arching a brow.

“You know, tales from other lands.”

“I’m afraid these aren’t nearly as exciting as that. Most of these are histories. Some are written in other languages, and some are written with strange scripts that take hours to even attempt to read.”

Sophie looked up at him. “Where are those?”

The shopkeeper studied her for a moment before motioning to a few books on the bottom shelf.

Sophie pulled them off the shelf and thumbed through them. They reminded her of the book that Ridaln had her studying, with the oddly angular script that made it difficult to read. Could these be a sorcerer’s journals? Could these be like Ridaln’s book? If they were, maybe she could learn something from them.

She didn’t have time to read through them. And she didn’t want to stay in the shopkeeper’s store any longer than was necessary. All she wanted was to get out and get away from him before he attempted anything with her.

“How much for the books and the knife?”

“I thought you said you didn’t like pretty things,” he said, glancing at the hilt of the blade.

Sophie looked down. She couldn’t help but agree with him. It was quite a lovely knife. The hilt was made of ivory, and it was polished smooth. Black lines marked the ivory, and she ran her finger along them. There were slight depressions where the black lines were, almost as if they were veins in whatever tusk the knife had been carved out of. The blade itself was unremarkable, possibly steel, though it could be another metal. She ran the edge of the blade along her dress, and it made a small slit.

“Maybe this girl does like some pretty things,” she said.

The shopkeeper considered her for a long moment. “For a palace girl, I would need ten silvers for all of them.”



Sophie's eyes widened. She didn't have much money, only what she had taken from Nana and Papa when she had come from Halith. Certainly, she didn't have ten silvers. "How much for only the books?"

"For the books, since you seem so intrigued by them, I will part with them for five silvers."

"You said you couldn't sell them."

"Perhaps I can. Maybe they are more valuable than I realized, especially with your immediate interest in them."

Sophie thought about simply returning to the palace and asking Ridaln for some money, but then she would have to tell him what she wanted the money for. And that would open her to questions. Besides, she liked the idea of having books about magic that Ridaln didn't have. Maybe she could learn something and surprise him. Then again, she wasn't certain these books even were about magic. Maybe they were nothing more than histories, as the shopkeeper had claimed. Maybe there was nothing exotic about them. Either way, they weren't worth five silvers.

"I don't have five silvers, let alone ten."

"Then perhaps there is something you could barter with," the shopkeeper said.

The way he said this made Sophie clench her jaw, and a surge of irritation washed through her. Was he leering at her? She had seen men doing that to older girls but had never expected to see a man doing that to her. She was only fourteen, and far too young to even wed, let alone bed.

"I have nothing that you would be interested in."

"Ah, I suspect that you're wrong. I didn't become the store owner I am without finding value in surprising places."

"And what do you think I have that is valuable?" She waited for him to comment on her looks again, but he surprised her by pointing to her neck.

"That necklace. It has the look of value to it."

Sophie touched her neck. She had forgotten that she was wearing the chain carrying Nana's ring. She'd forgotten she had it on. "This?"

The man nodded. "It appears to be finely made. Perhaps I would be willing to part with the books in exchange for that."

Sophie glanced down at the necklace. It was silver, but she doubted that it was worth even a single silver, let alone five. Why would he be interested in her necklace? The necklace itself had no sentimental value to her. It was the ring that she cared about. It had been Nana's, and before that, she didn't know. All she knew was that Nana had kept it with her at all times, and because of that, Sophie had claimed it when Nana had passed.

"This is a family heirloom." She ran her finger along the necklace. "It would be worth more than five silvers."

The shopkeeper studied her, and a smile crept across his face. "Is that right? How much would a girl think such an item is worth?"

"It would be worth my choice of books... and this knife."

"And what makes you think that I would make such a bargain?"

"You told me the books were worthless, at least to you. Let someone who cares about them take a few off your hands."

"No more than five," the shopkeeper said.

"Then it's a deal?"

The shopkeeper eyed her necklace for a moment and then flicked his gaze to the books and finally down to the knife. "It is a deal."

Sophie slipped off the necklace, careful to keep the ring in the palm of her hand, and handed the chain over to the shopkeeper.

He ran his fingers along the necklace and smiled. "You don't even know what this is, do you?"

“I know that it’s a necklace. I know that it’s a family heirloom.”

What harm did it do to maintain the lie?

The shopkeeper glanced up, and he shook his head. “I doubt this is an heirloom—at least, not for any family of Neylash. We rarely see such work, especially in the city, and especially since the war began.”

“War? Why would that have anything to do with the necklace?”

The shopkeeper grinned again. “See? As I said, you don’t even know what you had.”

“Then tell me. I’m not going to back out of the bargain. You have the necklace. I will have my choice of books and this knife.” She held the knife up, making a point to be as menacing as she could with it.

“The necklace comes from Reyash. As I said, the quality is quite rare.” He looked up and grinned at her. “And unfortunately for you, it is worth far more than ten silvers.”

Sophie glanced at the necklace. How would her nana have had such a necklace?

Maybe she had bought it in Halith. They were near the border, close enough that it was possible some trade would have gone through in the years preceding the war, but she remembered Nana saying she’d had it for years, and that it was worthless, nothing more than a way to hold the ring. If it was so valuable, why wouldn’t Nana have known that?

Had she made a mistake?

Even if she had, wasn’t it worth it? Owning books—and maybe even the knife—allowed her the chance to see if there was anything she could learn on her own. And the necklace itself wasn’t what was valuable to her, even if it was worth more than ten silvers. What was valuable to her was the ring. That was what mattered to her, especially as it had been Nana’s ring.

“Well, even if the necklace is worth more than ten silvers, so are these books. At least to me.” She pocketed the three books that she had in her hand and started looking along the shelf for the other two that she would take.

As she did, she kept the shopkeeper in view out of the corner of her eye, not wanting him to approach her and surprise her. He ignored her and kept his focus on the necklace, as if he was planning how to trade it already.

Sophie found two more books and slipped those into her pocket, along with the other three. The shopkeeper might be plotting how to trade the necklace, but Sophie was planning to sit in her room, read the books, and see if anything in them revealed secrets of magic that Ridaln didn't have.

She started away from the shop, and the shopkeeper called out from the back of the room. “If you decide that you would like any other books, you know where to find me.”

“And you would have me believe that other books you have are as useful?”

“If it's books with strange writing that you're after, I can always find you more.”

“If you find them, then perhaps I will return.”

Sophie left the store, but it was unlikely she would return. Even if he did find more books, what did she have left to trade? She had no money, and she had no way of earning additional money. Serving Ridaln did not pay, and she could only imagine his reaction were she to ask for compensation.

No. She would have to be satisfied with the books that she had managed to acquire. Hopefully, they were worth the trade.

# CHAPTER 43

## LAN

The sword was awkward in his hand as Lan swung it, trying to remember what Tohm had taught him about technique. The only thing he could recall was not to get poked by the sword. It was good advice, but not necessarily anything he could act on.

“Keep your arms up,” the broad-shouldered man said to him. The sword master was one that Kragen had arranged for him, and Magnus wielded a sword nearly as long as Lan was tall. So long that Lan had no hope of penetrating the man’s defense, even if he’d had the skill. Lan’s own sword was long, but that only seemed to make wielding it more difficult.

Every time he tried, he thought of Tohm and the way he had trained with him, a way that was so different from this. *Survive. Then eat.* Only he didn’t have to survive. Magnus wasn’t going to harm him.

“I’m trying, but the sword—”

“The sword is the sword. You must carry a sword befitting your capabilities.”

Lan struggled to control the blade. It was much longer than the one he had trained with while working with Tohm. This sword was long and slender, and it flexed as he spun, but it whistled when the movements were correct. From what Magnus had said, such a sword was necessary for training. The whistling helped Lan learn whether his technique was correct. Magnus claimed Lan would eventually progress to the point where he wouldn’t need the training sword, and he

would be granted a standard sword. Only then would training begin in full.

“I know the sword is the sword. I’m just saying that the sword is heavy,” Lan said. That really wasn’t even the issue. It was more the size and balance than the weight. It was awkward.

Magnus smiled. “If it were easy, anyone would be able to wield it.”

Lan took a step back, considering Magnus. He was a massive man with a wide face and muscles that bulged beneath his jacket. He left the jacket unbuttoned, revealing his enormous chest. Lan feared how badly he would be harmed if he connected with one of his blows, yet Magnus had complete control over where his sword went, and each attack was perfectly placed, making it clear Magnus viewed him as no real threat.

Lan spun the sword, trying to mimic the technique that Magnus had demonstrated. This wasn’t the right way to fight. It couldn’t be. He’d been trained by Tohm to fight in a more brutal manner, nothing like this.

Every time he tried mimicking Magnus, he felt foolish. The style was so different from what he knew. Did that even matter? Did he come across as a fool? Lan didn’t know whether he did, but the whistling that came from the blade told him the movement must have been at least somewhat correct. He let out a whoop of excitement, but it ended the moment Magnus brought his own sword around, pushing Lan back.

“You must maintain your focus. If you are confronted with an opponent who wants to destroy you, you must be prepared to do anything to stop them.”

If nothing else, his time in Neylash had taught Lan that survival was of the utmost importance. *Survive, and then eat.* Those words continued to echo in his mind. So far, he had managed to survive, and while he had been with Kragen and the others of the Taihg, there had been no refusal of food. He was better fed than he had been in months, with a full belly

allowing him to fight with more strength and stamina than he had ever had in Neylash.

But while training in Neylash, he had used his grappling skills, jumping on Tohm or Jarson or any of his other attackers, trying to use the techniques that Papa had demonstrated. Against a man like Magnus, they would be useless. Magnus outweighed him, so Lan doubted he would even be able to push him back, let alone get them on the ground, where he could have a chance of grappling with him.

That left the sword. Magnus impressed him with his skill. Each movement was controlled and compact, nothing like the enormous man himself. This was how Lan would love to fight.

Magnus nodded to him and motioned to his sword. Lan lowered it as he had been taught. Magnus approached and wrapped his massive hands around Lan's and showed him how to maneuver the blade. The sweeping strokes were much broader than anything that Lan had been doing, and his arms shook from the effort. He didn't think he could be strong enough to fight, not with this sword, and not in the way Magnus wanted.

"Let's try it again," Magnus said.

Lan hesitated, still thinking of the way Tohm had trained him. He couldn't withstand that again. He had hurt others in order to survive. Would he be asked to do that here? The Taihg were responsible for what had happened to his grandparents, so did he even want to do what they asked? He'd found that difficult to move past and didn't know if he could.

"I'm not as strong as you."

"Yet all men can develop strength. You must practice."

"I don't think I can get as strong as you even if I practiced," Lan said. There was nothing about Magnus he could copy. Magnus was impressive in more ways than just size. He was almost as gentle as Kragen, though had Lan faced Magnus in the pits, he wouldn't have survived. Lan never would have eaten.

“All men can become strong. Even women can become strong,” Magnus said.

Lan thought his sister would have appreciated that comment. She was already strong. She had refused to back down from Lan when they had tussled. Most of the time, Lan had gotten the better of her, but a few times, Sophie had won. At the time, Lan had been frustrated by her victories, but the longer he was away from his sister, the less they troubled him.

“Do you have women as part of the Taihg?” Lan asked.

“Both men and women form the Taihg.”

“Women aren’t called to serve the Karell?”

“The Karell call their own members,” Magnus said. “Some who have served the Taihg are invited to serve the Karell.”

“How are they different?”

“The Karell have a different task.”

“What is that task?”

“To find the heir.”

Lan frowned, and Magnus didn’t give him a chance to question him, swinging his sword in a sweeping arc that nearly took his head off. Had Lan not hoisted his sword up and deflected the blow, would Magnus have stopped his sword?

He copied the movement Magnus had made. As he brought his sword around, sweeping it in a broader stroke than he had before, he tried to recall what Magnus had demonstrated. When he did, he got an approving grunt from the enormous man.

“Good. You have learned.”

“Learned what? All I’ve done is bring the sword around, but doesn’t that open me up for attack?”

“You believe these movements would open you up to a shorter sword?” Magnus asked.

Lan nodded. He despaired as he considered the quick, dangerous movements Tohm had demonstrated to get past any



defense. These large, sweeping movements were nothing like those Tohm had demonstrated, and it seemed as if anyone with speed would be able to penetrate his defense and harm him while he was trying to fight with these sweeping movements. Fighting like this wouldn't allow him to survive.

“Would you like to try a shorter sword?” Magnus asked.

“I didn't think you had shorter swords.”

“There are shorter swords, but they are for training, a way of demonstrating an opponent, not of demonstrating appropriate technique.”

Magnus headed to a small building and disappeared inside. When he reappeared, the sword he carried was tiny compared to the enormity of the man. Magnus handed the sword to Lan and smiled.

“See if you can penetrate my defenses with this blade.”

Lan set the practice sword down and tested the weight of the shorter sword. It was more familiar to him, closer to the blade Tohm had trained him with. Still a bit longer, but close enough he could use the techniques he'd learned.

With a nod, Magnus stepped forward, sweeping through his movements, but he did so slowly, with less intensity than he had before.

*What is this about? Is he trying to make a point?*

Lan attempted to dart forward, but Magnus swung his sword back around, and Lan was forced to drop and roll out of the way of the enormous blade. He attempted to slide in again but was met with the same attack, which deflected him and forced him back and away.

Surely, he should be able to dart in past that slow defense. Jarson could have done it. Lan had survived by being stronger, but he wasn't stronger here. Maybe he could be quicker.

He waited for the right moment and dove in, attempting to pierce Magnus's flank.

The larger man brought the sword around, and it slapped Lan on the side, sending him flying backward. Lan hadn't

even gotten close to Magnus.

Magnus stood, the tip of his blade resting on the ground. “Do you see?”

“I see that I couldn’t get to you.”

“The sweeping motions are designed to take advantage of the length of the blade. When you move in such a way, it prevents an attacker from getting close. And I was moving slowly so that you could try. In a real fight, my movements would have been much quicker.”

“How much quicker?”

Magnus arched a brow at him. It was quite the expression on the normally impassive man. Magnus lifted his blade and stepped back, then began demonstrating a series of movements.

Lan marveled at the speed. Because of his size, Magnus should have been slow, but as he flowed from movement to movement, he was anything but. He moved fluidly, and Lan couldn’t imagine how anyone could get past that blade to get close to Magnus. It would require someone with a longer blade to get to him.

He suddenly understood why the Taihg were viewed as such deadly soldiers. Even without magic, they were formidable. With their rumored magical abilities, no wonder Tohm had feared them.

Magnus finished his demonstration and rested the tip of his sword on the ground once more. “As I said, when you grow more skilled, you will be able to prevent anyone from piercing your defense.” He glanced down at the longer practice sword and then looked up at Lan. “Are you ready to resume?”

Lan set the shorter sword aside and picked up the slender practice sword. He tested it, listening to the whistle as it streaked through the air. What was the point of working with a blade so easily countered by the longer sword?

“Are all swordsmen of the Taihg like you?”

“Not all. Some are better.”

From anyone else, that would have seemed like a boast, but not from Magnus. The man was simply who he was.

*This* was what Lan wanted to become, the kind of swordsman he wanted to be, not like Tohm. His heart pounded with a thrill. Would he be able to learn?

“How can I develop your level of skill?”

“Practice,” Magnus said. “Every day, hours of practice. That is what it takes to become skilled.”

“When will I have a chance to learn about magic?” It felt strange to even ask, but if he was training with the Taihg, there had to be a promise of magic.

Magnus considered him. “Kragen tells me you have the mark of the gods. Such a mark means that you should have the capacity to reach for more power, but it will take time. And in that, you will need to practice no differently than with the sword.”

“What about you? Are you touched by the gods?”

“In my own way.”

Lan wondered if his question had been inappropriate. Had he offended Magnus by asking him whether he was connected to the gods? He didn't know what was appropriate for the Taihg. Maybe they were touchy about such things, though from what he had seen of Kragen, he didn't think they were.

“And what way is that?”

Magnus smiled. “You have to find your own connection. You can't borrow mine.”

“That's not why I was asking,” he said quickly.

“That *is* why you were asking. You want to know how I managed to connect to the gods. I managed to connect through time and patience and understanding of what was asked of me, as will you.”

“And what if I don't understand? What if I am asked to do something that I can't do?”

“How would the gods ask something of you that you are not able to do?”

“What if they asked me to do something to my sister?”

Magnus nodded slowly. “That is a reasonable concern. The gods should not ask you to act against your family, but if your sister fights against the Raven Queen, it is possible that you will be asked to intervene.”

That thought had kept him awake some nights. It was one thing to be here, working with Kragen and Magnus and the others, and quite another to think about the consequences of his presence here. If he was supposed to help the Taihg, if they were going to help him understand how to connect to magic, then eventually they would ask him to act against Sophie.

How could he?

He had no ties to the Raven Queen, other than being brought here and treated kindly. Was that kindness enough? Was it even real, or a trick?

He hated that he questioned his situation in this way. It would have been easier if he had never trained with Graychen and Tohm. Then maybe he would have felt a connection to the Taihg. But life hadn't happened that way. Maybe it never would be easy for him.

Magnus watched him as if understanding the thoughts working through his head. He said nothing, which didn't surprise Lan, but he wished the man would. He wished for answers, but the Taihg didn't operate that way. They expected him to find his own way. Wouldn't it be worth it to be able to fight like Magnus? *That* was something worth training for.

*But do I want to be like the Taihg?*

“Now, it is time for us to resume your practice. If you intend to become any sort of swordsman, you need more time.”

# CHAPTER 44

## LAN

Excitement built in the town. Lan wasn't certain what the cause was, but it built slowly. It reminded him of the energy he had felt when he had been in the forest, with his hand on the tree, thinking of Darish, but he was in the middle of the town, standing alone in the practice yard, swinging the flexible practice sword through the movements Magnus had been teaching him. He looked around for a few moments before turning his attention back to his training.

The sword whistled through the air. He might finally succeed in making the movements in the way Magnus had shown him. In the weeks he had been working with the man, his skill had changed. Each sweeping stroke no longer felt awkward. As Magnus had promised, practicing had made him stronger. Lan had always been strong—his size had given him that advantage—but this was a different type of strength.

It also came from eating on a regular basis. No longer did he wonder when his next meal would come. No longer did he wonder when the next attack might come. There was no survive-and-then-eat dictum. There were no expectations on him other than that he attempt to improve.

It was a strange feeling. He had grown complacent, accepted that he was here and that the Taihg did not seem interested in harming him. They didn't seem interested in having him return to Neylash. A part of Lan had worried they would ask him to return to Neylash, but nothing had been said. The longer he was here, the less he wanted to leave.

Yet he continued to think of his sister.

Thoughts of Sophie disrupted his movement, and he heard a grunt behind him and turned.

“You grow distracted,” Magnus said.

“How long have you been watching?”

“Long enough to know that you have begun to feel the flow of each movement.”

“The flow is not easy for me. I think my arms are getting more accustomed to holding this blade, but I don’t know how they’ll manage when I try something other than a practice blade.”

“They are not that different. The practice blade flexes so you can hear when your form is incorrect, but the weight is similar.”

Lan glanced to Magnus’s sword, arching a brow.

Magnus looked down. “Perhaps not my sword, but most do not carry one this size.”

“Are you from Reyash?” Magnus didn’t look anything like Kragen, and while Lan had been here, he had observed that Magnus didn’t look like many of the people in the town.

“I am not from Reyash, but that does not mean I don’t serve the Raven Queen.”

“Why?”

“She freed my people. I owe her that debt.”

“And who are your people?”

Magnus tilted his head, as if hearing something that Lan could not. “We come from a place far to the north. It is difficult to reach, and we had been left alone for centuries.”

“Until the Raven Queen came?”

“Not the Raven Queen. Another came. With it came a great darkness. The Raven Queen rescued us from the Shavln. I have served her since.”

“How did she rescue you?”

“It does not matter. I serve her. That is all that matters. She has earned my service, and I will do everything I can to repay her.”

“Is that where your family is?”

“My family is gone,” Magnus said. His voice was soft—much softer than Lan was accustomed to hearing from him.

“I’m sorry.”

“They have been gone for a long time. They have rejoined the gods, and they are safe with them.”

“My parents died, too.”

“So Kragen tells me.”

“I don’t think the Raven Queen offered me protection.”

“Are you certain?”

“My sister and I went to stay with my nana and papa in Halith. It is a village along the border between Narith and Lorant. We were safe. It was a quiet life. Peaceful. Papa worked a farm, and Nana was a weaver, often selling her wares at guild functions.”

“I have found that many women in Reyash serve as weavers.”

“We weren’t from Reyash,” Lan said.

“Perhaps not you, but what of your nana and papa?”

Lan frowned to himself. “As far as I know, they lived in Halith their entire lives.”

“Then perhaps it is the same there.”

“What is the same?”

“The connection to magic.”

“What connection?”

Magnus considered Lan for a moment. “You do not know this?”

“Know what?”

“Weaving is a connection to a form of magic. It is why the Karell women start as weavers.”

“Are you trying to say that my nana was a Karell?”

“That is not what I’m saying. The weaving is tied to magic. I don’t know what your grandmother did, and I don’t know whether she was tied to magic or the Karell. All I am telling you is that weavers access magic in ways that the Karell often take advantage of.”

Lan thought back to his nana. She would sit at night, weaving while telling stories. Sophie would sit near her, mostly listening, rarely taking part in the weaving, though Lan would. It was a task that helped calm his mind. Sophie had teased him about it, and when they were in Halith, he hadn’t cared. What did it matter if he had some talent with weaving? He didn’t know any other boys who had tried to weave, but there weren’t that many other boys in the village, and besides, it helped settle him. There was something to the repetition, the patterns, that he found soothing.

Sophie had never felt the same. She didn’t find anything requiring her to sit still for any length of time soothing. She preferred to be moving.

Could Nana have served the Karell? The idea would once have seemed laughable, but maybe that was why the Karell had come. Maybe they had come because of Nana. If that were the case, then why had they seemed to be attacking?

Unless they weren’t attacking.

Maybe Tohm and his soldiers had been the ones attacking.

There were so many questions. Why had Nana and Papa died? Why had his parents died, for that matter?

“You are troubled?” Magnus asked.

“Not troubled. I’m trying to make sense of what happened to my sister and me. Our grandparents were killed, and we were led to believe the Karell killed them.”

“Why would you believe the Karell killed your grandparents?”



“Because we saw them before they died.”

“Your grandparents?”

“No. The Karell. They came out of the forest, preceded by the sound of some horrible creature.”

“Ah. Not a creature, but their steeds.”

“Their steeds? What do they ride?”

“It’s not something that those outside of the Karell are allowed to witness. And those within Reyash do not speak of it, for fear that they will draw the Karell’s attention.”

“You don’t know?”

“I am not from Reyash—not originally. I don’t share the same fear, but then, I have seen the Karell do much good.”

“Then what is it?”

“It is a winged creature, large enough to carry at least one person, with massive wings—something like an enormous hawk, though that does not do it justice.”

Lan couldn’t imagine any hawk making the noises that he had heard. No bird would make noises like that. What, then, had it been?

“Where are the—”

He didn’t get the chance to finish. A loud whistle broke the silence around them, and Magnus looked up.

“What is that?” Lan asked.

“That is a return.”

“A return?”

Magnus nodded. “That sound is the return of the Taihg. Those who have left and returned are greeted with a whistle. If other whistles follow, that tells us that some were lost.”

Magnus tipped his head, listening, but no additional whistle followed. A relieved smile crossed his face.

“Where were they?” Lan asked.

“The Taihg go many places.”

“Where do you think they were?”

“The Raven Queen has made many requests of the Taihg. It is likely that they went to satisfy one of her requests.”

Magnus started away, and Lan followed, keeping a hold on the practice sword. As they made their way along the street, Lan began to feel foolish for still holding it, but now that he was as far as he was, there was nothing else to do but continue to hang on to it.

In the distance, he saw movement.

Horses.

Lan hurried forward, moving with the flow of dozens of others, all of them trying to reach whoever had returned.

As he neared, he saw a flash of armor, and then something that took his breath away. A woman sitting atop a horse, her hair as orange as the setting sun, and her skin as pale as milk.

“The Pale Princess,” Lan whispered.

Magnus glanced over at him, giving him a strange look. “What was that?”

Lan pointed to the woman. “Her. She’s the Pale Princess, isn’t she?”

“Princess? Jalyn is no princess. A skilled soldier. Powerfully so. But a princess?”

Lan couldn’t take his eyes off her. She looked exactly like the Pale Princess of the stories that Nana had told him. More than that, she was beautiful, breathtakingly so.

“Jalyn? Is she a Taihg?”

“She is much like you, trained by men in Neylash who thought they would use her to attack the Raven Queen.”

“Who would think to attack the Raven Queen?”

“Fools, that is who.”

They watched the woman. There was something powerful about her. It was almost as if Lan could feel the magic radiating from her.

“How long has she served the Taihg?”

Magnus smiled. “Longer than the people of Neylash would like.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that they do not know that she serves.”

“They don’t know? How can they not know that she serves the Taihg?” Maybe it was his imagination, but Lan could feel that she served the Taihg.

*It has to be my imagination.*

There was no way for him to detect anything like that. He didn’t have a connection to magic, despite Kragen’s desire for him to develop one, and Lan feared the possibility that he could.

“It’s no different than you,” Magnus said.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that at some point, you may be asked to serve in such a way.”

Lan shook his head. He couldn’t betray Neylash. It was bad enough to be here, attempting to learn things he had no business learning, but betraying Neylash? That wasn’t something Lan felt he should—or could—do.

“Why would they ask such a thing of me?”

Magnus shrugged. “I don’t know what will be asked of you. It’s possible that it will be nothing, but all of us must be prepared for the possibility that we will be asked to do more than what we have done. That includes you, despite the fact that you would choose otherwise.”

“And her? Was she forced to do this?”

“There is no forcing, not when it comes to the Raven Queen. You will see. You will choose to serve her. It is the same with anyone else. Everyone who has chosen to serve the Raven Queen wants to understand what she seeks.”

Lan felt uncomfortable for the first time when discussing the Raven Queen. He had heard stories of the Raven Queen from Nana. And the stories were worrisome enough he knew he should fear them, but Nana had never made them frightening stories. The Raven Queen was powerful, but didn't she need to be for what she was facing?

He looked over at Magnus and didn't know what to say.

Could coming here have been a mistake? It had not been his choice. Perhaps staying here was the mistake.

His gaze drifted to the woman who looked so much like the Pale Princess of the stories, and he noticed her watching him. Lan shivered. There was heat and power to her gaze. Did she know what he was thinking?

And if she did, what would she do?

She still watched him, and he turned away, uncertain about what he should be doing. Magnus regarded him, a curious expression on his face. Lan tried to mask his discomfort but didn't think he was successful.

She really was just like the Pale Princess of Nana's stories. The Pale Princess was described as terrifyingly beautiful as well as terrifyingly powerful. Looking up at Jalyn, and seeing the confidence she exuded, Lan could believe those stories, and he could believe Jalyn was the Pale Princess.

"Where are you going?" Magnus asked.

Lan hadn't realized he had turned away, and he paused a moment. *Where am I going?* Would Magnus allow him to simply leave, or would his disappearance raise questions?

"To the forest."

"Why to the forest?"

"I think I need to speak to Darish."

As he said this, he realized it was true. After feeling as small and helpless as he had at the sight of this woman, Lan wanted nothing more than to speak to the woodsman god, regardless of how little Darish might help him.

“Good. All men must find their peace with the gods. Especially men from Reyash.”

“I’m not from Reyash.”

Magnus studied him. “You keep saying that, but it doesn’t make it any more true.”

Lan breathed out a heavy sigh. It seemed as if the people here knew more about him than he did, almost as if Nana had kept secrets from him.

Why would she have kept something from him, especially something necessary to protect himself, and protect Sophie?

“Speak with the gods, and when you’re finished, it seems Jalyn would speak with you.”

Lan looked up and saw her still watching him. He shivered. What else could he do? He didn’t want to speak with Jalyn. Anything she might want could lead him into danger.

He nodded and headed toward the forest, away from the line of Taihg and the beautiful woman who watched him.

# CHAPTER 45

## LAN

The sword whistled.

It was a sweet sound. It was a high-pitched sound, piercing the air, and Lan imagined it carrying from the practice yard and out toward the forest, up into the trees, letting Darish know how he fought. Thinking of the woodsman god gave him strength, and though he didn't feel that the woodsman god returned his attention, that didn't mean Lan should try any less. Instead, he made his way through the motions even more rapidly, focusing on the patterns that Magnus had trained him in.

Each sweeping arc of the sword parted the air, leaving it humming.

Lan smiled to himself. When he had trained with Tohm, there had been no such feedback on his movements. He had practiced the techniques Tohm had taught him, but the only feedback had been the pain of injury.

Tohm had taught him brutality. That brutality had almost killed him more times than he could count. Living had been about anger, hate; an animal survival.

Magnus's way of fighting was more effective and less dependent on brutality. The sweeping motions gave Lan more confidence in his defense, more time to think. Lan didn't think himself overly skilled—not yet—but he began to believe he could develop skill.

He rolled and swung the sword around, smiling at the sharp whistle. He halted the blade midstroke and brought it

back around, testing how short an arc he could make. It was nothing like the forms that Magnus had taught him, but then, when he'd seen Magnus sparring with others, he had never seen the much larger man using the same forms he was teaching Lan.

The small practice yard was empty. The ground had been trampled flat, either from his feet or Magnus's or even from a dozen others who had come to the Taihg to train. The brown grasses had been stamped out of life. The earth remained hard despite the recent rain, which gave the air a pleasant scent. In the distance, a pair of buildings blocked his view of the street, but they also blocked the view of any on the street who would watch him. He wasn't comfortable with the idea of an audience. It reminded him too much of Sophie and her taunting of him.

He jumped to his feet, spun the sword around, and smiled at the whistling. Each movement required less effort than it had even a week ago. He had grown stronger, as Magnus had promised. How much stronger would he get? How much more skilled would he get?

And at what point would the Raven Queen demand something from him?

That last thought troubled him, intruding on his practice. It wasn't that he feared the Raven Queen. For now, she was little more than an imagined threat. He had never seen her, and he wasn't even certain that he ever would. The people in the town all followed her with a devotion bordering on a commitment to the gods. Would Lan eventually feel the same?

He ducked, mimicking the movements that he would need when attacked, and imagined Tohm attempting to stab at him. He twisted in midair, bringing his sword around, and landed with it sweeping out.

Practice like this was quite a bit different from going into the forest outside the farm and hacking at the trees there. He flushed at the thought of Sophie seeing him now, how she would tease him. At least now he had some training, but he'd welcome the teasing if it meant having her with him.

“I heard your call throughout the town,” Magnus said.

Lan spun around, bringing the sword up to a ready position. The air whistled and then fell silent. “Magnus. You heard it?”

“I suspect all in the town can hear it, if they know what they’re listening for.”

“It’s just practice.”

“As I suggested you do.”

“I think... I think that I’m getting better.”

“Think? Kragen asked you to train with me so you would get better, not think about getting better.”

Was Magnus angry at him? It was difficult to read Magnus. The large man rarely smiled, and he made no expression that revealed what he was thinking.

“Fine. I am getting better.”

Lan could say that without feeling deceitful, though it was strange to admit it. He was not accustomed to having anything resembling confidence since leaving his village and Nana and Papa behind.

“If you are, then I think it’s time for you to prove it.”

“Prove it?”

“Yes. This will be different from our training. This will be a sparring session.”

Lan’s eyes widened slightly. “I don’t know that I’m ready to spar.”

“And do you anticipate a time when you will be ready?”

He had seen Magnus sparring with others. The man had such impressive skill Lan had had trouble following his movements. “Eventually.”

“No eventually. Now.”

Magnus unsheathed his massive sword and tapped Lan’s practice sword. Lan couldn’t imagine holding a sword as large as the one that Magnus used, nor being as comfortable with it.



Magnus was powerful, and Lan doubted he would ever be able to counter the man.

“Make your blade sing.”

Lan nodded and took a deep breath as he prepared.

What would he do? How should he begin?

He started forward, sweeping the sword around, aiming at Magnus’s torso. Magnus blocked it, turning his wrist, twisting to force Lan backward.

Lan was already tired. He had been practicing for a while, long enough that sweat streamed from him. His hands were slippery from it, so he tightened his grip, not wanting to lose his sword. He doubted his opponent would take much pity on him.

Magnus brought his sword around in a broad swipe. Even though he didn’t use a practice sword, the air whistled. The tip of the blade practically brushed Lan’s cheek.

Lan stepped back, swinging his sword, grunting with the effort of the sweeping motion. Sweat dripped down his brow, but he refused the urge to wipe it away. Any attempt to remove the sweat would only distract him, and he needed no distractions. What he needed now was focus. If he lost focus, he would be smacked once more by Magnus and his massive sword. He had grown tired of feeling the slap of the man’s blade, tired of the pain of failure. Jarson’s mocking face flitted through his mind.

Lan ducked his shoulder, bringing the long blade around. The air whistled with the call of the practice sword. It was a reassuring sound. He still didn’t understand how the sword worked, but perhaps that wasn’t the point. All that mattered was his success.

Magnus thrust his sword forward and twisted it. *Why is he fighting like Tohm?* Magnus had shown him how it was an ineffective way of fighting. Blunt and brutal, but any skilled swordsman would be able to parry the blow, deflecting it to the side.

“What are you doing?” Lan asked.

“Training,” Magnus grunted.

Lan stepped back, stumbling and rolling away. He came to his feet as Magnus’s sword whistled toward his knees. Lan swept his blade down. It didn’t whistle this time, but perhaps it didn’t need to. The move was meant as nothing more than a way of trapping Magnus’s sword.

He swung the sword around in a low arc as he lunged forward. At the last moment, he spun around, swinging the practice sword in a whistling attack. He kept the blade low, barely above the ground, and at the last moment, he angled it up, intending to catch Magnus in the leg. He had abandoned any attempt to limit how hard he attacked. Lan didn’t think that Magnus needed him to.

Magnus grunted and stomped on Lan’s sword.

Lan jerked on the sword, trying to pull it free, but Magnus was too heavy. Lan twisted, kicking as he did, and slammed his leg into Magnus. It gave him a jolt of pain, reminding Lan of the fractures that he had sustained, but he ignored it, driving through, and forced his way beyond Magnus and his defenses.

He wrenched his blade free.

Lan rolled and swung the sword around.

Magnus blocked, but Lan anticipated him and turned his blade so that he could bring it back around. He swung in a shorter arc than was typical, but the time he’d spent practicing with the sword had proven that he could get the practice blade to whistle even with a shorter arc.

He brought the sword around, twisting in such a way that he nearly connected with Magnus’s leg. The man grunted and scampered back, making a movement that Lan had never seen him make before.

“Almost,” Lan grunted.

“Almost does not count,” Magnus said.

The larger man spun his blade, and Lan flicked his wrist, slashing toward the man’s sword. It forced Magnus to shift his

position the barest amount, but enough to give Lan an opening.

He dropped his sword and jumped, crashing into Magnus's chest.

Magnus was quite a bit heavier than Lan, but the suddenness of the attack unsettled Magnus sufficiently to let Lan knock him down.

Lan rolled off, scrambling for his sword, and snatched it up to find Magnus sitting up, issuing a deep, hearty laugh.

Lan held his practice sword out, worried he had upset Magnus.

"Unconventional," Magnus said.

"I don't think I can beat you with a conventional attack," Lan replied.

"Perhaps not yet." Magnus got to his feet and dusted himself off before slipping his sword back into its sheath.

Lan was a little disappointed. He would have liked to have more sparring time with Magnus, but maybe he *had* upset the man. Would he be angered by Lan ignoring the swordwork Magnus had been teaching him, to resort to grappling?

It had saved him when working with Tohm. Had he not known how to grapple, he would have been killed—or at least injured countless more times. It was only because he had been willing to use an unconventional approach that he had survived.

"I'm sorry I knocked you down," Lan said.

"You should never apologize when sparring. Only if you do not act honorably should you apologize."

"Honorably?"

"There are certain things you do not do in warfare."

"Isn't the objective to win? Why should it matter how you win, so long as you do win?"

He thought of what he had been taught by Tohm in the barracks. Survive, and then eat. Hadn't that been the lesson?

"It matters. There are some victories that you can claim that have no honor in them. What does it matter if you win if you lose yourself?"

Lan nodded, though he didn't understand—not really. All he understood was that he did not want to lose. Losing meant he wouldn't eat. Losing meant injury. Losing meant death. All that mattered was success.

Magnus breathed out and turned away to head into one of the buildings that blocked the courtyard from the street. He returned carrying a long sword. It reminded Lan of the practice sword, though the hilt was slightly more ornamental than the one he had been practicing with.

Magnus held out the sword, resting it in his palms as he presented it to Lan. "Take it," he said.

"I already have a practice sword."

Magnus nodded. "And this is no practice sword."

Lan twisted the practice sword between his fingers before setting it on the ground and taking the blade from Magnus. It was of a similar weight, but when he swung it, he realized that there was no whistle to the air. Had he made the wrong movement? He tried again, going slower with the pattern, and this time he was certain that he hadn't.

No. The whistling simply wasn't there.

If it wasn't a practice sword, that meant...

"Why are you giving this to me?" Lan asked.

"You have earned it. When you have your first victory, you deserve to have your first blade. I doubt this will be the one you keep for the rest of your days, but consider it yours, for now. This blade should stay with you."

"I don't understand."

"You don't understand having a sword? What has been the point of our training?"

“I don’t understand why you’re giving it to me.”

“Because you have earned it, Lan.”

“What of the practice sword?”

“There is benefit in continuing to use the practice sword. It allows you to hear when you are successful, but eventually, you will grow to no longer need it. Perhaps you are at that point already. When you are ready, then you will spar, training in a different way.”

“Like we just did?”

“Just like that. You will be well served in seeking out those who are better than you. That is how you will learn.”

“You won’t train me anymore?” Lan felt more than a little disappointed. He had grown to appreciate his time with Magnus and the man’s stoic but firm nature. There was kindness within him, and it surprised Lan, given how massive and powerful the man was.

“I will still train with you, but there are others who you should seek. That is how your skills will continue to develop. If you become dependent on one sword master, your style will be nothing more than a mirror of that sword master’s, and likely a poor reflection.”

Lan thought he understood. If he could learn from others, he could incorporate their styles into his own fighting technique, making him a better swordsman. Who else could he train with? He hadn’t seen Kragen practicing, though maybe Kragen didn’t take time to practice the same way Magnus did.

“What should I do with it?” Lan examined the sword.

“Keep it with you. Find a sheath. Make it your own. You are a soldier now.”

With that, Magnus turned away.

Lan didn’t watch him leave. His gaze remained on the sword, lingering there. A smile slowly spread across his face. He was a soldier. Not a Taihg, though perhaps that was in his future. Even if it wasn’t, he was a soldier. He had a sword. He was no longer pretending.

He held on to the blade as he walked back to his room, unable to peel the smile off his face.

# CHAPTER 46

SOPHIE

Sophie leaned over the table, keeping the book spread out in front of her. She was determined to make her way through the pages. The writing was difficult. She'd not counted on how challenging it would be to read even a single paragraph. So far, she'd struggled to work her way through no more than a few pages.

This difficulty gave her hope that she was on the right path. If it was this challenging to even read a few paragraphs, this had to be the kind of book that would grant her knowledge, didn't it? It had to be the same type of book as Ridaln's. If that were the case, then she could learn from it.

Maybe she should show Ridaln what she had found.

Each time she considered that, she pushed away the thought. She wanted to determine what was here before she revealed it to Ridaln. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe this was little more than some boring record, but she couldn't shake the idea—and the hope—that this might actually be a sorcerer's journal. If it was, what could she learn from it? Would she be able to discover tricks like those Ridaln had to use his magic? Could she discover how she could force out—and focus on—that energy without needing to hold one of the frustrating poses?

Ridaln wanted her to believe she needed to crawl first. Maybe she did. Maybe all she needed to do was master the poses as Ridaln had suggested, but they weren't useful to her. That was the most frustrating thing. When she had needed magic, she hadn't known how to use it.

As she flipped through the book, she came across a few pictures. They were poses she hadn't seen before, ones Ridaln had not demonstrated to her yet. Studying them, she noticed something else. In one of the pictures, the person holding the pose also held an object.

*Is that a wand?*

Why had Ridaln never mentioned needing something else to help with the pose? It might not be needed yet. With her poses, she was still definitely trying to crawl. Maybe when she started walking, she'd get the opportunity to use something like that.

The door to the library opened, and Sophie glanced up. She caught a flicker of pale skin and a flash of red. For a moment, she thought that it might be the soldier woman. Then she realized it was far more likely to be Nessa.

“What are you reading there?”

Sophie carefully closed the book and looked up at Nessa. The woman's gaze lingered on the book before she glanced back up at Sophie's face.

“Nothing. Just a story.”

Nessa's gaze drifted to the cover, and a hint of a smile crossed her face. “It seems like an interesting story. I don't know that I've seen many books with such covers.”

“Maybe you haven't read very much.”

She shouldn't be quite so irritable with Nessa. The woman hadn't been terrible to her. She hadn't been the most welcoming, either, but she deserved better than what Sophie was doing to her.

“Maybe I haven't.” Nessa took a seat across from Sophie and leaned forward on her elbows, watching Sophie with an unreadable expression.

Sophie squirmed slightly on her seat, not wanting to look away, but also not wanting to keep staring at Nessa. The woman intimidated her, and she hated to admit it.

“Are you just going to watch me?” Sophie asked.



“I hear you have been looking for me.”

Sophie had wanted to find Nessa, but in a way that wouldn't draw attention. Had she been too open in looking for her?

“I just haven't seen you in a while,” Sophie said.

“I didn't realize that you and I needed to connect so frequently,” Nessa said.

“It's not that.”

“Then what is it?”

“It's...” Sophie glanced behind her. The library was otherwise empty. Would Ridaln be angry if she shared with Nessa that she was working with him? Would it matter? She didn't think so, but then again, she didn't know Ridaln well enough to know what would irritate him.

“It's what, Sophie Varison?”

Nessa said her name with a hint of derision. It was almost enough for Sophie to reconsider saying anything, but she needed to know what Nessa's experience with Ridaln had been. What connection did she have to him?

“I understand that you have spent some time with Ridaln.”

The hard-edged smile on Nessa's face began to fade. “What was that?”

Sophie glanced behind her again. She didn't like the idea of Ridaln surprising her, and he had a habit of showing up unexpectedly. “Ridaln. I understand that you have spent some time with him.”

“And what does that mean, Sophie Varison?”

Why was Nessa emphasizing her name that way?

“It means that my understanding is that you've spent some time with him. That's all. I'm trying to ask you a simple question, Nessa.”

Sophie leaned forward, irritation flaring up in her. She needed to be careful. She didn't know Nessa well enough to

snap at her. With Nana, Papa, and even Lan, they understood her snapping at them was a part of her passion. But Nessa might think Sophie was angry—or mean.

“If you’re inquiring as to whether Ridaln brought me to the city, in much the same way as he brought you, then the answer is yes.”

“Why did he bring you to the city?” Sophie asked.

“I suspect the same reason that he brought you.”

Was Nessa hinting that she knew what Ridaln had been teaching?

“I don’t exactly know why Ridaln brought me to the city.” Sophie leaned back, watching Nessa, uncertain whether the woman would say anything. What was there to say? Sophie could admit that she had been spending time training with Ridaln. For some reason, Sophie thought that might be a mistake, and she feared if she revealed her connection to Ridaln, she’d open herself to questions she wasn’t prepared to answer.

“Then you and I are in the same situation,” Nessa said.

“You don’t know why Ridaln brought you to the city?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Then what is it?”

“I’m not willing to share why Ridaln brought me to the city, no more than you are.” The hard smile returned, and she considered Sophie for a long moment. “If that’s all, then perhaps I will get back to my preparations. We have another delegation arriving shortly, and I need to ensure that I’m ready.”

Sophie blinked. That was news to her. How long had it been since the Dunvale delegation had come? A few weeks, likely. Maybe longer. When it had been here, everyone had been on edge. Oleda and Petra had both been irritable, and Sophie would rather be able to anticipate what might happen with them. Maybe there was something that she could do,

some way that she could help, so that they didn't end up feeling quite so angry.

"Where is this delegation from?" Sophie asked.

"I thought you didn't care about the delegations."

Sophie shook her head. "I don't. I'm content in the palace."

"The palace isn't home to you, Sophie Varison. As much as you might think it is, you won't be allowed to stay here indefinitely. None of us will. We have all come for a purpose, and eventually, we must serve that purpose."

"Even you?"

Nessa smiled sadly. "Even me. As much as I would avoid it, there will come a time when I can't refuse what is asked of me."

Would it be the same as was going to be asked of Sophie? Or could Ridaln have given up on Nessa, choosing to move on to Sophie?

"Where is the delegation coming from?"

"I believe this one is coming from Alitan."

Sophie frowned. She didn't know anything about Alitan. How far away was it? Far enough that Nessa would be considered unique? That she would run the risk of being chosen? As much as Nessa wanted to pretend that she wasn't worried, Sophie saw the concern written plainly on her face. Sophie shared her concern. Nessa played some role with these delegations, and somehow she had to portray the Pale Princess. Eventually, Sophie would have to help. Could she do what Ridaln wanted of her?

"I can see that you don't recognize the name," Nessa said.

Sophie shook her head. "I haven't traveled that extensively."

"It's not about extensively traveling. This is about geography. You have access to all these books. You have access to everything Ridaln keeps in this library, and yet you

still don't know basic geography? Do you even know where Dunvale is?"

Sophie blinked. She hadn't even given it any thought. "Not really. So where is Alitan?"

"Far to the north. A place beyond the forests, and a place beyond the mountains. It is difficult to reach, and it would be difficult to return."

"That's what you're concerned about?"

"Do you think those who are chosen will ever be allowed to return? Especially from someplace like Alitan, someplace so far away that it is almost inaccessible."

Sophie wasn't sure that it mattered for Nessa, much like she was certain it didn't matter for her. She was in no danger of getting paired off. "Ridaln said the king has coordinated these meetings."

"And you believe Ridaln?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Oh, Sophie Varison. You really are quite young."

"What does my age have to do with it?" Sophie pulled her books back to herself, preparing to stuff them into the pockets of her dress. Maybe she had been mistaken in thinking Nessa would help. Nessa was happier just being nasty to her.

"Your age makes you immature. With age—and time—you will gain wisdom. If you're going to continue learning from Ridaln, you will need wisdom. And more than a little luck."

Sophie resisted the urge to look down at the books, but she wondered if Nessa had recognized them. Maybe Ridaln hadn't been as honest with her as she had hoped. Maybe he was concealing others who could reach magic.

"Help me understand," Sophie said.

"You've been learning from the person you should question. Take the opportunity to question him. But I warn you, do so carefully."

Nessa glanced behind her, and Sophie looked up to see the door cracking open. Ridaln stood framed in the doorway, his silver eyes gleaming. He glanced from Sophie to Nessa, an unreadable expression on his face.

“Good luck, Sophie Varison. I need to prepare for the delegation.” Nessa stood and sauntered away from the table. She glanced at Ridaln. “Isn’t that right, Ridaln?”

“Nessa,” he said, bowing his head slightly.

She laughed as she left the library. Ridaln closed the door after her but stared at it while Sophie’s gut churned. He turned to raise an eyebrow at Sophie. “What were the two of you talking about?”

“Mostly about the incoming delegation.”

“And what were you deciding about the delegation?”

“I don’t know that we were deciding anything. She was sharing with me that the Alitan delegation was from a great distance.”

“It *is* Alitan, so she’s correct. Now. Where have you been?” Ridaln asked.

“I’ve been here, reading in the library.”

“Have you? I’ve looked but haven’t found you. What have you been reading?”

Sophie carefully pushed forward one of the books that she had gotten from the shop. It was one of the more common books, and this one she had been able to read more easily. At least she could admit that she had it, and she wouldn’t have to fear that Ridaln would be angry and upset about the fact that she had this one. There was nothing to hide with this one.

“A story,” Ridaln said dismissively. “There are many other things for you to be reading. If you continue to waste your time in this way, you will struggle to make any gains with me.”

“I don’t think of this as wasting time. I’m using it to help me relax. I’ve told you that my nana used to tell me stories. They always calm me. With everything that you’ve been

teaching me, I need that. I need to be able to settle my mind so that I can hold the poses.”

Ridaln stared at her for a moment and then breathed out heavily. “Do not waste too much time on these books. You will find that they don’t provide the insight that you think they do.”

Sophie’s breath caught. Was that his way of telling her he knew what kind of books she was reading? Did he know she was attempting to find another sorcerer’s journal?

“Have you found anything about my brother?” she asked.

His brow darkened. “Unfortunately, I have not.”

“Could he have left the city?”

Ridaln shrugged. “It’s possible if he’s training with soldiers. They often leave on patrol.”

“And where do they go?”

“I’m afraid that I’m not privy to such information.”

“I thought you were the king’s adviser. Wouldn’t he share that with you?”

She shouldn’t be so forward with Ridaln, as she still didn’t know how much to trust him, or whether she could trust him at all.

“What the king does is his business,” Ridaln said.

Sophie bit back a retort. She wanted to know what might have happened to Lan. If Ridaln knew anything, why wouldn’t he share that with her?

She decided a change in topic was best. “I need some money,” she blurted.

Ridaln frowned at her. “Money? You’re in the palace. Why might you have need of money when you can acquire what you need within the palace?”

“Not everything is within the palace,” she said to Ridaln.

“No. I suppose not. Yet you have everything that you need here.”

“It’s not what I need. It’s what I want.”

“And what is that?”

Sophie’s gaze drifted down to the book. Would Ridaln believe that all she wanted was to have more books like this? Hopefully, he would be convinced. “Stories,” she said.

“Stories? If all you want is stories, then you can find those within the library.”

“I’ve read all of your stories,” she said.

Ridaln’s gaze drifted around the library. “All of them?”

Sophie nodded. That wasn’t entirely true. She’d read most of the stories that Ridaln had here, but not all of them. There were quite a few that she still had not gotten to, but many of those were dry and difficult to read.

“And you think that you have found a place to acquire stories outside of the palace?”

“There are booksellers in the city, Ridaln.”

“Oh, I know that.”

She watched him. How much about her ventures outside the palace had he learned? She didn’t think she had done anything to anger him, but with Ridaln, she could never be entirely certain.

“There are... ways of earning additional coin, but you will not care for them.”

“Why not?”

“They are not always the most savory of tasks.”

Sophie swallowed. She had half a mind to refuse Ridaln, but another part of her felt intrigued. She wanted to know what he might demand of her.

“What are they?”

“Perhaps in time I will bring you in. Perhaps.”

Sophie waited for him to say something more, but he did not. Instead, he glanced down to where she had hidden the journals, his eyes narrowing slightly. Then he spun around and

left. Sophie let out a long sigh. What was she doing pressing Ridaln in that way? What was she doing risking her status?

And what was she going to do about the next delegation coming to Neylash?

She wanted to see them. She wanted to know what Alitan intended, which meant getting an invitation, or sneaking in. She wasn't above sneaking in. She had done it often enough now, but would that anger Ridaln, too?



# CHAPTER 47

## SOPHIE

The kitchen was awash with activity. Cooks scurried around, moving pots and pulling baked goods out of ovens. It appeared everyone danced around to some unheard music. Sophie watched from the back of the kitchen, keeping her eyes peeled for Oleda, but she hadn't seen the woman. For that matter, she hadn't seen Oleda in days. Where had she gone?

"You need to get out of the kitchen," a booming voice said from behind her.

Sophie turned and saw Karen approaching. She was a wide-bodied woman, someone who fit the image of a palace cook, and she carried a massive spoon in one hand, which she waved around like a wand. Her eyes widened slightly when she saw Sophie. She wasn't quite as friendly as Oleda, but she was welcoming for the most part.

"Sophie. I would invite you to remain, but you must know that the palace prepares for the Alitan delegation. Everyone is busy here."

"I know you're busy..." She frowned. "Ridaln said there won't be any more after this one."

Karen shook her head. "That's none of my concern. We do what we must for these delegations."

"I just..." Sophie looked around, scanning the kitchen. "Where's Oleda?"

"That woman is none of your concern," she said.

“None of my concern? What happened to her?”

Karen’s eyes narrowed slightly. “What makes you think that anything happened to her?”

“It’s just the way that you said that. Where is she? I haven’t seen her in a few days.”

Could something have happened to her? Oleda had run the kitchen for a long time, and Sophie couldn’t imagine anything happening to the woman, but she didn’t know anything about the politics of the palace kitchen. Maybe Oleda had done something.

“Nothing’s happened to Oleda,” Karen said. “Gods. Can you imagine? I have no interest in running this entire kitchen. It’s bad enough trying to handle the broth. If I needed to maintain all of the girls the way Oleda does...”

“What happened to her?” Sophie asked again, lowering her voice. She leaned toward Karen to convince the woman to share at least a little.

“She’s not been well,” Karen said. “I don’t know what it is, but she has been feeling poorly over the last few days. I hope she manages to get back on her feet in time to help with this blasted delegation. The king wants his pastries, and I’m afraid I’m not nearly the cook that Oleda is. I have enough skill in making soups, but anything more than that is beyond my ability.”

Sophie smiled to herself. Karen had more than a little ability with making soup. The woman was widely regarded as one of the best cooks in the kitchen. Only Oleda was more revered.

“Is she in her room?”

“She’d better be. If she’s not, and she’s left me in charge of the kitchen while she goes off jaunting around the palace, she will have a piece of my mind when she returns.” Karen waved her spoon and gave Sophie a quick wink before hurrying to one of the counters.

Sophie smiled after her and then spun toward the pantry. She hoped there were still enough pastries for her to grab at

least one. If nothing else, having a pastry would help ease her mind a little.

Inside the pantry, she found the pastries lined up on a tray, much as they often were. There were no rhubarb pastries, and she tried to hide the disappointment she felt, but the raspberry pastries were just not the same as the rhubarb. Still, they were better than nothing. Sophie grabbed one, then thought better of it and took a second. It was better to have too many than not enough. She hurried from the kitchen and saw Karen watching her. She tapped her spoon on her thigh, and Sophie grinned. She didn't think that Karen was angry with her, but she didn't want to linger long enough to run the risk of giving her a reason to be.

Sophie scurried out of the kitchen and up a back staircase. She practically collided with Dannith as he made his way down the stairs.

He took a step back and watched her for a moment. "Another pastry run?" he asked, a smile crossing his face.

Sophie realized that she held one of the pastries in her hand, and she hurriedly lowered it from her mouth. Why did she always seem to be eating pastries when she ran into Dannith?

"Apparently," she said. She pulled the other pastry out of her pocket and offered it to him.

Dannith smiled and shook his head. "You keep that. I'm not particularly fond of raspberry."

"It's no rhubarb," Sophie agreed.

Dannith smiled again. "No. There aren't many pastries that rival her rhubarb."

"I don't think this is one that Oleda made," she said.

"No? Have other cooks begun to make pastries now?"

"I don't know. It sounds as if Oleda has been unwell."

Dannith's eyes widened slightly. "That is... unfortunate."

Sophie leaned forward conspiratorially. “I think Karen can make pastries nearly as well as Oleda. I would never tell either of them that.” Sophie was convinced that this pastry was made by Karen rather than Oleda. They were similar, but there was still something different about the ones that Karen made. The crusts weren’t quite as flaky, and the fruit didn’t spill out with the same sweetness. They were almost the same, but not quite.

“Well, that’s good. We don’t want to go too long without our sweets, do we?”

Sophie smiled. “Where are you going?”

“I was thinking of stopping in the kitchen, but if it’s as you say, and if there aren’t any rhubarb pastries”—he glanced down the stairs, almost longingly—“then perhaps I need to return.”

“Too much work remaining?” she asked.

Dannith smiled. “It never ends.”

He turned and headed back up the stairs, and Sophie followed. She expected him to stop at one of the lower landings and make his way out into the palace. She didn’t know what Dannith did, but the fact that he always appeared in this section of the palace made it likely that he was a high-ranking servant. Maybe she should ask Nessa or Ridaln about him.

Sophie smiled at Dannith. “Are you busy getting ready for the incoming delegation?”

Dannith glanced over at her. “I imagine that everyone needs to be ready for this delegation.”

“Why? I don’t really know anything about Alitan.”

“Ah. Well, there is something unique about the people of Alitan. They come from the far north. I think the likelihood of having them help us is high.”

“Help how?”

Dannith spread his hands out and smiled broadly. “Those are answers that we will have to learn in time. Unfortunately, we don’t have time.”

“We don’t?”

“Everything has been escalating,” Dannith said.

“How has it been escalating?”

He leaned toward her, lowering his voice. “We’ve been facing increasing attacks. Stories out of the east and out of the Raven Queen’s lands have indicated that she’s moving, preparing for something more.”

Sophie looked over at Dannith, wondering again what connections he had. How was it he knew these things? He was a servant, but clearly, he was well connected.

“What kind of stories?” Sophie asked. Why was that what she had latched on to? She felt foolish even asking, but it was the first thing that had come to mind, and she had blurted it out before realizing what she had even said. Would Dannith think her little more than a child because of her question?

Dannith slowed on the stairs and glanced over at her. “Do you enjoy stories?”

Sophie flushed. The first thing that came to mind was Lan chiding her for her interest in stories. She did enjoy them, but being within the palace made her feel she shouldn’t.

“I enjoy reading.” That had to be a better response than acknowledging she liked the stories her nana used to tell her.

“I imagine that Ridaln has you reading many things.”

She flushed again. Dannith knew she worked with Ridaln. If he was well connected within the palace, it wasn’t surprising that he would know that.

“Most of the books that Ridaln wants me to read aren’t all that exciting,” she said.

“Sometimes the least exciting things are the most important.” Dannith looked around, and Sophie realized that they had stepped out at the hall of portraits.

Dannith took a seat in front of two rows of paintings and stared up at them. Sophie watched him for a moment, uncertain why he would choose to return here. What was it

about this place that he found so compelling? She pulled the pastry out of her pocket again and offered it to Dannith. This time, he took it with a smile and absently bit into it. As he chewed, Sophie watched him, trying to figure him out.

“What’s bothering you?” she asked.

Dannith glanced over. “What would make you think that anything is bothering me?”

“You make your way between this area and the kitchen. Those are the only places I’ve ever seen you.”

“Is that right? The only places?”

Sophie shrugged. She’d seen him at the delegation banquet, but that had seemed different for some reason. “Fine. Not the only place, but I don’t see you anywhere else in the palace.”

“And where would you have me go?”

“I don’t know I would have you go anywhere. I’m just saying that I haven’t seen you anywhere else.”

Dannith turned his attention back to the paintings. He stared at the bottom row, and Sophie turned her attention to it. One of the paintings was of a dark-haired young man. He had a sharp jaw and broad shoulders. The portrait depicted him standing with his hands at his sides, a long sword hanging from his belt. The sword was jeweled, more decorative than functional. Next to the young man was a beautiful woman. She had black hair and pale skin, though she was not quite as pale as Nessa and Jalyn. She was striking, and there was something about the way that she was painted that made her seem to watch.

“Who are they?” Sophie asked, waving at the paintings.

Dannith breathed out heavily. “You like stories?”

Sophie nodded but realized that he wasn’t watching her. “Yes.”

“There was a time when Neylash was a different place. It was a time long before the war. Lands were isolated then, and some would say it was a better time, and certainly an easier

time. Before the war, Neylash didn't worry about finding soldiers able to fight the Taihg. Before the war, families weren't torn apart, struggling with losing loved ones to battles in faraway lands."

His voice drifted off, and Sophie looked over at him. His eyes had softened. He stared at the paintings, almost as if there was someone there he had loved and lost. Could they have been people he had served? Or did she have it wrong? Was Dannith somehow related to them? She didn't really know his role in the palace.

"What started the war?" Sophie asked.

"What starts any war? A desire for power."

Sophie shook her head. "What kind of power would start a war like this?" As far as she knew, the war had been going on for a long time.

"The worst kind of power." He took a deep breath, and though Sophie hoped he'd explain, Dannith said nothing more. He clasped his hands on his lap and stared straight ahead. After a while, he stood up and wiped his hands on his pants, sending a smear of raspberry across them. "Thank you for the pastry, Sophie."

She smiled at Dannith. "Will you be at the next banquet?"

Dannith tipped his head in a nod. "I will. Do you intend to come to this one?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I only came the last time because I wanted to see what all the excitement was about."

"It was a successful visit for Dunvale," Dannith said.

"Successful how?"

"They succeeded in making the partnership that they sought."

Sophie hadn't given any thought to who had been paired off. She had been so focused on everything else that had happened to her that she hadn't even considered that someone would have been paired off during the last visit.

“Do you know who it was?” She should have spent more time in the weavers’ circle. If she had, she likely would have heard that gossip by now. She could imagine Carolyn or any of the others telling her about who had been chosen. Even Caitlyn was likely to know. Maybe it would have been better had it been Caitlyn. At least that way, Sophie wouldn’t have to worry about angering her or about what sorts of things she might say or do to her.

But the palace wasn’t so large that she shouldn’t have noticed who had been paired off. There were a number of women here, but not so many that she wouldn’t have noticed an absence. What had happened?

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” Dannith said. “I imagine that if you’re so inclined, you could ask Ridaln. He does tend to coordinate these events, as they were his idea.”

Sophie knew that, but how did Dannith?

“Perhaps I will see you at the banquet,” Dannith said.

Sophie nodded.

Dannith meandered down the hall while she stayed where she was for a few moments, looking at the portraits. She realized that she didn’t know anything about Dannith—and maybe it was time that changed.

As she looked at the portraits, the dark-haired woman seemed to stare at her. Sophie didn’t know why or what it might mean. She only knew that it left her feeling unsettled. After a time, she hurried off, back down the stairs to find Oleda and answers to questions that she should have been asking before.



# CHAPTER 48

## LAN

Lan looked up as the door opened to his room. He had been staring at the long sword that Magnus had given him. It signified his improving skill. His face ached from the grin that refused to leave. The blade felt similar in his hand to the practice sword, but not quite as flexible. It would give no feedback to him, no guidance for proper technique, unlike the practice sword. The hilt was plain, though there was a faint decoration carved into it, as if it were meant to be a series of symbols, but Lan couldn't tell what they were. And it didn't really matter. All that mattered was the sword, not any of the decorations. Besides, eventually he would do as Magnus had done and place a leather wrapping around the hilt. It would serve for protection, but it would also serve another purpose and give him a better grip.

He thought that perhaps Kragen had entered to congratulate him. Instead, he saw the red-haired woman. Jalyn.

He almost dropped the sword.

“Can I help you?” He jumped to his feet.

The woman stood in the doorway, watching him for a moment. There was a hint of amusement on her face, a slight smile that did nothing to make her look less beautiful.

“You are new here.”

Lan nodded. “Kragen brought me here.”

He thought it best to bring up Kragen's name. The man was well respected, and if nothing else, he could use that

respect to keep the woman from questioning him too much.

“So he has told me.”

Lan wasn't surprised that Kragen had told Jalyn about him, but what did surprise him was that she had come to see him.

“I saw you when I first returned,” she said.

“I had been training with Magnus,” he said.

“I have heard.”

Lan swallowed. How much about him did this woman know? “You've heard?”

“I've heard that you were found in Neylash. You were training as a soldier.”

“I was training.”

“Was?”

“I don't know what happened. I was training, and it became violent.” How would he explain what had happened with Jarson? Maybe there wasn't a way to explain how he'd been brutalized during that attempt at training. Maybe it simply was. The thought of admitting it to Jalyn embarrassed him, reminding him of the hot flush that had worked through him when Sophie had revealed she had seen him practicing with the sword in the forest. Much like with Sophie, he didn't want this woman to think any less of him.

“Training can often become violent, especially in Neylash.”

“Why?”

“They think that violence can elicit a connection to something greater.”

“Magic?”

She studied him with a smile. “Of a sort.”

“I don't understand.”

“Tell me about your training.”

Lan had been through this with Kragen. He had explained to him how he had been brought to Neylash and how he had been locked in a cell and forced to fight to survive so that he could eat. And yet he *had* survived. He had proven that he *could* survive. He had become a fighter.

Why should she want him to share the same with her?

“You don’t have to fear repercussions from me,” Jalyn said.

“I don’t fear repercussions from you.”

The corner of her mouth quirked into a smile. “Then you fear repercussions from the soldiers in Neylash. Is it your intention to return?”

“I don’t know that I would be allowed to return.”

“And why not? Do you believe we know such violence here? Do you believe we would treat others with the same disregard as they are treated in Neylash? Do you think we would use you in the same way as those within Neylash use others?”

Anger simmered beneath the words. Recognizing it made him uncomfortable. He needed to be cautious. He couldn’t reveal too much to this woman.

“I haven’t seen violence here,” Lan said.

“What have you seen?”

“I’ve seen Kragen and Magnus. They both wanted to work with me, thinking to train me.”

“Because you bear the mark. Is that correct?”

“That’s what they tell me.”

Jalyn held her arm out and pulled up the sleeve to reveal three darkly pigmented areas on her arm. They reminded Lan of his own, though his had a different pattern.

“They believe you are touched by the gods,” Jalyn said.

Lan looked at the markings on her arm before nodding. “Kragen believes that I’m touched by the gods. I don’t know

what that means, or whether or not I am touched, but...”

“I felt the same way, once.”

“When did they find you?”

“They didn’t find me. I found them.”

“You found the Taihg?” Of course, he had once thought he had found the Taihg and they had intended to bring him with them.

“It was my assignment.”

“What kind of assignment was that? Who would assign you to find the Taihg?”

“There are those who believe they have answers. They believe they have a different task.”

“What task is that?”

“To destroy the Raven Queen.”

Lan swallowed. Was it even possible to destroy the Raven Queen? Based on Nana’s stories, he didn’t think it was. He had never really paid attention to them, not in the way that Sophie had. To Lan, they were nothing more than stories. How could he ever have known they might be something else? How could he ever have known Nana might have been providing them with truths they would need?

“I see from your face that you understand what that means.”

Lan breathed out. He hadn’t wanted to reveal too much to Jalyn, but he had the sense that anything he tried to keep from her, she would find a way of eliciting it. There was something about her calm demeanor, about the way she studied him, as if she demanded he acknowledge what she might do—or say.

“I’ve heard stories,” Lan said.

“What sort of stories?” Jalyn asked.

“The kind that I never believed were true. When I was younger, my grandmother used to share stories about the Raven Queen.”

“Was there anything else in the stories that your grandmother shared?”

Lan swallowed again. “She described a... woman... with great power.” He looked over at Jalyn, not wanting to share how his nana had described her. With her deep red hair and pale skin, she was the spitting image of the Pale Princess that Nana had described. Yet those were stories, weren’t they? They couldn’t be anything more than that.

“There are many women with great power,” Jalyn said.

“I see that.”

“Do you?”

“I understand from Magnus you are an impressive soldier.”

“Is that all?” The quirk of a smile pulled at the corner of her mouth again.

“There was more, but...”

“You can say it. You can say that you believed that I looked like the Pale Princess.”

“It’s just a story,” Lan said.

Jalyn smiled. “And where do you believe stories come from? Do you think they come from nothing? Or do you think there is some basis in truth to all stories?”

“I think if you asked my sister that question, she would tell you there is truth in every story.”

He could imagine Sophie’s reaction to meeting a woman like Jalyn, someone who looked so much like the Pale Princess. She had always loved the stories. Nana had used them to draw Sophie out of her shell after their parents had died. Over time, the stories had become a bond they shared, one Lan had not shared with either of them.

Sophie likely would not have been intimidated by Jalyn, not the way Lan was. Something about Sophie drew everyone in, a trait Lan had always been jealous of. Yet she had never made him feel bad that she had more... charisma, he supposed it was. His appeal was different.

“You have a sister?”

Lan nodded carefully. What would Jalyn do with that information? Would she use it against him?

“And where is she now?”

“I don’t know. We went to Neylash together. Our grandparents were killed, presumably by the Karell—”

“The Karell would not have killed. They are searchers, nothing more.”

Lan breathed out heavily. He had heard the same from others, and he wasn’t sure what the Karell were other than frightening, but regardless of what Kragen might say, there was something about the Karell that unsettled him.

“Whatever they are, they found us. Afterward, our grandparents were dead.”

“And how did you come to Neylash?”

The way she asked this made Lan think she already knew the answer. “Soldiers brought us to the city. They offered to train me,” he said bitterly.

“And your sister?”

“I don’t know what happened to her. She was taken away, somewhere else, with a strange man who had silver eyes. I... I don’t know what happened to her.”

Jalyn watched him for a long moment. As she did, something changed in her eyes. They softened, and the amusement that he’d seen in them faded.

“Tell me about your sister. What does she look like?”

“Why?”

“Just tell me.”

“She has brown hair, much like mine. When she smiles, she has a dimple on one cheek, and there’s a scar on the other from wrestling with me...” He shook away that thought. The scar wasn’t his fault, but he’d often thought it was. “She’s strong, but deceptively so. She’s not a large girl, and she is”—

Lan tried to think how old Sophie would be, realizing that she would have had a birthday in the time since he'd seen her last —“fourteen years old now. Gods, can she be that old?”

Jalyn watched him, a curious expression on her face. “Tell me what you remember of your grandparents.”

“Why?” Lan had been through this already, sharing with Kragen and Magnus what had happened to his grandparents, so why did she want him to repeat it?

“Tell me one of the stories that your grandmother used to tell you,” Jalyn said.

“I was never much of a storyteller,” Lan said.

“No? Did you enjoy hearing the stories?”

“Not as much as my sister.”

“Yet you listened.”

“How could I not? My nana used to tell stories while she was weaving, and I would sit next to her, copying her weaves, seeing if I could...”

Lan blushed. He had never admitted to anyone that he'd enjoyed weaving. Weaving was a woman's task, and though Papa had never chided him for attempting it, there had been a look of disappointment.

“And?”

He wasn't certain if Jalyn was ignoring the comment or if she simply didn't see anything wrong with it. “And I would listen,” he said.

“So you would have heard some of her stories. Tell me one of them. What story is the most memorable to you?”

The most memorable story to him would be different from the one that was most memorable to Sophie. Lan had enjoyed the stories of the Pale Princess, but not as much as his sister had. There were other stories that he had enjoyed more. Stories like those his papa had told. Typically, Papa had told stories while they were farming, and he had rarely shared them

with Sophie. Most of them were of a crasser nature than what Sophie would enjoy.

“My favorites weren’t even those that I heard from my nana,” Lan said softly.

“No? Your grandfather, then?”

Lan nodded. “We had a farm. Farming can involve a lot of planting, and there were times when Papa would talk. He would tell stories, and...”

Lan had never known whether they were stories or whether Papa had only been talking to himself. Sometimes with Papa it was difficult to know. When the storytelling had first begun, Lan had thought that perhaps Papa’s mind was slipping. It was something that happened to men as they aged, and Nana had teased him about it often enough that he and Sophie wondered if it would eventually happen to Papa.

“What sorts of stories?”

“Papa served in the war. Most men did, from what he told us. Most of his stories were from the war.”

Jalyn watched him, saying nothing.

“There was one, and it was always amusing, at least to hear Papa tell it. It was about his regiment, a group of men who wanted nothing but to return home to their farms and their women, and they came across a stream that they couldn’t cross. The way Papa would tell it, his regiment continued to try to find ways to cross the stream, but every time they tried, they were pushed back and turned around.” He remembered well Papa’s face when he had told the story, and how it had contorted in the telling, even then, as if Papa had relived it. What Papa had told him couldn’t have happened, not really.

“Yes, there is a stream like that near the border of Reyash. I’m surprised that your grandfather saw it, and even more surprised he survived.”

“What do you mean you’re surprised he survived?”

“Only that the stream is notorious for the effects it inflicts on those who attempt to cross it. The sorcerer who placed



those protections did so with a vile intent, wanting to destroy anyone who thought to cross the stream.”

“My grandfather never spoke of any vile effects.”

“Perhaps he crossed before it became notorious,” Jalyn said.

She fell silent, and Lan did nothing to disrupt her silence. The longer he waited, the more he twisted the fabric of his pants between his fingers.

“I think I saw your sister,” she said, breaking the silence between them.

“Sophie?”

Jalyn nodded. “She was in the city.”

His heart skipped a beat. “How was she?” Lan wasn’t certain what he would do if something had happened to Sophie. There had been a time when he’d wanted nothing more than to get away from his sister, but now that he’d had so much time away from her, he only wanted to ensure that she wasn’t harmed. Wasn’t that his role as the big brother? Wasn’t he to protect her?

And now that he had been training with the sword, learning from Magnus and Kragen, maybe he would be able to.

Sophie would hate it. She hated the idea that he—or anyone—needed to help her. She was so fiercely independent, preferring to do things on her own, even when asking for help was the better option.

“She was... fine at the time I saw her.”

There was something to that comment that troubled him, something Jalyn didn’t want to say, but Lan doubted she would elaborate if he pushed.

“Where did you see her?”

“As I said, in Neylash.”

“I knew she was in the city, but I wondered where in the city they had taken her.”

“She was in the palace.”

“Why would Sophie have been taken to the palace?”

“There are many reasons, but most likely is that they intended to pair her up with someone to strengthen political ties.”

“What do you mean, pair her up?”

“Are you always this dense? Your sister didn’t seem quite as dense as you, but then again, she did seem feistier.”

“We called her passionate.”

“Well, that passion might be used against her. There are those in the palace who enjoy testing a woman’s passion. You had better hope that your sister has learned some way of protecting herself.”

“Such as who? Who would harm a fourteen-year-old girl?”

“There are many who would harm her. But there’s only one that I worry about.”

“And who is that?”

“You mentioned a man with silver eyes?”

Lan nodded. “He traveled with us. When we reached the city, the soldiers separated from him, and they took me to train. The silver-eyed man kept Sophie with him.”

“A dangerous man. He is powerful.”

“Powerful?”

Jalyn arched a brow. “I suspect that given the fact that I found your sister outside of the palace, she has been granted a certain level of freedom not all are allowed. If that’s the case, then the only person who could arrange that for her is a man by the name of Ridaln. Does that name sound familiar to you?”

“No.”

“He is a man who thought to use me. He thought to train me, to serve as his way of fulfilling a story.” She watched Lan, and he could tell she had chosen that word purposely.

“What kind of story?”

“The kind that involves the Pale Princess.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“No. Of course you don’t. You have spent too long in Lorant to understand the stories of the Pale Princess and know what they might mean.”

“My nana told me stories of the Pale Princess. I know who she is.”

“You might know what the stories say, but you don’t know she is not real in the way that he would tell the story.”

“He? This Ridaln?”

“He spread the stories as a way to deter the Raven Queen.”

“And you were involved in them somehow?”

“Perhaps you aren’t quite as dense as you appear.”

“You look like her. I can only imagine that’s why you’re telling me this.”

“I look like what he has created. Yet the stories that you’ve heard are incomplete.”

“Why are they incomplete?”

“They’re incomplete because he created a tale of the Pale Princess, but most neglect to tell all of it.”

“What else is there?” Lan shifted on his bed, feeling uncomfortable sitting so close to Jalyn. This close, he could smell a floral scent on her, a perfume he found appealing. Did she know the influence that it had on him?

Maybe it was nothing more than her confidence. Lan had never been around a woman quite so beautiful. How was he to know how to respond? Yet Jalyn sat watching him with an almost playful smile on her face.

Yes. She *did* know how she made him feel.

He flushed again.

“The Pale Princess. The story Ridaln would like the world to know. The part that is missing is only for the Raven Queen.”

“And how do you know it?”

“Because the Raven Queen told me herself.”

“And what is that?”

Jalyn stood, and she dusted her hands on her pants. She watched Lan before shrugging and taking a step back. “I don’t know that you’re ready to know, not yet.”

She started to leave, but Lan leaped to his feet, chasing after her. “You tell me this and then you leave me?”

“Do you believe that I owe you anything?”

“I don’t believe you owe me anything. But if you were going to tell me a story like that, it seems reasonable you should share the rest of it.”

“I thought you said you weren’t the one in your family who enjoyed stories.”

“Just because I don’t enjoy stories doesn’t mean I don’t want to know how they turn out.”

Jalyn watched him and then nodded, as if coming to some decision. “Perhaps you should know, especially as it seems your sister has gotten caught up in this.”

“Caught up in what?”

“Caught up in Ridaln and his machinations.”

“And what does Ridaln want with my sister?”

“Likely he wants the same thing as he wanted from me.”

“And what was that?”

“He wanted me to be the Pale Princess. He wanted me to fulfill his story, the prophecy that he had created.”

Lan thought about what he knew of the Pale Princess and of the stories that Nana had shared. The Pale Princess was supposed to be powerful, strong enough to overcome the Raven Queen.

“He wanted you to defeat her?” Lan asked.

“He trained me, gave me strength, ensured I learned to fight. He built up an illusion around me. I was to be the Pale Princess. I was to destroy the Raven Queen.”

“What happened? Why didn’t you?”

“If you remain in Reyash long enough, you will learn no one can defeat the Raven Queen.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“What Ridaln has shared is a lie. The Pale Princess was never destined to defeat the Raven Queen. She was her granddaughter.”

With that, Jalyn turned and left, with Lan staring after her.

# CHAPTER 49

## LAN

“Where are you going?” Lan asked Kragen. He had found Kragen near the stables, preparing a trio of horses. The stable smelled of fresh hay, and the dappled gray mare that Kragen brushed looked over and flicked her tail at Lan.

The older man smiled warmly at Lan. “I didn’t realize that you would want to know.”

“You brought me here. You started to train me. And now you’re leaving?”

If Kragen left, what would happen to Lan? Magnus had trained him, but he had done so at Kragen’s behest. Would others be willing to work with him, to develop his swordwork? Magnus had instructed Lan to improve his skill, but that required him to find others willing to train with him. So far, he hadn’t been successful. Everyone else was so busy training on their own, and Lan hated to disturb anyone.

“As you have learned, I am a Taihg. I have many responsibilities. Some have called me out of the town.”

“To serve the Raven Queen?”

“All of my service is on behalf of the Raven Queen. If you ever progress to serve the Taihg, you will find that you will serve the Raven Queen no differently than the rest.”

Lan looked at the other horses that Kragen had readied. “Who’s going with you?”

“You are not a Taihg. Not yet. Don’t try to rush into anything that you aren’t prepared for.”

“I’m not trying to rush into anything. I’m only—”

“Let him come,” a voice said behind him.

Lan turned and saw Jalyn watching. In the shadows, her eyes seemed haunted, and she watched him for a long moment. He wondered if he should have seen her before.

“He’s not ready,” Kragen said.

“Yet he should be there.”

“Why? Why should I be there?” Lan looked from Kragen to Jalyn, but neither responded. “What is it?”

“We’re going to Neylash.” Kragen turned his attention back to his horse, continuing to brush her flanks, and when he was done, he set his saddlebags on her rump. He turned to Jalyn and waited.

The red-haired woman watched Kragen for a long moment before responding to him. “We go to Neylash, and we go where Ridaln has taken his sister, intending to use her as he used me.”

Kragen fixed Jalyn with a hard expression. “We don’t know that.”

“It’s the only reason that he would have abducted her.”

“His sister doesn’t fit the profile. There are many reasons for Ridaln to take in a young girl.”

Jalyn arched her brow. “Excuse me?”

“I’m only saying that there are things other than his desire to teach her to be the Pale Princess that might influence him.”

“Those things are even more dangerous. You know what he is.”

“What is he?” Lan asked.

“He is a sorcerer, and a powerful one.”

“Why does that matter?”

“It matters because he would oppose everything the Raven Queen has attempted to build. If it were up to Ridaln, he would destroy where the gods would have her build.”

“You’re going after him?”

“We intend to weaken him.”

“How do you intend to weaken him?”

“By slowing his plans,” Jalyn said.

Lan glanced from Jalyn to Kragen. “And this has something to do with my sister, doesn’t it?”

Jalyn nodded.

“Then let me come.”

“You’re not ready,” Kragen said. “You may have reached your first blade, but we are going someplace where the Taihg generally do not go. It is dangerous for us to do so.”

“But Jalyn said that she was in Neylash. And you found me in Neylash.”

“I found you because we had gone to check on Jalyn. Instead, we came across you. With a little healing, we thought that we might be able to learn more about the city.”

“I thought you saw the mark of the gods on me.”

“Not until later,” Kragen said.

“I want to go. If it involves my sister, I want to help.”

Kragen and Jalyn shared a long look before Kragen turned and sighed. “It will be dangerous. Coming with us to Neylash puts you at risk.”

“But I’ve spent some time on the patrols. I might at least be able to provide some information.”

“See? He’s already providing value,” Jalyn said.

“And I still disagree,” Kragen said.

“We could send word to the Raven Queen,” Jalyn said. “We could ask what she would prefer.”



“Sending word to her would take too many days. You said that our time is limited.”

“As far as I can tell, it is.”

“Why? Why is it limited?” Lan asked.

“Because another delegation is arriving in Neylash. It’s the only time when we will be allowed into the city. The king continues to summon these delegations, and otherwise, Ridaln keeps the city sealed. When the city is open for the delegations, we can sneak in, but we have to ensure that we’re out when the delegation leaves. Otherwise...” Jalyn smiled tightly. “Otherwise, we’ll be trapped. The city is mostly locked down.”

“That’s when you were there? There was a delegation?”

“Dunvale.”

Lan had heard of Dunvale, but it was far to the west. He didn’t know much about it other than it was a remote place, on the edge of the kingdom. It was similar to Halith in its remoteness. Could there have been a Dunvale delegation when Kragen had found him? He couldn’t recall, but it made sense.

“And what happens if this delegation decides to choose my sister?”

“Then the king can either decide to intervene or allow her to go. If he allows her to go, he solidifies his power.”

Lan didn’t see how Sophie would be involved, but there was much that he didn’t know. Kragen and Jalyn had much more experience with what was taking place in Neylash. They seemed to know much more, though he felt he could help them.

“I’ve patrolled the city. The layout of the city was one of the things I was learning when I was training with the soldiers. I can help guide you. And my sister is there.”

Kragen and Jalyn shared another glance before Kragen finally sighed. “Fine. You may come, but you must remain in the background.”

“He bested Magnus,” Jalyn said. “That tells us that he should be ready for this.”

“Magnus wasn’t prepared for the possibility of being bested.”

“And why should it matter if he wasn’t prepared for it?” Jalyn asked. “A Taihg should always be ready for that possibility. Isn’t that what you taught me when you were training me?”

Kragen chuckled. “Perhaps it is. It’s just that I don’t want to take this boy back into such a dark place. You didn’t see him the way that I did. You didn’t see what happened to him or the way that they had treated him.”

“We’ll keep him safe.”

“I’ve learned much since coming here. I’ll be safe,” Lan said. If his sister was involved, he *had* to be a part of this mission.

“You may have learned much, but there are many things we haven’t been able to teach you,” Kragen said. “But Jalyn is right. If this does have to do with your sister, you should be offered the opportunity to come with us.”

Kragen handed him the reins of one of the horses, and Lan climbed into the saddle. He had not ridden much. The only time he’d spent much time in the saddle had been when traveling to Neylash. He had primarily walked during his time in Halith.

“You know how to ride?” Kragen asked.

“I do,” Lan said.

“Good. We will wait for Magnus, and then—”

“Magnus is coming?” Lan asked.

“You don’t think he should?” Jalyn asked.

“It’s not that. It’s only that Magnus will stand out. He’s so much... more than anyone else in the city,” he said.

Kragen chuckled. “That would be one way of putting it. I think we can all agree that Magnus is more. If we end up in a

tussle, Magnus is exactly the kind of soldier you want on your side.”

Lan didn't disagree with that. He only worried that Magnus might draw attention. He could only think of what would happen were Tohm to see someone like Magnus. How would he react? Would he realize that Magnus shouldn't be there?

“And what's the plan?” Lan asked.

“We intend to infiltrate the palace,” Kragen said.

“What happens if you see my sister?”

“I think the better question is what would you do if you saw your sister?” Jalyn said.

Lan didn't know. “I'll do what I can to help.”

Jalyn nodded.

They each mounted and then sat waiting. Eventually, Magnus appeared, carrying a sack that was easily as tall as Lan, but he carried it effortlessly, as if it weighed nothing.

“What do you have in there?” Lan asked.

“He is coming?” Magnus posed the question to Jalyn.

Was she the one who led this mission? Lan had assumed it was Kragen.

“His sister is in Neylash,” Jalyn said. “And Ridaln has her.”

“You told him this?”

“I *saw* this,” she said.

“Gods. This will be a disaster.”

“That's why only the three of us are going. Four,” Jalyn said, correcting herself.

Magnus said nothing else. He climbed into the saddle and led the way out of town. In the time Lan had been here, he hadn't explored much. He had seen dozens and dozens of houses, shops, and the typical sorts of buildings he would expect in any town. Distantly he heard the clanging of a

blacksmith. The smells of the forest permeated everything with the scent of pine and damp earth.

A few people glanced out of their homes as the four of them rode past. On the edge of the town, a road meandered away, but Magnus nodded to the forest. They veered off to the edge of the forest, where Kragen dismounted and went into the trees.

“What’s he doing?” Lan asked in a whisper.

“He is a Taihg,” Jalyn replied. “He must speak to his god before he does anything.”

Jalyn watched, and Lan frowned to himself.

“Kragen worships Darish?” Lan asked.

“He worships many gods.” She looked over at Lan, a hint of a smile on her face. “And what god do you worship?”

Lan climbed down from his saddle and walked under the trees. There was a weight to the forest, and something else, an insubstantial sense he couldn’t quite place. He saw Kragen kneeling before one of the trees. His head was bowed, and a soft chant came from his mouth, which Lan couldn’t make out.

He didn’t bother trying. If his grandparents had taught him anything, it was that a man’s prayers were his own. They were meant for only Kragen and the gods, and Lan should not attempt to overhear.

Lan moved to the next largest tree and knelt before it. He clasped his hands together and leaned forward, thinking of Darish and all the lessons that he had ever learned about praying to the woodsman god. Would he listen? Would he even care what Lan might have to say? All he wanted was to somehow connect to Darish and ask for the god’s protection—for him and for his sister.

The memory that came to him was when they had first arrived in Halith. Sophie had been scared, uncertain what would happen to them. They had gone into the forest, Nana and Papa giving them space. She had knelt in front of one of the trees, bowing her head, and when Lan had reached her, he had seen her wipe away the tears.

“What happens now?” she had asked.

“We stay with Nana and Papa. They’ll take care of us.”

Sophie had wiped away more tears, and Lan could see her growing stronger by the moment. She had *always* been strong. “What happens if they die?”

The idea of losing both his parents and his grandparents had seemed impossible at that time, and so when he’d answered, he hadn’t thought anything of it. “Then I will take care of you.”

He swallowed at the memory. He hadn’t expected to need to fulfill that promise, but if she was in danger, then he had no choice. Now that he’d been training, he could actually do something to help. He needed to reach her, to protect her from whatever this sorcerer intended for her, and then they could be together again. He would fulfill the promise he’d made.

“Watch over us during this journey,” Lan said. “And grant protection to Sophie. If she is in danger—if this sorcerer has placed her in harm’s way—watch over her so that we can get to her.” He wasn’t sure if his words would be heard, and he wasn’t sure if they mattered. Maybe Darish would know Lan had cared so little for his sister in the past, and that they had argued so often, or maybe Darish would know what was in his heart, and the desire Lan had to help Sophie. Darish could see that, even when Lan didn’t always feel it.

“Grant me strength, Darish. And if you would see fit, bless me with the same strength you have given to the Taihg.” He added the last without really knowing what it meant, but it seemed fitting for some reason.

Wind gusted from behind him, fluttering his jacket. He took a deep breath and stood, turning away from the tree and from Darish, and back to his horse.

When he climbed back on, Jalyn looked over at him. “Did you find peace with your god?”

“I hope so,” he said.

# CHAPTER 50

## SOPHIE

Sophie glanced around the corner of the hallway. The Alitan delegation had arrived, and they filled the hall. There were dozens of them, all dressed in strange clothing, and she had made a point of staying hidden. She didn't want to draw any more attention to herself than necessary.

Clothing of all colors and styles greeted her. Sophie marveled at the plunging necklines of some of the women, the jewels hanging between their breasts, and wondered if she would ever look so fashionable. Many of the women had their hair held up, revealing slender necks, though a couple had tight braids within their hair. Within those braids were dozens of jewels.

She couldn't shake the sense that there was something exotic about these people.

Unlike the clothing in Neylash, many of the gowns the women of the delegation wore were made of silk. They flowed outward, stretching toward the ground and trailing behind them. The men wore silks as well, and they didn't have the same jacket and pants of Neylash. It looked almost as if they wore dresses, too.

All of this was different from the last delegation.

“Another delegation visit, and another time that you're hiding?”

Sophie turned to Nessa, who was standing behind her. How was it she encountered Nessa at each of these delegation

visits? Nessa was dressed in a flowing pale blue gown. Her hair was braided and twirled up atop her head. She looked exquisite. Dressed as she was, with her hair done the way it was, Sophie could almost believe that she was the Pale Princess. Even her jewelry accentuated that image. A blue opal hung from a necklace, dangling nearly to her breasts. She flashed a smile, waiting for Sophie to say something.

“I’m here for the same reason that you are,” Sophie said.

“I doubt that.” Nessa stepped forward down the hallway. She paused and glanced back at Sophie, and there was a question lingering in her eyes. “Did Ridaln instruct you to come here?”

Sophie shook her head. “I haven’t seen him in the last few days.”

She had tried to find him, wanting to continue her training. She had been practicing the poses on her own with some success. She had summoned power a few times more, but not with any consistency. Even trying to read through her books had been difficult. If they were a sorcerer’s journals—and Sophie wasn’t convinced they were, not any longer—she wasn’t able to determine what was in them. The longer she struggled through them, the more she wondered whether she should ask Ridaln if they even were a sorcerer’s journals.

And she had thought she could find some secret hidden in them to give her knowledge about how Ridaln used his magic. She’d been a fool. She couldn’t even crawl. What made her think that she could walk?

“Why do you think that is?” Nessa asked.

Sophie shrugged. “It’s Ridaln. I don’t know anything more than you do about him.”

“I doubt that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

A grouping of well-dressed people squeezed past. There were two men dressed in richly colored jackets, heavy embroidery along them signifying the cost. The women on

their arms wore gowns that were similar to Nessa's, though Nessa managed to make hers look more impressive.

Nessa flashed a smile at them and waited for them to enter the banquet hall before answering. "Only that you have spent more time with Ridaln than almost anyone else in the palace has."

"Are you jealous?"

Even as she said this, Sophie regretted it. What was it about Nessa that had her saying things like that? She liked Nessa—at least, she thought she did. She didn't want to say anything to upset her or anger her. Maybe it would be best for her not to say anything at all.

Nessa stepped close to Sophie and leaned into her. "Ridaln uses you no differently than he uses me. I recognize what he does. I think that you need to recognize the same."

"I know that he wants to use me."

"You know? And you still allow it?"

Sophie shook her head. "I haven't allowed anything yet. I know what he intends. Isn't that enough?"

"Is it enough? What you know about Ridaln is he has demonstrated power to you. What you don't know is—"

"Nessa. Sophie."

Sophie spun and saw Ridaln approaching. She glanced over at Nessa, and her normally pale skin seemed to turn even lighter.

"It is good that you are both here this evening. This delegation is particularly important."

"Because you arranged it?" Sophie asked.

"You have already heard the reason for the delegations, Sophie," Ridaln said.

Nessa watched her. Sophie debated her answer. What did it matter? She had already spoken up and said too much.



“You don’t deny it?” Nessa said. There was heat in her question.

*Why wouldn’t Nessa know?*

“When it comes to serving the kingdom, I do my part.” Ridaln fixed Nessa with a hard stare, daring her to speak.

For her part, Nessa said nothing. She remained silent, watching Ridaln, as if she couldn’t speak.

Sophie glanced down. Ridaln was tapping his fingers together. She had seen him doing that before when summoning his magic. Was he doing it now? Then again, from what he had told her, he was constantly summoning his magic.

“It is strange,” Nessa began.

“What’s strange?” Sophie asked.

“The Alitan delegation. We haven’t had a visit from a place quite so far away before. I find it interesting.” Nessa looked over at Sophie. “Perhaps if you shared the purpose for the delegation...”

Ridaln shrugged. “The purpose is no different from that of any other visit. To bring unity. We have a shared desire to stand against the threat of the Raven Queen.”

“And what threat is that?” Nessa asked.

Sophie was surprised to see Nessa challenging Ridaln.

“What threat? You have been in the palace long enough to know the dangers of the Raven Queen.”

“I’ve been in the palace long enough to know there are stories, but I haven’t seen those dangers myself. When was the last time Lorant was attacked? When was the last time we were even threatened?”

“You don’t believe the Raven Queen poses any danger to Lorant?”

Nessa smiled. “You hide in your tower, sorcerer. You don’t hear the same rumors the rest of us do. There are whispers the war is coming to a close. Whispers it’s time to find a peaceful

solution. The Raven Queen hasn't attacked Lorant. Many think she never *will* attack Lorant."

"You know nothing about the war," Ridaln said.

"I know what you've taught me."

Sophie glanced from Ridaln to Nessa, but Nessa ignored Sophie, whether she was preoccupied with watching Ridaln or whether she truly wanted to ignore Sophie. Nessa's glare carried a heat Sophie hadn't seen before.

"You know very little." Ridaln hesitated. "If all goes well, this will be the last of the delegations." He stared at Nessa for a moment before turning away and striding into the banquet hall.

When he was gone, Nessa let out a quiet sigh and unclenched her hands.

"What was that about?" Sophie asked. "I thought you had trained with Ridaln."

"Trained? No. There has never been any training with Ridaln. He wants me to be his figurehead, but he doesn't understand what that requires of me."

What was Nessa keeping from her?

The woman watched as Ridaln disappeared, and after a while, she shook herself. "You should go with him. I suspect he'll be upset if you don't."

"I don't care if I upset Ridaln."

"I think you will regret it if you anger him."

Nessa left her and entered the banquet hall, and she disappeared into the crowd.

Sophie watched for a while, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Something was going on between Nessa and Ridaln, but she didn't understand it. Maybe Nessa didn't understand what was happening between Sophie and Ridaln, and it made her angry.

Sophie watched the activity in the banquet hall for a while before deciding she needed to enter. She eased around the

walls. She didn't want to draw too much attention to herself. Sophie wasn't dressed nearly as well as Nessa or the other women.

This banquet was similar to the last. There were hundreds of people, all gathered and mingling in the massive hall. Music played at the far end of the room, a mixture of strings and the sweet, almost mournful sound of a flute accompanying a singer. Voices interrupted the music, loud and boisterous. Sophie moved from conversation to conversation, not paying much attention to what was said, searching for people she might know.

Her time in the palace had helped her get to know many people here. Most of them were servants, but there were also the weavers and Nessa.

She didn't recognize anyone.

That was unusual for her. One of her gifts was remembering the people she met. She took it for granted that she would be able to recognize others by face, if not by name. She had made a point of trying to meet as many as she could during her time in the palace, not wanting to feel quite so alone. Sophie hadn't felt overwhelmed in the palace before now.

She paused along the wall, scanning the faces of those within the banquet hall.

There weren't even any servants that she recognized. It wasn't that there were no servants. It was that she didn't recognize those who were here. Dozens of white-clothed men and women hurried through the banquet hall, carrying trays of food and drink, moving from place to place. Most of them kept their heads down, but occasionally a servant would look up and scan the room. Unusual for servants.

What was going on here?

Sophie remained by the back wall, observing.

The banquet hall was large enough that anyone could be lost within it. She needed to be patient. Were she better

dressed, she would make her way through the banquet hall in her search for familiar faces.

Sophie headed toward the table near the back. When she reached it, she frowned. The food wasn't as extravagant as it had been for the last delegation. There were trays of meats and cheeses and row upon row of different breads, but no sign of pastries, though if Oleda was still not feeling well, that wasn't entirely surprising.

Where was Dannith?

At the last banquet, she had seen Dannith mingling with the crowd, chatting with people. He would be quite disappointed there were no pastries this time. She took a roll and stuffed it in her pocket out of habit. She grabbed another one and took a bite, pulling off a hunk of bread.

Sophie spat it out.

The bread tasted strange.

It was the first time since coming to the palace that she had tasted anything strange. She was accustomed to the food being delicious, even better than what Nana had made. Sophie pulled the roll out of her pocket and tossed it back onto the tray.

She was reaching for a cluster of berries when someone grabbed her hand.

She turned and saw Oleda standing across from her.

Oleda was dressed oddly, not in her usual kitchen frock but in an olive-green robe. She carried something, and Sophie at first thought it a spoon before realizing it was a stick of sorts.

Not just a stick. A wand. *Like the one the crone carried.* There was a crystal on the end, glowing softly.

Her breath caught.

“Oleda?”

“You don't want to eat that, Sophie.”

“What is this?”

“This?” Oleda stuffed the wand into her pocket. “This is nothing.” Her gaze drifted to the trays of food, and she shook her head. “But you don’t want to eat the bread.”

“It didn’t taste very good, anyway,” Sophie said. She couldn’t take her mind off the wand.

Oleda smiled tightly. “No. I don’t believe that it would.”

“I thought you weren’t feeling well.”

“Perhaps I wasn’t. I’m better now.”

Sophie studied her for a moment, collecting her thoughts. Something strange was taking place, and surprisingly, Oleda was a part of it. The last thing Sophie had expected was to see Oleda holding a wand with a crystal at the end. So now Sophie had questions—especially about whether Ridaln and Oleda were working together.

“What’s this about?” Sophie asked.

“This is about an attempt to gather power. And it is very nearly complete. What we have spent the last decade protecting is about to fall.” Oleda sighed. “I suppose I should thank you. Without your comment, I doubt I would have noticed, which means *I* have been a fool.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Danger. Power reaching a crescendo. And magic that should not be released coming into the world again.”

Sophie looked around the room. “Is that why there’s no one here that I recognize?”

“That’s because of me,” Oleda said.

“And you are a Karell?” There was no other explanation. Memories of the attack—of the strange woman and the power she had possessed—flashed into her mind. The Karell had killed Nana and Papa. They were responsible for Sophie being in the palace. How was it possible for Oleda to be involved?

“Sophie, there are things that you don’t understand.”

“I understand that the Karell attacked my nana. I understand that she’s gone because of the Karell. I understand

that she won't tell me any more stories. I understand..."

Sophie started shaking. She'd thought she'd be protected here. Despite what Ridaln said, Sophie hadn't really believed she'd have to face the Raven Queen, but now...

"The Karell didn't attack your family. How could they when they were assigned to protect them?"

Sophie blinked. "What? I don't even know what you're saying."

"It doesn't matter. Not right now. All that matters is you need to leave the banquet and let this play out."

"What are you going to do?" Sophie asked. Her gaze drifted to Oleda's pocket, where the wand had been stuffed. "Who are you going to attack now?"

"Attack? Sophie, you have it wrong. This isn't an attack."

"I don't understand."

Oleda looked around for a moment before turning her attention back to Sophie. Finally she nodded. "No. I can see that you don't understand. Which is why you need to come with me."

# CHAPTER 51

## SOPHIE

Oleda grabbed Sophie's hand and pulled her along the hallway. Sophie cast a glance back at the banquet hall. She hadn't even seen Dannith. Ridaln had been there, but only at first. Even he had disappeared. Then again, so had Nessa. What was going on?

Sophie didn't have a chance to ask questions as Oleda pulled her until they reached a narrow back staircase the servants used. She dragged Sophie, twisting down and down the staircase until they reached a landing far below. She'd used this staircase when she had used the servants' bathing room.

"Oleda? Where are you taking me?"

"You mentioned the Pale Princess."

Had she? Sophie couldn't remember when she might have mentioned the Pale Princess. Had it been when she had been visiting with Oleda? Or had it been earlier? Since arriving at the banquet, everything had seemed... off.

*Especially if Oleda is Karell.*

"I did? Why?"

"What do you know about the Pale Princess?"

Sophie shrugged. "Nothing more than stories. But I know she's gone. Lost in the war."

Oleda paused and glanced back at Sophie. When she looked at her like that, there was a strength to her eyes that reminded Sophie of how Oleda ran the kitchen. She had kindness in her, but she was a strong and powerful woman. It

was the reason Karen had not wanted to take over the kitchen. Sophie could imagine running the kitchen was incredibly difficult.

None of that stayed on her mind.

*Ridaln. Oleda.*

*The Karell.*

“Do you know why?” Oleda asked.

“Ridaln told me she was killed in a fight with another sorcerer while he was trying to keep her from releasing a dangerous power.”

“Is that what he said? Ah, it really is time for more truth to be unleashed.”

“What kind of truth?”

Oleda sighed. “The truth about the Pale Princess.” Oleda looked over at her with a deep frown on her face. “When he brought you here, I feared that you were another one of his projects. You were different, though. And when you mentioned the Karell and your brother, I knew that there was something else to you.”

What did she mean? Sophie needed to know more, but it seemed Oleda was leading her deeper into the palace. “Where are you taking me?”

“When you started disappearing up into his tower, my fears were confirmed. I knew he wanted you for one of his projects, and possibly one that was further along than any of us had expected.”

“Oleda, what is this about?”

Oleda pulled her into a small room. When she closed the door, a single lantern glowing in the room was the only light. The air was musty and damp. Sophie looked around, trying not to allow herself to feel fear, but she couldn't help but tremble. What might Oleda do to her? What if she pulled out the Karell wand? Would she use it on Sophie? She remembered the explosion and the way she had felt the power building around



her, practically burning within her. Would Oleda be capable of something like that?

“What are you doing with me?” Sophie asked.

“What am I doing? I’m bringing you to a place where you can get answers.”

“What kind of answers?”

Oleda snorted. “The kind that you should have been asking for from the very beginning. Or perhaps more accurately, the kind that you should have been given from the very beginning.”

“And what is that?”

“Why Ridaln has trained you to fear the Raven Queen.”

“She’s dangerous,” Sophie said, though as she spoke, she realized she was echoing only what Ridaln had told her.

“She is,” Oleda said. “But not for the reasons that you know. The Raven Queen is powerful and dangerous and... she might be the only hope that we have.”

“Hope for what?”

Oleda shook her head. “What has he told you about this?”

Sophie didn’t know what to say or how much to reveal to Oleda, but out of everyone in the palace, Oleda had been the kindest to her. Sophie trusted her.

*But should I?*

Sophie tried to think about what Ridaln had shared with her. There had been a description of the power that the Raven Queen was able to reach, and his fear of it, but there had been something else, too. It wasn’t so much that he was afraid of the Raven Queen. It was that he feared her power. And he wanted to have some of that power.

“Ridaln has told me that the Raven Queen has attacked surrounding nations, that she uses her magic in dark and dangerous ways, and that she will attack in Lorant.”

“All of which are true.”

Sophie's breath caught. If all of them were true, why would she want to work with the Raven Queen? Why would she want to do anything that might put her into more danger? Why would Oleda have pulled her away from the Alitan delegation?

"And he told me the Raven Queen was trying to get an ancient power."

"The Shavl'n," Oleda breathed.

"You've heard of it? Ridaln has been following his mentor's advice on how to prevent this power from returning."

Oleda squeezed her eyes shut. "The Raven Queen hasn't been after this power. Could I have been wrong?" she asked herself. "Could he have been ignorant?"

"Oleda?"

"Ridaln wasn't involved in the war. He came to his position after the king's sorcerer—a powerful man named Darius—was killed by the Pale Princess. At least, that is what we thought. It was Darius who sought the power of the Shavl'n. All this time, I have thought Ridaln was in on it. The delegations all fit with that."

"Why?"

"They trade pieces of power required for the summoning of the Shavl'n. That's why they are here. And why Alitan is the last. With this delegation, the power comes full circle. The Shavl'n can be summoned."

"What did you mean about the Karell protecting my family?"

That had stuck with Sophie. She wasn't sure that she could trust Oleda—though she had—but there was something to that comment.

"What do you think the weavers are, girl?"

Sophie blinked. "The weavers—"

"Are a way to understand power. That's what they teach. And those with potential are trained by the Karell."

“But there are weavers *here*.”

“There are. And many are Karell.”

“But the Karell serve the Raven Queen.”

“The Karell serve no one. The Karell merely *are*.”

Sophie didn't know how to process that, or really what it even meant. All of this felt... too much. But was it?

Sophie was training to use magic, wasn't she? And Nana had wanted to teach her to weave. Could Nana have been trying to train her all along?

“Carolyn?” Sophie asked.

“We needed someone close,” Oleda said, then took a breath. “You need to stay here.”

“Why here?” she asked.

“Because here you can be safe.”

“I wouldn't be safe in the banquet hall?”

“No.”

The simplicity of her response was almost alarming. Oleda had an almost menacing tone, and it was so out of character for her.

“Why not?” Sophie demanded.

“Because of what is happening out there. Trust me, Sophie. You don't want to be a part of it.”

“Why should I trust you?”

Oleda looked at her with a stern expression. “I'm trying to help you.”

“Are you? From what I can tell, you've been keeping things from me.”

“I've been keeping things from a great many people. Most of it has been for their own good.”

“Such as?”

Oleda pulled her wand out of her pocket and tapped it on the table in the room. The crystal on the end glowed with a pale green light. Sophie felt power humming within it, practically reverberating against her. Why should she be so aware of that power? It felt as if she held a pose.

“You feel it, don’t you?” Oleda asked.

“What is it?”

“The wand is the marker of the Karell.”

Sophie stared at it. Could *she* learn to be Karell? “Why am I able to detect power from it?”

“Because you’re attuned to it. When you described the Karell finding you, I knew that you must have been hidden by them, protected.”

“So if the Karell didn’t kill my nana and papa, who did?”

Oleda pulled the door open a crack and peeked out. When she pulled her head back, she glanced over at Sophie. “There are other powers in the world beyond the Raven Queen and those who serve her.”

“Powers greater than the Karell?” Sophie had already learned that the Karell had a connection to magic. Maybe they had the same kind of connection that Ridaln had. She didn’t see any posing from Oleda, but maybe she hid it using the crystal.

“The Karell are one such power, and we seek to protect people from others.”

“That’s not what is in the stories I’ve heard of the Karell.”

“Yes. About that. The stories that you have heard are unusual. There aren’t many who know a lot of stories about the Karell. Most are aware of sorcerers. The Raven Queen is known by many. And then you have mentioned rumors of the Pale Princess, along with the Karell and the Taihg. Now that you’re working with Ridaln, I fear I need to understand *why*.”

Sophie didn’t know whether she trusted Oleda enough to tell her what Ridaln wanted her for, but she was speaking more

openly than anyone else had. “He fears the Raven Queen. He wants to create a magical defense against her.”

“Because Ridaln is a fool. Darius made him a fool.”

Sophie waited for Oleda to say something else, surprised by the sharpness to her tone. Ridaln was many things, but she was surprised to hear anyone calling him a fool.

“Why?” Sophie prompted.

“Because he focuses on the wrong thing.”

“And what’s the right thing?”

“Tell me what you heard the night you first met the Karell.”

Sophie closed her eyes. She could easily recall the thunder, the trembling that seemed to come from deep within the woods. “I heard the Karell’s creature.”

“Is that right? Did you come up with that yourself, or is that something else that Ridaln has shared with you?”

“What did I hear, then?”

“You heard the reason for the Karell. What you heard was the purpose of their existence, and you heard the reason that we know to fear dark places.”

Oleda tapped the wand on the table again, and the crystal glowed more brightly with the soft green light. It was enough to push back the shadows of the room that remained despite the lantern. It was a plain room, plain walls, crisscrossing exposed beams, a table and a couple of chairs. Sophie didn’t even know what it might be used for. It had to be deep in the servants’ section of the palace. Something about being here made Sophie uncomfortable. She shouldn’t be. She trusted Oleda—at least she had—but she had been dragged away from the banquet, and no one knew where to find her.

“You haven’t answered my question,” Sophie said.

“No. I’m afraid that I have not.” She turned to Sophie. “What have you been learning from Ridaln?”

Sophie frowned. “What have I been learning? He’s been showing me how to access magic.”

Oleda frowned. “Has he? Can you show me what he has been teaching you?”

Sophie considered the request. What harm was there in demonstrating the poses that Ridaln had shown her? She could barely do anything with them, so it was unlikely that she would be successful in re-creating them. Most of the time, she was lucky to feel the surge of energy as she held the pose.

“I’ll show you, but I don’t know that I’m the best person to demonstrate this.”

Sophie stepped back and decided to move into the prayer pose. Holding it was difficult, and it caused immediate strain on her joints. She felt throbbing where she’d been injured, despite what Ridaln had done to heal her. As she held the pose, as her arms trembled and shook, she could feel Oleda and her gaze upon her.

More than that, she felt energy swirling around her.

It was much like when she had first held the pose for Ridaln. Why was Oleda holding energy around her? Was she afraid of Sophie losing control of the magic and allowing it to explode out from her? Did she fear damaging the walls of the small room?

Sophie pushed those thoughts out of her mind. She pushed out thoughts of everything, trying to ignore the images in her head. She wanted to ignore the thought of Oleda holding the wand with the crystal at the end. Sophie wanted to ignore the thought of Nessa taunting her. She wanted to ignore even Ridaln and his promise to teach, yet his aloof way of doing so.

She thought of how she’d been successful in the past. Success—holding this pose—had required her to have an empty mind and focus only on the posture.

She intended to use the same power that Ridaln summoned. Eventually, she would walk where she now crawled. Power built within her, starting at her toes and flowing up through her.

It was a familiar sensation, filling Sophie with the belief she could finally reach the magic Ridaln was teaching her. She was meant to grasp it.

“Enough!”

Sophie was startled from the pose, and as she shifted, the magic sizzled out before slamming against the barrier Oleda held. Sophie looked up and saw the wand glowing more brightly, the green within the crystal a bright and shining light. As her magic faded, so did the light.

“You wanted to see what he was showing me,” Sophie said.

“I did.”

“Well, that’s what he’s been showing me. I can do a few of these poses well enough to feel the energy surging through me, but more than that...” Sophie shook her head, and her gaze fixed on the wand. “I’m not anything like Ridaln. I can’t summon magic without holding the poses. He tells me that in time, I’ll be able to draw upon magic without needing to hold each pose, but I don’t know how that’s possible. I’ve kept trying to find answers, but there’s nothing in any of the books that he has about how he uses magic without holding poses.”

Oleda breathed out heavily, and she watched Sophie. “No. I imagine there is nothing in his archives. Had I known he had been working with you so diligently and that you had been so successful, I might have intervened sooner.”

“Why? What are you afraid of?”

The wide-eyed way that Oleda looked at her told her that the woman *was* afraid, though why would she fear Sophie? She hadn’t done anything—and she doubted that she would be successful in doing much else. Her magic wasn’t nearly as powerful as what Ridaln was able to draw upon.

“You asked about the Karell,” Oleda said. “You’ve asked about the Raven Queen. And you’ve asked many good questions. Unfortunately, now isn’t the time to answer most of them. What I can tell you is that the magic Ridaln has been teaching you is a summons.”

“I know. I’m summoning magic.”

“You’re not summoning magic. You are summoning something else. Something much more dangerous. Had you not told me what you did about Ridaln, I might think this all his idea, but I wonder if he doesn’t even know.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The magic that he has been showing you is designed to summon a dark power.”

“The Shavln?”

Oleda nodded, and Sophie gasped.

“Darius never had the ability to summon that kind of power. It was never his strength. His was coercion. It’s how he drew the Lorant king into his schemes. We have done what we could to oppose his influence, but it seems his influence has lingered too greatly within Ridaln.”

“How have you opposed him?”

“The king has a love of rhubarb pastries. I have made certain that each pastry he has provides a certain level of protection. Unfortunately, it seems Darius’s influence is too great. Any help that I have given the king is no longer effective.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I think that I will need your help. If we are to stop this, we will require more than I’m able to do on my own.” Oleda leaned forward, and she tapped the wand again on the table. The light glowing from the end of the crystal had begun to fade, and as she tapped it, the brightness surged once more. “Will you help, Sophie Varison?”

Sophie didn’t know what to say. Everything that Oleda had told her felt... strange. Was it strange because she didn’t know whether to believe it, or because it was true? Could it be that Ridaln *had* been manipulating her without even knowing what he was doing? She believed that it was possible, and there was no questioning that he had power.



“I just don’t understand how I could be summoning anything.”

“You don’t believe me. Perhaps that’s for the best. I’ve told you quite a bit, and I imagine that it’s difficult for you to take in. I can’t remain here in hiding for much longer. I’m going to need to go and assist the others, but promise me this, Sophie Varison. If you remain here, studying with Ridaln, think about what happens when your power draws through you. Think about where it goes and what happens to it.”

Oleda pulled the door open, and she glanced into the hallway before stepping out. She started down the hall toward the stairs at the end. Sophie watched her go.

“Oleda,” she said.

Oleda turned and looked at Sophie.

“You never told me why the Karell were watching my nana and papa.”

Oleda smiled tightly and shook her head. “That’s not for me to share. What you should know is that they were not killed by the Karell. They wouldn’t have been, especially as \_\_\_”

An explosion rocked the palace, sending Oleda staggering to the side. She spun around, and without saying anything more, she hurried down the hall to the stairs. Green light began glowing brightly as she ascended, leaving Sophie standing alone, debating what to do.

# CHAPTER 52

SOPHIE

The kitchen was empty.

Sophie wasn't surprised to find it empty. She was only surprised that it seemed so *completely* empty. There was little light, and the only warmth radiated from the ovens. The smell of bread baking had faded. She found a pot of congealed soup resting on a table, and the pot was cold to her tentative touch.

Where had everyone gone?

Could everyone in the kitchen have worked for Oleda and her mission?

She paused at the pantry, pulling the door open and savoring the scent of the pastries. The smells were faded, the fruits no longer sharp, and the shelves empty. With Oleda gone, there would no longer be anyone here to make the pastries.

Emptiness filled Sophie's heart, matching what she saw in the kitchen.

What was she to do now?

She didn't know where to go. Should she stay in the palace or go somewhere else?

Sophie wandered through the kitchen to the back staircase.

If she took the stairs down, they would lead into the servants' quarters, where she could reach the bathing room, as well as the stairs leading up to Ridaln's tower. Now that she

knew Oleda's purpose, she understood why she had wanted to be so close to the entrance of Ridaln's tower.

If she took the stairs upward, they would lead to where she had often wandered, sitting with pastries as she stared at the portraits in the hallway, occasionally running into Dannith. It was unlikely that she would find him today. Maybe he was gone, too. Maybe he had been part of the same plot as Oleda.

Sophie took the stairs up. As she climbed, she became aware of pressure building around her. It was familiar only because of Ridaln's training. She still wasn't certain his training had been as nefarious as Oleda had said.

At the second landing, Sophie paused and looked out at the wall of pictures. The portraits seemed to be watching her, judging what she might decide. Something about the younger man and the dark-haired woman drew her eye, though she couldn't understand why.

"You shouldn't be here."

Sophie spun and saw Dannith standing at the top of the stairs, watching her. He was dressed more formally than she had seen him before, and his robes were deeply embroidered, more so than even the best-dressed people she'd seen at the banquet. Beneath his robes, there was a strange bulge. A sword. Why would Dannith need a sword?

"Where should I be?" she asked.

Dannith hurried down the hall, his gaze glancing along the portraits, his head shaking. "Not here. Be gone."

*Be gone?*

That didn't sound like something Dannith would say.

Sophie trailed him as he made his way along the hallway to the wide staircase that led up to the royal quarters. Where was he going?

"Do you serve the king?"

Dannith hesitated on the stairs before turning back and watching her with more intensity in his eyes than he had ever had before. "Why does it matter?"

“I don’t know who you serve.”

“Why must I serve anyone?”

Sophie shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t know where you go or what you do. And every time I see you, it happens to be near here or at one of the banquets or...”

She thought about Dannith and his fondness for pastries. He was a plain-looking man, normally. Today, dressed in formal robes, she saw him in a different light.

And he seemed... different.

Somehow more regal, if that were possible.

Sophie gasped. “You’re him.”

“I am me.”

Sophie shook her head. “No. The king. You’re him.”

Dannith reached the next landing—the landing for the royal quarters—and strode down the hallway without saying another word to her. At the end of the hall, he pushed open the door to one of the rooms. Sophie followed and gasped as she saw a body lying sprawled across the floor.

“Carolyn?” Sophie whispered.

She crouched next to the woman, discovering an injury to her head. It had been caved in, and blood stained the flagstones. Carolyn was dressed in a beautiful gown, one that would have rivaled Nessa’s. Her hair had been braided and twisted so it could be pinned up, but bits of gore spattered it.

Sophie looked up, but she saw Dannith searching the room, ignoring Carolyn.

“What happened to her?” she asked.

Oleda had mentioned the weavers and how they trained Karell.

*Could that be why she was hurt?*

But why didn’t Dannith even seem to care? What was going on here?

“She was killed.”

“How was she killed? Why does it seem as if you don’t care what happened to her?”

Dannith leveled a hard-eyed stare at Sophie. “There is nothing for me to do.”

He continued rifling through Carolyn’s belongings, as if searching for something.

Sophie crouched beside Carolyn, feeling the cold of her body. The woman must have been gone for a while to be this cold. It reminded Sophie of the way Nana had rested when they had found her. Carolyn would no longer form her weaves, nor sit and gossip with the rest of the circle. She would no longer be able to tell stories.

Tears streamed from Sophie’s eyes.

“I didn’t realize you were close to her,” Dannith said.

There was something about his voice that seemed off from the last time that Sophie had spoken to him. He seemed cold and disinterested, but the voice was also deeper, if that were possible.

“Not close. I wove with her a few times. She was... kind to me. Not everyone is.”

He glanced down at Carolyn a moment before he continued searching through one of the wardrobes. Sophie stood, barely able to take her gaze off Carolyn, and watched Dannith as he moved about the room, pulling open cabinets and searching inside.

“What are you looking for?” she asked, heading toward Dannith.

He paused and glanced over his shoulder at her. “I’m looking for a way to defend myself.”

“Defend yourself? You have a sword. Are you looking for another one?”

Dannith shook his head. “I’m not looking to defend myself in that way.”

Sophie had started to question what he meant when she felt a building pressure.

She had felt that pressure before, and it sizzled along her skin, practically freezing her flesh. She recognized the source.

Ridaln.

*Where is he?*

She turned and looked for the sorcerer but saw no sign of him. Still there came the steady cold sensation along her skin. Pressure continued to build, and Dannith began to search more frantically. Could he feel it also?

“Dannith?”

If he were the king, she would need to be more formal with him, but she knew him only as Dannith, not as anything else. Maybe it was a mistake to be so informal with him, but with a body lying in front of her, she didn’t know how to be more formal.

“Do you feel it?” she asked.

“Feel what?”

Sophie turned toward the doorway. She could feel the power building. She wished she had access to magic—real magic, not the kind that she had been learning from Ridaln. She wished that she could perform the kind of magic she had heard about in stories, the kind the Karell possessed, the kind that could stop a sorcerer, but all she knew was odd, specific poses.

Yet hadn’t she proven that holding those poses wasn’t completely useless?

She had destroyed a section of the garden by holding one of those poses, hadn’t she? Ridaln had been forced to maintain a protective barrier around her for fear that she might destroy something with her connection to power, so there had to be something to what she could do.

The pressure continued to build.

Sophie debated which pose she should try. All of them could be used to focus the energy that Ridaln had wanted her to summon, which meant that any of the poses could be effective.

What if one pose was more likely to summon the dark energy that Ridaln wanted?

As the power continued to build, she decided it didn't matter. What mattered was finding a way to resist the approaching power. If there was any malevolence to it, she needed to counter it.

She glanced over at Dannith and saw him still searching through Carolyn's belongings. What was he searching for? He'd said he was looking for protection, but what sort of protection?

She needed to try her pose. She couldn't wait any longer, not if she intended to be successful. The prayer pose had always been easiest for her. It was the one that she had used to first focus the energy, and the one with which she'd had the most success.

She pulled her arms up into the appropriate pose, readying herself.

Could this be a mistake?

Was she summoning dark magic, or was that a lie? She had to escape, so she had to use her magic.

Her body was stiff, and it ached, a strange sensation, considering she hadn't done anything strenuous recently. It was as if holding the pose earlier had strained her. Her thoughts raced as she held the pose, and she tried pushing them away, wanting nothing more than to let go of all thoughts and distractions. It was hard to do, especially with the energy building around her.

*Was it Ridaln?*

Or more worrisome, was it someone else?

Should she fear the Raven Queen, or had Oleda told the truth? What would it mean for Sophie if the Raven Queen

attacked Lorant?

She wasn't ready for this. She wasn't ready for *any* of this. She wasn't the right person to counter the Raven Queen. It didn't matter if the power came from the Raven Queen or Ridaln, she couldn't match that kind of power.

An empty mind. That was the key.

How could she empty her mind when so much was taking place around her?

And what was Dannith doing?

She looked back, distorting the pose and cursing to herself. He still searched through one of the wardrobes, scrambling through it as if he could find something in there that Carolyn had hidden. What would she have to help Dannith protect himself?

Sophie resumed her pose. It had been a mistake to let go of the pose. Now she had to start over. As she pulled herself back into the prayer pose, she focused on her breathing, hoping she could clear her mind, empty it of the thoughts threatening to overwhelm her. They left her trembling and afraid.

*Focus on the pose.*

She kept those words going through her mind, but her arms burned, and her legs throbbed. The pain reminded her of when she had been beaten and broken. Were it not for Ridaln, she wouldn't have recovered well enough to even hold the pose.

How could he be someone to fear? He had helped her. He had wanted to teach her.

Maybe all of this was a mistake. Maybe there was an attack taking place on the palace, and she needed to help Dannith keep from being injured by whoever was coming to attack.

Either way, she had to hold the pose.

*Focus on the pose.*

It became a chant within her mind. With it, she was finally able to clear away other thoughts, finally able to think of



nothing other than holding on to her pose. Nothing else remained other than that one thought.

She breathed in and out, taking deep breaths, focusing on the pose.

Power began to build.

Was it within her, or was it external?

*Focus on the pose.*

Another deep breath. She corrected her posture, shifting the slightest amount so that she could hold the pose a little differently, hopefully more accurately.

The power continued to build deep within her. Sophie adjusted her posture again, focusing on the pattern in the pose. Each time she did, the power swelled deep within her. It came from her toes first, flowed up her legs, surged through her belly, then built into her hands and up into her head.

Now there was no mistaking the power came from within her.

She held on to it, maintaining her focus, not wanting to lose the connection. If she did, what would happen? Would she explode too soon? Would she lose control before she had a chance to use this power on whoever was coming?

Sophie focused on her breathing. She didn't dare move and release the power. She didn't want to explode the magic away from her quite yet.

A different sort of power pushed against her.

Sophie's breath caught. She took in deep breaths, trying to control her emotions, not wanting to be overwhelmed by what she detected, but it was difficult. How could she not feel overwhelmed by this power? It was more than anything she'd ever felt before.

“What are you doing?”

Sophie resisted the urge to turn. If she did, she would lose the pose, lose the connection to the power within her. She

feared that happening. Some of the poses that she'd learned in the books helped her hold on to this one.

Then she saw Ridaln.

He appeared in the doorway dressed in flowing crimson robes, his silver eyes flashing with a barely restrained fury. He glanced from Sophie to Dannith and then to Carolyn lying motionless on the floor. "What is this?"

Sophie couldn't speak. Even that much movement might disrupt the power that she held, and she would lose control of it.

There was a building pressure, though it didn't come from Ridaln, not as Sophie had expected. It came from behind her.

From Dannith.

"Sophie, you need to ease what you're doing," Ridaln said. "There's too much power in your pose. You can't control it."

"Hold it," Dannith said.

"Do not hold it. Release that energy before—"

Sophie was struck in the back.

She staggered forward, and power exploded out from her.

It was an incredible amount of power, more than she had ever summoned before, and it flowed through her, building and building until it took on a life of its own.

Ridaln pressed his hands out, and there was a slight tremor to them as they moved, slight enough that Sophie couldn't be certain.

Was that his pose? Was that his way of releasing the power that he had built up?

She rolled to the side, pain throbbing in her back. She couldn't see much. Her vision had gone blurry. There was energy all around her. Her power.

"You made a mistake, Ridaln."

Sophie turned, barely able to move, and she saw Dannith holding up a wand much like Oleda had used.

A Karell wand.

The crystal on the end glowed, though this time, it didn't glow with the same greenish light. This was a deep blue—almost black—and the power that sizzled from it was enormous.

Sophie could almost see the power swirling in the room. The crystal was the only thing she saw with any clarity. Could Dannith have attacked her? That seemed so unlike the man who had shared pastries with her. Why would he attack her?

With a pulse of the bluish-black light, the energy Sophie had created was drawn toward Dannith.

He swirled the wand around, and the power surged into him, filling him.

As it did, he changed.

Sophie had no other way of describing it. It seemed as if he became larger, and power emanated from him. His features even changed. He no longer looked like Dannith. Now he looked younger, with tight lines around the corners of his eyes. His mouth was pressed into a thin line.

This wasn't Dannith.

*Then where is he?*

Ridaln kept his hands out. Power flowed from him, pushing against not-Dannith, though Sophie suspected not-Dannith was able to resist.

“Ridaln?” she whispered.

“You should go, Sophie,” Ridaln said. “I fear what Darius intends.”

“Darius?” Sophie asked, starting to turn, but she worried about what would happen if she did. “As in your mentor?”

“And you thought me defeated,” Darius said, a dark smile curling his lips. “All while doing exactly what I needed, and all because she has helped restore my full potential.”

“I didn't do anything,” Sophie said, confusion filling her. “I...”

Darius laughed. There was darkness there. “No? My ability to summon this power has been limited. And then you appear. Ridaln has been working with you as I coaxed him to, wanting to teach you, hoping that you could someday replace him.” Darius looked over at Ridaln with a dark sneer on his face. “He knew his own power was fading. He searched and searched for another, wanting to find a way to maintain his hold on me.”

“I have served the throne,” Ridaln said. “What have you done with the king?”

“Only what I had to,” he said.

Sophie looked at Carolyn. Had this Darius done the same to Dannith?

“You killed Carolyn?” she asked.

“Don’t mourn the Karell, girl,” Darius said. “I never did.”

Sweat streamed from Ridaln’s brow, and he kept his hands pressed out from him. Sophie realized that he was holding a pose. Something simple, basic, and as she watched, she realized it was similar to ones he had taught her.

She could feel the way his pose and the power he called upon held back the power surging from Darius. Yet he was failing. His power was being drained, weakening him.

Could she help?

The better question was whether she wanted to.

“Is this the Shavln?” she asked.

Ridaln barely moved. “You need to go, Sophie.”

“Is it?”

“That is what he’s always wanted. He has started to release the power, and if he succeeds...”

“How did he summon it?”

“Darius was never able to summon that power. Nor could I.” Horror washed across Ridaln’s face. “Until I arranged everything to permit it. I was used.”

“You were susceptible,” Darius said. “It was easy enough with the right touch. I needed those with the proper type of power, and *that* was something you had.” He turned to Sophie, far more at ease than he should be. “There are few in the world able to summon the power of the Shavln.”

“What does that mean?” she whispered.

Ridaln shifted his head the barest amount, enough that he could look over at her. “Unfortunately, *you* summoned the Shavln.”

“I...”

“It’s not your fault, but its power has been released, at least in part. Now that Darius has drawn it in, he can summon more. I can explain more to you later, if we survive.”

“Can I help?”

Ridaln nodded slightly.

Sophie struggled to her feet, and she stood on the other side of Ridaln. She mimicked his posture but changed it, thinking of what he had taught her, as well as the slight modification she needed to hold the prayer pose. She focused on clearing her mind, her thoughts going blank. She wanted only to help and build more power.

Would she be able to?

Darius didn’t get closer, as if held back from her by the pose.

“You must be careful with your pose,” Ridaln instructed, “as well as with your intent. If you’re not, you run the risk of lending the Shavln more power.”

Sophie’s breath quickened, and her heart raced. Even without doing anything, sweat beaded on her brow. If she made a mistake, if she released the wrong kind of power, she could unleash even more.

She had to push those thoughts from her mind. What choice did she have?

Sophie raised her hands, focusing on the barrier pose.

It was a simple pose, one that required her to hold her hands in a relaxed posture, pressed out from her body.

But did it need to be relaxed? With the way that she saw Ridaln pushing against Darius, there didn't seem to be any relaxation in him. He was tense, as if he was being pushed back, though he attempted not to move.

Sophie planted her feet. She tried not to think about how impossible it was that she was involved in this battle. She tried not to think about how this fit with every story that Nana had ever told. Sophie tried not to think about the way energy surged from her.

She *felt* it.

It was different from when she held the prayer pose.

This energy came from within her chest, pressed out from her hands, and filled her head.

She tried not to get excited. She held, maintaining the pressure.

Darius pointed his wand at her. The darkness on his face was terrifying.

“Please,” she whispered.

Darius shook his head. “When this is over, there is much I can teach you.”

She shivered at the darkness within his tone. There was nothing she wanted to learn from him. There was nothing he could say that she wanted to be a part of. Nothing.

Darkness exploded from the end of the wand.

Sophie kept her hands pressed out from her, bracing herself, but when the dark energy slammed into her barrier, she wasn't strong enough.

It threw her back.

She slammed into the wall and fell to the floor. She tried to stand, but she couldn't. Everything hurt. Her back throbbed, and pain surged down her legs.

Had she broken her back?

Without looking over, she felt power building again.

It would be directed at Ridaln. She didn't need to look over at Darius to see the way his power was focused or where he would send it.

But why?

The power exploded from Darius, and she heard Ridaln grunt softly.

She looked over and saw that Ridaln was down. What had happened to him?

“Ridaln. Get up.”

He moaned and rolled to his side.

Sophie saw Darius approaching. He had the wand held out from him, and the end of it glowed deep blue. Would a Karell wand work for her? If she could find one, would she be able to summon the same sort of power?

Yet she didn't even know how to hold a pose effectively. How would she be able to use a Karell wand to add to her capability?

“Darius. You don't have to do this.”

He looked at her with darkness in his eyes. He made his way toward her, and Sophie rolled. As she did, she flopped onto something.

Carolyn.

Sophie tried moving, but she felt something beneath her that was not only the softness of Carolyn. It felt strange.

She reached for it.

And she pulled out a wand.

She held it up, pointing it at Darius.

He eyed the wand for a moment and sneered at her. “You can barely hold a pose. What makes you think I would be afraid of you holding a Karell wand?”

“Don’t do this.” Her voice shook, and she took a step back, trying to hold on to a pose as she did. She didn’t know if the Karell wand required her to hold a pose the same way, but if it did, she intended to be prepared.

She used the barrier pose, only this time the wand was gripped tightly in her hand.

Surprisingly, power built up within her, surging through her chest and out through her hand and... through the wand.

Darius tried pushing through the magic she generated, but he couldn’t.

Sophie smiled tightly and held on to her connection with the wand. The pose was easier while holding the wand. Why hadn’t Ridaln told her?

Unless easier didn’t make it safer. He had been consistent in telling her she needed to walk before she could run. No, he had wanted her to crawl before she could walk.

Darius attempted to send a surge of power at her, but she maintained her pose, pushing against him. He glared at her but couldn’t reach her barrier.

Ridaln got to his feet and started to raise his hands, so Darius shifted, sending a rush of power toward Ridaln.

Ridaln rolled away. When he came to his feet, Darius had reached the door and disappeared from the room.



# CHAPTER 53

## LAN

The city of Neylash loomed in front of Lan. Even from a distance, it was clearly a massive collection of structures, buildings that sprawled out from the huge central palace. When he had been in the city, he hadn't been aware of the enormity of it. Returning with the Taihg, its immensity stunned him. He'd forgotten how vast it was.

Kragen stopped them on a hill leading into the city. Jalyn rode slightly ahead before she stopped as well. She stared down into the distance, her eyes narrowing as she seemed to struggle to take in the impressive vista. Lan watched, as usual unable to take his gaze off her.

"What are we waiting on?" he asked.

Kragen grunted. "Jalyn has been monitoring Neylash. We have all been."

"Monitoring for what?"

"For signs of our next mission."

Lan hoped they would explain. Instead, Kragen rode forward and joined Jalyn as she stared down at the city. That left Lan and Magnus sitting together. The much larger man didn't say anything. Throughout the journey, he hadn't said much at all.

"What are we doing here?" Lan asked.

He wasn't even sure how they expected to get all the way into the city. When he'd been there before, the city had been

closed to outsiders. Did they think they could get past the gates?

Magnus looked over. His brow furrowed deeply, and he smiled at Lan. “We are here because this is where the Raven Queen has called us.”

“But why did she call us here?”

And if they were called here, why only a few of them? Why not more? If there was something taking place in Neylash and they needed assistance, why wouldn't there be more coming to help?

“Think about what your gods said to you,” Magnus said.

“My gods? Darish doesn't speak.” At least, Darish hadn't spoken to Lan. From what Nana had said, Darish spoke to others, and Papa had believed the woodsman god communicated with him, though Lan didn't know whether to believe that.

“Regardless of what you think, the gods speak to us. And know that they speak to the Raven Queen.”

Lan breathed out. If everything went right, if this was what Kragen believed, he would get to see his sister again. More than anything else, that was what he wanted. After everything he'd been through, seeing Sophie was what motivated him.

Kragen and Jalyn spoke softly to each other before turning and motioning to Lan and Magnus. Magnus started forward, leaving Lan to follow. He rode behind them. As they approached the city, anxiety built within him. He didn't understand why, but he sweated, and his hands shook.

When they reached the edge of the city, Lan felt even more anxiety. These were streets he'd patrolled, places where he'd been tested and beaten. Would they come across Jarson or Tohm or Graychen? If they did, Lan wasn't sure how he would feel.

They had beaten him but also helped him realize he could do more than what he believed. Without the training, he didn't know if he would have realized his potential to be a soldier.

They meandered through the streets, coming to a steep slope upward, gradually approaching the palace in the distance. The palace loomed over everything.

Jalyn called for them to halt.

“It won’t be much farther,” she said.

“Until what?” Lan asked.

“Just be ready.”

Lan looked at the others but still wasn’t certain what they intended. They weren’t sneaking through the city. They made their way openly, as if unconcerned about who might see them. He was more worried than they appeared to be.

Jalyn dismounted and led her horse. Kragen and Magnus followed, with Lan hurrying behind them, all too aware of how out of place he was.

The streets were empty—certainly emptier than he remembered. Why would that be? What was taking place in the city?

“Something’s wrong,” Lan said.

“Be quiet.” Kragen held up his hand in warning.

“What is this? What’s happening here?”

Kragen leaned close to him. “There are plans for an attack. We are using the attack to sneak in.”

“For what?”

“To bring down Neylash.”

Kragen started away, and Lan stared after him. What did he mean by bringing down Neylash? He didn’t know if he wanted that. He only knew that his sister was here, and he was determined to see her. If she was in any danger, he would help her.

Jalyn ducked into a fenced-in yard and paused long enough to tie up his horse and pull a pack from the horse’s back. She touched the sword sheathed at her side before turning to Kragen and nodding. The man breathed out heavily, and Lan

stared at them, wondering what he was missing. They hadn't wanted him to come with them, but was that for his own safety or for theirs?

“What kind of attack is it?” Lan asked.

Kragen shook his head.

Lan looked over at Jalyn, but she didn't answer.

Why was he even asking? Lan knew the answer even without raising the question. For the Taihg to be here, that meant that it was a magical attack.

They continued to make their way through the streets. Lan remained quiet, too nervous to say anything, not wanting to draw any attention.

They skirted around the perimeter of the palace and reached a massive wall.

“How are we supposed to climb over this?” Kragen asked.

“We aren't climbing over it,” Jalyn said.

“Then how do we pass?”

“His sister. She revealed that there is an entrance into the garden.”

Sophie had opened the way for the attack. Would she be angry? Probably, but likely she, like Lan, thought Jalyn to be the Pale Princess.

Jalyn moved carefully along the street, then ducked down what appeared to be an alleyway. A narrow street led back to the rest of the wall, and a small gate. Jalyn hurried to the gate and attempted to force it open, but nothing happened.

“Blasted gods,” Jalyn swore. “It must've been unlocked.”

She looked over at Magnus. The larger man stepped up to the gate, and he pressed his hands to it. As he did, he closed his eyes and breathed out slowly. The ground rumbled.

At first Lan thought he was only imagining it. As it continued, he realized it was real. Magnus's hands began to

vibrate, softly at first and then with increasing speed and intensity. As they vibrated, the rumbling persisted.

Finally there came a loud crack, and he pushed the door open.

“Well, if nothing else draws attention to us, that will,” Kragen said with a hint of a smile.

“What choice did we have?” Jalyn asked.

“No choice, but I do wish there had been a quieter way.”

They stepped inside, and Lan looked around at a massive garden. Flowers of many hues sent their fragrances into the air. It was cloying, an almost overwhelming mixture of scents. He imagined Sophie enjoying the garden.

“She’s been here,” he said.

Jalyn nodded. “Likely she has been here,” she said. “We’ve tried keeping a presence here, but there is only so much we can do and only so much influence we have.”

“What kind of influence?”

“The kind that helps prevent this garden from becoming something else.”

Lan looked around. What else could the garden be?

As they made their way through the garden, Magnus grabbed fistfuls of flowers and twisted them. It wasn’t like the man to be so destructive, which told Lan that there was a reason behind his destruction. Was it something about the flowers? He had thought that Magnus worshipped Darish, but maybe he followed a different god.

Kragen glanced over and noticed that Magnus was tearing up flowers, and he unsheathed his sword and swept it in an arc through the garden. He sliced off the heads of the flowers and disrupted the colors—and the patterns, Lan realized—that were present in the various beds.

“Does the garden generate magic?” Lan asked.

“The garden’s purpose is over,” Jalyn said. “It was to alert others in the palace when we arrived.”

“What others?”

“The Karell.”

Lan shivered. He still hadn't gotten over the memory of the Karell and the attack when they had lost Nana and Papa.

*But were they even responsible?*

The Taihg hadn't been responsible, so maybe the Karell hadn't been, either.

Lan wasn't even sure what he knew anymore.

“We need to hurry,” Jalyn said.

“Why? What do you detect?” Kragen asked.

“I am... I am not certain. There is great power here. I fear the source of that power.”

Kragen studied her for a long moment before glancing over at Lan. He nodded slowly. “We have enough presence with the Karell here that we can counter what is taking place.”

“How many of the Karell are in the palace?”

“Hopefully enough.”

“Hopefully?”

“If we are not in time, a dark union will take place. If it does, even the Raven Queen may not be powerful enough to overwhelm it.”

They reached a small door tucked away in a corner of the garden. Jalyn tried the handle, found it unlocked, and hurried inside. They filed in one after another, with Lan last. Once inside, it took his eyes a moment to adjust. The air still carried the fragrance of the flowers. A few lanterns glowed where they hung on hooks. Decorative sculptures were tucked into corners, and a few tapestries hung along the walls.

Jalyn glanced up and down the hallway before nodding. All followed her as she crept along. Her hand remained on the hilt of her sword. When she reached the end of the hall and poked her head around the corner, she unsheathed her blade.

Kragen still had his sword unsheathed from when he had been hacking at the garden, and Magnus drew his blade, which left only Lan unarmed. He pulled his sword out. They hadn't encountered anyone in the palace hallway, and he had certainly seen nothing that would make him think that he needed to be prepared to fight. Still, he would be ready.

When he rounded the corner, he caught sight of movement at the end of the hall.

He barely had a chance to react. Soldiers fell on them, attacking with vigor. In the confined space, Magnus and his massive sword and sweeping motions were less effective. He was forced back and nearly stepped on Lan. Lan tried pushing forward, but Kragen and Jalyn blocked his way. They fought with smaller movements, though still sweeping arcs, as they flowed through the patterns now familiar to Lan.

One of the men fell.

Kragen and Jalyn pushed forward, and Lan stepped over the fallen body. He had a short sword, and Lan grabbed it. It would be better fighting in the confines of the narrow hallways with a shorter blade.

They pushed against the attack and fought quietly. The only sound was that of metal smacking against metal, and the occasional grunt coming from the soldiers.

And then all was quiet.

Lan looked around at the bodies littering the floor. There were five, more than he had expected when they had started down the hallway. His own blade was clean. He hadn't engaged in the fighting, though whether that was because Kragen and Magnus had kept him back or because he simply hadn't been able to get close enough, he didn't know. He slipped his long, slender blade back into its sheath, preferring to hold on to the short sword. Magnus gave him a side-eyed glance but said nothing.

Jalyn motioned for them to follow, and she hurried down the hallway, continuing to move silently. She moved more quietly than Lan. His own boots seemed to thunder across the

flagstones. Then again, the steady pounding of his heart was almost as loud.

They reached some stairs. Jalyn paused before waving for them to follow. Somewhere in the palace, Lan would find Sophie. More than anything, that drove him forward. He hadn't seen his sister in months, and he was the older brother. It was his responsibility to ensure that she was safe. Nana and Papa would both have wanted that.

At the top of the stairs, they came across another small group of soldiers.

Much like before, the attack happened quickly. Lan struggled to keep track of the battle. There was brutality, swords slamming into bodies, and blood splattering. None of the Taihg were injured.

Seeing them fight—seeing the speed and skill with which they battled—he was even more aware of how breathtakingly skilled they were. There was nothing he would be able to do to counter their ability.

“Lan!”

He spun and came face-to-face with another attacker.

Lan had the short sword that he'd claimed from the body of one of the fallen soldiers, and the man standing across from him carried a matching sword. He had dark hair and a sharp nose, and there was something familiar about him.

The man swung his sword, and Lan brought his blade up barely in time, deflecting the blow.

He twisted, swinging his sword in the sort of arc he had been taught. He emptied his mind of everything other than the movements, trying to think back to the way that Magnus had taught him to fight.

His sword slipped through the man's defenses, and he twisted, jabbing it up and catching the man in his armpit. Lan swung around and brought the blade back before jabbing it forward in a sharp thrust. He caught the man in the belly. He was drawing back, preparing another attack, when the man sank to the floor.



Lan stood staring at him.

He had trained for this. He had fought—and brutalized—others as he had trained, but actually killing another person was something else entirely. He had survived so that he could eat, but this felt different to him. This time, he had survived, but had he done it for the right reasons? Had he killed this soldier because he'd wanted to or because he'd had to?

A hand clasped his shoulder, and Lan spun.

Kragen watched him, lines of concern on his face. "It's hard, the first time."

"I..."

"I can't say that it gets any easier, not for a man with a pure heart. We do what we must, because if we don't, the alternative is our own death."

"When I was here before, they forced me to fight. That's how they trained me."

"Forcing a man to fight only teaches him that violence solves all problems."

Lan looked up at Magnus. The larger man had cleaned his blade, and he stared along the hallway, ready for another attack.

"It's much harder to recognize that there are times when violence is necessary and other times when violence only leads to more violence," Magnus said.

Lan couldn't take his eyes off his sword. It was stained with the blood of the fallen soldier, a man whose name he would never learn, and yet had he not done what he had, the soldier would have killed him. What choice had he had?

Was this the reason that he had wanted to become a soldier?

After spending all that time training, after spending all those years thinking that he wanted to become a soldier, now that he had proven himself, Lan wasn't sure what he wanted, not anymore.

He felt a tap on his arm, and they started off, leaving the bodies of the fallen soldiers in the middle of the hallway. It was an unceremonious departure, and Lan whispered a soft prayer to Darish, thinking that if anything, perhaps the woodsman god would keep an eye on the fallen in the After.

They reached the end of the hall, and there was another stairway. Lan followed the others up it. When they reached the top, they encountered another group of soldiers.

This time, they were confronted with nearly a dozen.

Lan thought that Jalyn might have them turn and try to retreat, but she didn't. She threw herself forward into the attack and cut down two men before they had a chance to react. The hallway was wider here, and it suited Magnus and his massive sword much better than the narrow passage. Lan tossed the shorter sword aside and unsheathed the longer blade, and he began to sweep through his movements, preparing to attack.

And then two men faced him.

For a moment, he froze.

All he could think about was the soldier who had fallen. All he could think about was the blood staining his blade.

He recognized one of the men.

Not a man. A boy. Jarson.

“You betrayed us?” Jarson asked.

Lan could barely speak. It felt as if his mouth didn't want to work, and he licked his lips, trying to put moisture into them so that he could speak. How was he supposed to react with Jarson in front of him?

Yet all he could think about was Jarson beating him, attempting to pound him into submission. All he could think about was the way that Jarson had attacked in the village.

Lan swung his sword.

He kept what he had seen of Jarson in the forefront of his mind as he attacked. He used the techniques that Magnus had

taught him, sweeping his sword in a wide arc that prevented the others from getting too close.

Jarson backed up a step, allowing Lan to swing toward the second man, and he struck him on the shoulder, forcing him to drop his sword. The man reacted quickly and lowered his good shoulder to charge toward Lan.

Lan danced back a step, and two options flickered through his mind: either he could drop his sword and grapple with the man, or he could hang on to his sword and attempt to drop him with that.

Lan shifted to the side, brought the hilt of his sword up, and slammed it on the top of the man's head. He crumpled.

Movement caught Lan's attention.

He spun, sweeping his sword out in front of him, and blocked another attack from Jarson.

"You never were good enough to beat me," Jarson said.

Lan grunted and pushed off, sending the younger boy back a step. Where was Lan's backup? He didn't dare take his attention off Jarson and couldn't hear behind him.

Jarson attempted to slip his sword forward, and Lan swung around in an arc.

He resisted the urge to fight in the same style Jarson used. Magnus had shown him how ineffective that style was against someone with the longer reach of the sword Lan now carried.

"You can't beat us. I don't know why you're wasting your time," Jarson said. "You've already shown that you will lose. Everything you think you will do, everything you think you can do, you will—"

Lan spun, and his sword caught Jarson in the stomach.

He grunted and fell, dropping his sword as he grasped his belly.

Lan looked around for the next attacker, but the battle was over.

He had taken on two, but he felt as if he'd been fighting for hours rather than mere moments.

The hallway was quiet. Other than the sound of Lan's own breathing, there was the soft sound of Magnus wiping clean his blade. Kragen whispered something to Jalyn, and then he looked back at Lan.

"Did you know them?" Kragen asked.

"Only the last one."

"It's harder when you know them."

"Not with that one." He hated admitting that, but it was true. It hadn't been nearly as hard for him to attack Jarson, not after everything the boy had put him through.

Kragen watched him, and then he nodded. "Either way, it's still hard."

Lan stared at Jarson. The soldier had stopped breathing, his hands still gripping his belly. He would torment Lan no longer. There was a part of Lan that thought he should enjoy this moment more, but he felt nothing. There was only emptiness.

"I want to find my sister."

Kragen studied Lan's face for a moment, then nodded. "Then we will."

# CHAPTER 54

SOPHIE

“Ridaln?” Sophie looked around the room, and her gaze fell on Carolyn once more. The poor woman had been shifted when Sophie had fallen on her, and the blood that had gushed from her head was now smeared all over the flagstones. Sophie jerked her hands back, not wanting to touch it and afraid to be too close to Carolyn.

Ridaln eyed her as if debating what to do. “This is my fault.”

“You were used, Ridaln.” It was a feeling she knew all too well.

Ridaln’s face bore a look of anguish. “I see that now. And now we need to stop Darius. Having the Shavln here is dangerous.”

Ridaln hurried from the room, and Sophie raced after him. They were heading toward the banquet hall. Why would they head in that direction?

“What does he intend to do here?” she asked Ridaln.

“If he succeeds in freeing the power of the Shavln,” Ridaln said, glancing over at her, “then nothing will stop that dark power. Even the Raven Queen will not be enough to stop him.”

“Why the delegations?” Sophie asked. That aspect didn’t make sense, but it had seemed as if Darius had wanted—or *needed*—the delegations for whatever he had planned.

“I thought we were consolidating power, but if Darius has been here, there may have been other things at play. Summoning the Shavln requires items that are not easily acquired. I suspect Darius has used the delegations to make that much easier to do.”

“What of the Karell?”

“The Karell won’t do anything, not now that he has released it.”

“Why not? I saw other Karell here.”

“You saw them here in the palace?” Ridaln asked.

“I did. They were...”

Was she supposed to share with Ridaln that Oleda was a Karell?

“Oleda. She is a Karell.”

A hint of a smile twisted Ridaln’s face. “Crafty, that one. She has hidden herself for a long time. I don’t like involving their kind,” he said, the smile turning sour, “but if Darius reaches the Shavln, then both our nations will suffer.”

They entered the banquet hall. Chaos abounded.

Bodies littered the floor. Darius raced through the room, sending strange dark lines of power away from him and toward the people in the hall. Each time he did, someone else collapsed. People were screaming, and Sophie tried to ignore the painful sounds, but it was difficult. The anguish in each voice tugged at her heart.

“I saw Oleda here. I don’t know where she ended up going.”

Ridaln’s eyes closed, and he kept them squeezed shut for a long moment before snapping them open. “The Taihg.”

“What was that?” Sophie asked.

“They are here.”

He hurried forward, and Sophie’s heart started racing. What would the Taihg be doing here? How could they be

here?

They reached the end of the banquet hall, and Sophie saw a line of people. One of the women was familiar, reminding her of Nessa. No, not just reminding her of Nessa. She'd met her before. It was the strange woman who'd helped her out in the city.

"She should not be here," Ridaln said, looking at the woman.

"Who are the others..." Sophie trailed off as she recognized one of the others with the red-haired woman. What was Lan doing here?

Everything closed in on her. How long had it been since she'd seen him? It seemed ages—long enough for him to be very different from her memories. He was stronger, muscles present where there had been none before.

Now that he was here, she wanted nothing more than to run over to him, throw her arms around him, maybe scold him for being absent as long as he had. She wanted to ask him to tell her a story the way Nana once had.

But she couldn't.

There was too much still at stake, and she didn't know why he was here.

"The Taihg," Ridaln said.

Sophie shook her head, her heart lurching within her chest. Not Lan. He couldn't be with them, could he? "No. That's my brother. He can't be with them."

Ridaln looked at her. "There would be only one purpose to their coming here," Ridaln said. "They must have known about the attack. They must have known what Darius planned."

Sophie couldn't imagine that her brother would be involved, but then, she had lost him. She hadn't seen him since they had parted.

If he wasn't able to save himself, then she would have to do what she could. Now that she understood magic, *she* would

have to be the strong one.

“Lan,” Sophie said as she approached. Her brother looked well, though he held a sword, in a way that told her he had practiced. Had he truly become a soldier in the time that they’d been apart?

He glanced over at her, and his eyes widened when he saw her. “Sophie?”



# CHAPTER 55

LAN

The massive hall was decorated for a party. Brightly colored ribbons hung around the room. Baskets holding flowers were set on each table. The clothing that everyone wore was equally ornate, a mixture of embroidery, silks, and other finery.

For the most part, the people in the room lay motionless on the floor.

“What happened here?” Lan asked.

“The Karell,” Jalyn said.

“The Karell? I don’t understand.”

“Why do you think we’re here?” Kragen asked.

Lan was here to find his sister. He didn’t care why the others were here. He intended to find Sophie, and if there was some way of rescuing her from this place, pulling her free, he wanted to take advantage of it. She needed to be extracted, whether she knew it or not.

He scanned the room and saw no one moving. What had happened here? There was no sign of violence, no sign of fighting, such as they had left littering the hallways on their way to this banquet hall. Nothing other than people lying motionless.

Lan smelled food, and his stomach rumbled. On the road toward Neylash, they had only eaten a meager meal, mostly dried meat and whatever could be collected along the way. He

leaned over to eye the food, and what he smelled had a savory quality.

“Stay away from it,” Kragen whispered.

“Why?” Lan asked.

“The Karell,” Kragen said.

“Why here?” Lan asked.

“Here is where—”

Jalyn broke off as a door opened at the far end of the room.

Two dozen soldiers entered. They all wore black-streaked armor, and they all had swords unsheathed.

The man leading them caught Lan’s attention immediately.

“Tohm,” Lan said softly.

Kragen looked at him. “You know him?”

“He’s the one who found me. He’s the one who brought me to Neylash.”

Kragen’s brow furrowed. “He was once a Taihg.”

“Once?”

“He welcomed more violence than the Taihg approved of. He sought violence for the sake of violence. He sought darkness. He found the answer to what he searched for in Neylash.”

“Is he why you’re here?”

“Not him. The one that he serves.”

“And who is that?”

“The Darkened Sage.”

The soldiers stormed into the room, heedless of the bodies littering the floor. Magnus and Kragen stepped off to either side, and Jalyn took a position near the front. That left Lan standing behind them, holding his sword and feeling impotent. There was nothing he could do against Tohm, who once had been a Taihg. Even if he hadn’t been, Lan had trained with him and seen how brutally efficient his fighting style was.

Would the other soldiers be as effective?

Maybe Lan could do something against them.

He swung his sword, loosening his muscles. He didn't have to wait long.

Four soldiers split off, focusing on him.

Thankfully, he didn't recognize any of them. He wasn't sure whether that would make it easier or harder, but he didn't want the distraction.

"Focus on your training," Magnus said in a low voice. His instruction carried to Lan despite the clanging of metal on metal.

Lan fell into the patterns, sweeping his sword around. Would they be equally effective when facing several men as when facing a single man?

The movements created a separation between him and the others. Lan continued to spin his sword in a wide arc, trying to keep distance between him and the soldiers.

One of the men darted forward. Lan's sword severed the man's arm.

Lan didn't shift his focus. He maintained his attention on his movements, speeding through patterns.

The three remaining attackers kept a distance from him, as if they saw him as dangerous, though Lan certainly didn't feel dangerous. He pivoted around, continuing his movements, focusing on the men in front of him.

As the next attack started, he shifted his feet, bringing his sword around to deflect the first attacker. He maintained his cut to catch the next sword, pushing it back. Then he rotated, catching the third attacker.

Lan worked through each of the patterns, moving quickly to keep the attackers away from his back.

He hadn't noticed that one of the other fighters had fallen. Had he caught him?

That left only two.

He kept his mind empty, focusing only on what he needed to do. He was a soldier now. He was training to be a Taihg. He could handle two.

Lan tripped.

He glanced down and saw that one of the fallen soldiers had caught his leg.

A flicker of movement at the corner of his vision drew his attention, and he dropped, spinning his sword up and out of the careful arc that he'd been working with. His sword cleaved the attacker's wrist, freeing his hand. Blood spurted, making the stone floor slippery.

Lan didn't give himself any time to think about what had happened. He rolled and got clear of the remaining attacker.

Not only one. There were two.

Where had the other come from?

Lan tried jumping to his feet, but his boot slipped, and he fell atop one of the injured soldiers.

That fall likely saved his life. A sword whistled above, where his head had been.

Lan's heart was pounding, and he took a few steadying breaths, trying to slow it as he leaped to his feet. He caught the nearest attacker, shoving his sword into the man's face, before spinning and coming face-to-face with Tohm.

The man smiled.

Lan did what he knew he shouldn't: he looked around. Kragen was busy fighting three soldiers. Jalyn was near the end of the room, surrounded by four or five soldiers. Where was Magnus?

"You've become exactly what I thought you might," Tohm said.

"You didn't think that I could become anything."

"On the contrary, there was a reason that I brought you to Neylash. You could fight. I saw that in you. But I also sensed something else." Tohm looked down and danced away from

the fallen men. “You have the potential to reach power. I imagine that’s why the Taihg have claimed you.”

“They haven’t claimed me. They’ve trained me, something that you were unwilling to do.”

“Unwilling? I seem to remember I was the one who brought you to Neylash, and I was the one who ensured that you developed some measure of skill with the sword. If I hadn’t, what would’ve happened to you?”

Lan kept his sword out in front of him, holding it in a tight grip. The hilt was slippery with blood, and he feared he would drop it. “What would’ve happened? You brought me to a place where I was forced to fight. I had to survive so I could eat.”

“And did you?” Tohm asked softly.

“I nearly died countless times. If the Fixer hadn’t helped me, I would have.”

“The Fixer shouldn’t have been able to save you. That’s how I knew.”

“You knew? You put me through all of that to prove I could be something like a Taihg?”

“I put you through all of that so you would realize you were stronger than you thought. I went through the same thing when I joined the Taihg. Every soldier has his limitations, how far he will go if the situation calls for it. Every soldier must realize there are times when he has to fight.” Tohm smiled. “I made certain you learned all of those lessons. You are stronger than you realized. You have power you are just beginning to recognize. I can help you reach it. So can the one I serve.” He motioned to Kragen. “You think they can help you reach it? The Taihg would limit your access to it. They would restrict you in reaching what the gods would grant you. And they would limit how strong you can become. Trust me when I tell you that they do not understand the true meaning of power.”

Lan swung his sword out, trying to keep Tohm from distracting him.

Tohm smiled. “I see they’ve taught you Magnus’s style. Did they teach you its weakness?”

Tohm darted forward, and he swirled his blade in a quick flick of his wrist.

Lan attempted to block, but Tohm was quick—even quicker than Lan remembered.

Pain exploded in his arm where Tohm's sword pierced his flesh. Lan dropped his blade and grabbed for his arm. Tohm danced back, the smile still spread wide across his face.

“No. I can see that they did not. Magnus foolishly believes his style is the only effective one. Yet, as I've told you, there are other ways to reach power. I will show you what I know, but you have to be willing to come with me.”

Lan shook his head. “I'm not going with you. You brought me here to be tormented. It's because of you that I was tortured.”

“It's because of me that you learned that you could fight. It's because of me that you learned what you could do. It's because of me—”

Tohm spun away just in time as Kragen's sword came slicing at him.

“You talk too much,” Kragen said.

He leaped forward, and Lan felt a surge of power. The man started to glow. At first Lan wasn't sure that he saw it, but the more he watched, the more it became clear that Kragen had begun to glow faintly. It started with his eyes. They had always been pale, such a light blue that they could be gray or... silver. They reminded Lan of the eyes of the man who had claimed Sophie.

Kragen pushed Tohm back, and their swords were a blur as they slammed into each other. Even as Lan watched, he could tell that Kragen was not as skilled as Tohm.

Tohm started pushing him back, and Kragen resisted, though he continued to fall back. Lan grabbed for his sword, picking it off the floor, and tried swinging toward Tohm, but the man was too quick and batted his sword down. He turned his attention back to Kragen, completely unconcerned about Lan.

Jalyn approached. She attempted to join the fray, but Tohm was too much, and he spun, kicking her as he held Kragen back.

“The Taihg continue to believe that they know enough to be victorious,” Tohm said. “Unfortunately, I have seen that you will fail. Everyone will fail, especially now that the power has been awakened.”

Kragen grunted. “The power will not be awakened. Do you think that we haven’t had a presence here?”

“Your presence has failed. I am fully aware that there have been members of the Karell within the palace. But we have finally succeeded.”

“You haven’t. You don’t know what you think you do,” Kragen said through gritted teeth.

“Ah, but you’re wrong. And now you will fail to see exactly why you are wrong.”

Tohm spun, and his arm smacked Kragen on the side of his head. Kragen went spinning, and he collapsed to the flagstones.

Tohm brought his sword up and swung it down.

“No!”

Lan launched himself at Tohm.

He forgot about his sword. He forgot about everything other than grappling as his papa had taught him. The only thought in his mind was knocking Tohm down. All he wanted was to protect Kragen.

Where was Jalyn?

Lan didn’t have time to consider her absence.

Tohm brought his sword around, but it wasn’t in time. The blade grazed Lan’s arm, but he ignored it and crashed into Tohm’s chest, sending the man flying backward. He landed atop him and brought his fist back to punch, but Tohm caught it. Lan was at a disadvantage. His other arm was injured from

where he'd been stabbed, and as he tried to swing it back, pain shot through his hand.

Tohm smiled. "See? I told you that you had enough aggression in you. You really would do well to remain here."

With that, Tohm threw Lan off him. He rolled across the floor.

"The Taihg will never see you fully realized. It takes a different sort of training."

Tohm stalked toward him until a blast of greenish light slammed into him and sent him flying backward.

Lan looked up. A heavysset woman approached, holding a wand. Lan recognized the wand. He had seen something similar in Halith.

A Karell.

"It took you long enough," the woman said.

Kragen got up, rubbing his head. He looked around, and his gaze fell on Tohm lying motionless. "Your message was delayed."

"Only because she wasn't able to reach us quickly enough."

"Yes. She was delayed because she was helping another." The Karell woman glanced over at Lan. "Are you the brother?"

His eyes widened. "Sophie? You know Sophie?"

The woman grunted. "I've done what I can to protect her here, but she's possibly under the influence of a sorcerer. I don't know if we will be able to restore her."

"Restore?" he asked.

"Was he successful?" Kragen asked.

"I don't think he was, but I fear—"

A loud explosion echoed through the room, silencing the Karell.



Lan saw the silver-eyed man who had brought them from Halith stalking toward them. He held a wand much like the Karell woman's, but that wasn't what drew Lan's attention. It was his sister approaching behind him.

When Kragen and Jalyn had said she was here, he had struggled to believe she was involved. It seemed impossible that she would have that ability, but seeing her now, *feeling* the power around her, he couldn't help but believe it.

He wanted to race over to her and put himself between her and danger, grab her and take her away from this place, but the wild-eyed sorcerer stood between them, looking dangerous. Surprisingly, she looked well. He hadn't known what to expect and had no idea how much danger she was actually in. He had thought that he'd come to fulfill the promise he'd made to protect her, but he no longer knew if she needed him.

Lan looked around, his gaze darting from Kragen to Jalyn before returning to Sophie. He still didn't know what had happened to Magnus, though it was possible that Tohm had killed him.

The room was strangely silent otherwise, but Lan felt energy building, and it reminded him of the energy that he'd felt in the woods back before he'd discovered that Nana and Papa had died.

"Lan?" Sophie asked, pushing past the sorcerer.

"Sophie? What are you doing?"

"I would ask you the same. What are you doing with them?"

"We're here to..."

Why were they here? Lan didn't really know. He only knew that the Taihg had said that it was necessary to come. He knew that Sophie was in danger, but he didn't know why. The others had come for another reason, though Lan wasn't sure what it was other than to stop some danger.

He looked down at Tohm, lying motionless. He had tried using Lan, hadn't he? He had wanted to train him to be ruthless.

An explosion rocked the room, and Lan turned. An older man dressed in a black cloak entered, a dark wand pointed outward, streamers of black power swirling from the end of it. Another sorcerer, and more powerful than the others.

“They have come on behalf of the Raven Queen, and they intend to destroy Lorant as they have destroyed so many other kingdoms,” the sorcerer said, as if speaking to his sister and the other sorcerer.

“No,” Kragen said.

The sorcerer pointed his wand, and a black light exploded from the end of it. It struck Kragen, sending him flying back. He didn’t move, and as the blood pooled around his head, Lan doubted that he would again.

The heavysset Karell raised her wand, and greenish light flowed from it. She aimed it at the sorcerer, and he leveled his wand at her.

Sophie jumped in between them. As she did, power exploded from her.

Lan felt it, though why should he? He didn’t understand what he felt, but it surged from his sister.

Was she a sorcerer now, too?

“Sophie?”

Sophie didn’t turn toward him, focusing on the sorcerer and the Karell.

The sorcerer holding the black wand laughed. “It’s too late. She has already released the Shavlñ.”

Sophie gasped. “I didn’t release anything.”

“Didn’t you?” the sorcerer asked. “What do you think you’ve been training to do? Ridaln thought he was training you to use magic, because that’s what I led him to believe. You’re both fools. Releasing the Shavlñ requires power I don’t possess.”

The sorcerer raised his wand, and Sophie once more held her hands out. This time, Lan felt what she did. Power surged

from her, exploding away from her and through a wand he hadn't seen her carrying. It pushed the sorcerer back, creating a space between them. The silver-eyed man who had led them from Halith added power to it, as did the Karell, holding her wand out and adding greenish light to the barrier Sophie created. The sorcerer was forced back, and Lan felt power building around him.

Why should he feel that? What was it?

An explosion rumbled through the hall, and Lan was nearly tossed from his feet.

# CHAPTER 56

## SOPHIE

Sophie looked over at Oleda. She felt the power that the woman was holding. It rivaled Ridaln's, but already Sophie could tell Oleda was fading. She had strength, but she didn't have the same strength as Ridaln. And now something worse had been freed. And all because of her.

Darius was not far from her, facing an older man...

*Dannith.*

Sophie raced over but almost didn't reach him in time.

She pointed the Karell wand, and power exploded from the end of the crystal and caught Darius in the back. He turned to Sophie, and there was the same darkness in his eyes that she'd seen when he'd been in the royal quarters.

*Probably looking for Dannith.*

"You have made a mistake if you think I'm going to let someone like *you* stop me," Darius said.

Sophie hurriedly formed one of her poses and managed to create a protective shielding just before a darkened blast of power struck her. At least his attention was on her and not on Dannith.

And as it was, Jalyn swept toward Dannith, sword in hand.

"No!" Sophie cried.

Darius seemed to think it was for him. He smiled.

Jalyn grabbed Dannith and dragged him away.

Not to harm him. To protect him?

*But she works with the Raven Queen.*

Another blast of power streaked toward Sophie but was caught by a greenish blast.

Oleda stepped forward, holding her wand at the ready. “Go, girl. You need to get out of here. Let them take you to the next step,” she said. “Protect the king. Let me deal with the Sage.”

So many questions mixed in Sophie’s mind. “The next step?”

“You need to learn more about what you can do. It’s more than what Ridaln has been teaching you. Do not get caught here. And we cannot let *him* corrupt the king.”

“Oleda... you need to come with me.”

“You need to go. Take Dannith to the queen. She can teach you, but she can’t teach you if you’re dead.”

“It’s my fault,” Sophie said.

“You might have performed the magic, but it was his fault that you did,” Oleda said. She pushed out with a twisting of her hands, sending a surge of power away from her. Along with Ridaln’s power, it sent Darius back a few steps, but it wouldn’t last.

The floor rumbled from approaching power.

The power of the Shavln.

*Her fault.*

She couldn’t process everything, couldn’t comprehend how her brother was here. She could only understand that she was responsible for releasing great destruction on the world. It was her fault, and now darkness would fall.

The stories that Nana had told had stuck with her. They were horrible stories of the Shavln, and yet in those stories, only the power of a great warrior had been enough to defeat it.

There would be no such warrior. Not this time.

Darius started toward them again, but an explosion followed. Smoke and debris filled the air, making it difficult for Sophie to see anything clearly. When it cleared, Darius was gone.

*Where did he go?*

“Go,” Oleda said again.

Someone grabbed Sophie’s arm, and she looked over to see the warrior woman. Dannith was next to her, a confused look in his eyes as he looked at Darius.

“Dannith,” Sophie said.

He turned to her. “Sophie? Do you know what’s happening here?”

She shook her head. “Not entirely.”

“Darius is dead,” Dannith said.

There wasn’t time for this, but Sophie understood his confusion. “I know he was *supposed* to be. But he’s not. And the...” Sophie caught herself before mentioning the Karell. “And Ridaln thinks he might want to harm you, so we need to go.”

“Ridaln does?”

Sophie nodded.

“We need to go,” Jalyn said. “There is so much more for you to do, Sophie. And we need to get *you* to safety,” she added, looking at Dannith.

“I don’t understand,” Sophie said.

“Only someone like the Pale Princess could summon the Shavln.”

“I’m not the Pale Princess. He only wanted me to pretend to be her.”

“The power is real. You don’t have to be the Pale Princess of the story to have her power.”

Oleda pushed out with a surge of power and glanced over at her. “It is time, Sophie Varison.”

“Time for what?”

Oleda smiled at her sadly. “It is time for you to find your own story.”

Power exploded once more, and Jalyn pulled on her, dragging her back.

Sophie resisted, not wanting to be taken away, but there was nothing she could do to counter Darius, not once he held the power of the Shavln. She couldn't do anything to help Ridaln and didn't know whether she even wanted to. But he needed her help. He had trained her, and though he might have used her, *he* had also been used.

A pair of soldiers guided Dannith away, and surprisingly, he didn't resist.

“Sophie?”

Lan grabbed her other arm and pulled her through the banquet hall. A massive man next to him held an equally enormous sword, his head turning as they made their way through. Lan's sleeve was bloodied, and he couldn't move one arm. What had happened to her brother? He was dressed like the other soldiers, which meant Lan had become a soldier. After all this time, he had become everything that he had dreamed of.

And what had she become?

She didn't know. All she knew was that everything she had wanted to be seemed beyond her. She had chased after power, drawn to it because of promises Ridaln had made to her, promises of ever greater. She should have known better. She should have known there would be consequences. She should have recognized the warnings.

“What's happened to us, Lan?”

They reached the other end of the banquet hall, and Sophie looked down to see soldiers lying on the floor. How many had been lost in this? And had they come for her? That didn't make any sense.

“We’ve become what we wanted,” Lan said. His voice was soft, and there was sadness mixed within it. “We’ve become everything that we claimed we wanted.”

Sophie looked over at her brother. A scar on his arm was new, and bruises on his face looked fresh, but it was the darkness in his eyes that troubled her. He had wanted to be a soldier. From the very beginning, that was what he had wanted. From the days when he would go out into the woods to smack at the tree with his sword, he had wanted to be a soldier. And now he was one.

Not only a soldier, but a Taihg.

What would Nana and Papa have thought of that?

What would they have thought of her?

She had magic, but she still didn’t understand how. And now she was expected to be the Pale Princess, whatever that meant. Sophie wasn’t the princess, and she didn’t know where they were taking her, but she suspected it was to the Raven Queen. After everything Ridaln had said about the Raven Queen, she trembled at the thought, filled with a mixture of fear and... excitement. The Raven Queen could run where Ridaln could only walk. How much more could the Raven Queen teach her?

Still, she was scared. Power out of horrific stories was real. The Shavln was real. And it had been released.

She might not know what else she needed to do, but she *could* protect the king.

They reached the garden, and she followed the soldiers guiding Dannith through it. She could feel the dark energy chasing her. They raced through the city, pausing only long enough to grab horses that had been tied up inside a gated yard, and rode out, moving quickly from the city. As they went, Sophie kept expecting a chase, but there wasn’t one.

Then power surged.

Sophie glanced back and saw a pale green light exploding near the palace.



*Oleda.*

She hadn't needed to be there to know what had happened. The kind cook had sacrificed herself, using her power to hold off Darius. She had bought time for Sophie to escape.

What of Ridaln? Had he survived?

Dannith had turned back as well. There was confusion in his eyes.

That was something she'd seen when talking to him before.

Which left her wondering how long Darius had been in the palace.

*Has it always been him?*

Sophie didn't think so, but she wanted answers—and she knew she wouldn't get them here. As she looked at the others with her, now reunited with her brother, she realized Oleda had been doing the very things she had promised from the beginning. She had brought her help. She had helped Dannith.

When Sophie had first come to the palace, she had wanted nothing more than to get free, to escape. And then she had stayed, drawn in by the power that she had gained learning from Ridaln. Now once more she was free.

A part of her wanted nothing more than to return to Halith and the quiet life that she had once known. As they rode past the boundary of the city, Sophie realized she could never have that life again.

Oleda had said she needed to live her own story. Somehow that meant living the story of the Pale Princess, just as Ridaln had wanted.

Sophie didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so she did neither, keeping her eyes fixed on the road before them as they rode away from the Shavln and the city and toward a future where she could learn more about her power.

It was the kind of story Nana would have loved to tell.

The next book in The Storyweaver Saga: [The Raven Queen](#).

**The magic of the Raven Queen ensures peace and stability. Some would see that time change.**

Lan and Sophie cannot move on from the deadly attack. Both train to be ready for another attack, but all has been quiet.

Sophie continues to train as a sorcerer, though she has not learned from the Raven Queen as she had hoped. Life in the tower is slow, and Sophie longs for excitement.

While on patrol with the young prince, Lan and the Taihg encounter a strange attack. The rest of the Taihg are sent to investigate, but Lan is left behind, where he searches on his own.

Danger lurks closer than any realize. When Lan goes missing, Sophie must find him. What they uncover will change all they know about the power in the world.

As Sophie struggles to find a way past the patterns that restrict her magic, and Lan searches to understand the powerful connection he now has, they are key to saving the Raven Queen—and all of Reyash—from the dark power that threatens the land.

It might already be too late to stop what a powerful sorcerer set into motion.

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

*Thank you so much* for reading *The Pale Princess*. I hope you enjoyed it. If you would be so kind as to take a moment to leave a review on [Amazon](#) or elsewhere, I would be very grateful.

I'm also always happy to hear from readers! Email me at [dkh@dkholmberg.com](mailto:dkh@dkholmberg.com). I try to respond to each message. Don't forget to follow me on Facebook as well!

**Review link [HERE](#).**

All my best,

D.K. Holmberg

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