



# THE RAVEN QUEEN

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# THE STORYWEAVER SAGA: BOOK 2

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# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Series by D.K. Holmberg](#)

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# CHAPTER I

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Movement within the barracks always caught Lan's eye. He paused as he watched soldiers moving in and out. Many of them were mounted, which was unusual deeper in the city. The streets of Valan were narrow, making it difficult for horses or carts to traverse the city itself, which was part of the reason the barracks rested near the edge. The building was simple—a long, squat stone structure that stretched along the southern border of Valan.

When Lan had first come here, he'd thought it looked beautiful. Compared to what he'd been accustomed to, it *had* been beautiful. In the years that he'd been here, he'd come to see the barracks as something else, though in some ways it was no less beautiful.

“Are you just going to stand there?”

Lan turned and saw Jalyn striding toward him, leading her horse. She was breathtaking in her beauty. Long red hair hung down to her shoulders, streaming over her black leathers and armor, with only a bit of her pale skin exposed. She was a warrior, but she looked every bit the Pale Princess of legend.

“What's going on?”

“Well, if you hadn't been mooning around as much as you have”—Lan arched a brow at her, and Jalyn chuckled—“you might have heard we've been sent out on assignment.”

“Lorant?”

“Not Lorant. At least, not that we know of. They haven't moved on us in years.”

Lan nodded. The last time there had been any threat from Lorant was when Lan had been there. In the time since then, there had been nothing but quiet.

He supposed he should be thankful for that, especially as this peace was what gave him the opportunity to continue to train and master the sword, but Lan couldn't help feeling as if the lack of activity was a precursor to something worse. Something that the people of Valan had to be prepared for.

Not that the people of Valan weren't preparing.

The Taihg, in particular, were readying for any sort of attack. That was the reason Lan trained as aggressively as he did. All knew that danger existed out in the world, and all were ready for what Lorant might do next.

"If not Lorant, then what is it?"

"The prince has gotten himself into trouble again."

"Again?"

"He likes to take his own patrols out along the border."

Lan groaned. "Royals."

Jalyn cocked her head to the side, grinning at him. "You say that as if you have lived under the rule of royalty your entire life."

"Long enough to know that I don't care for the way they use us."

"None of us care for the way they use us. The only one who is worth her salt is the Raven Queen. That's only because we need her power."

Lan's gaze drifted to the massive tower stretching up at the heart of Valan. The tower served as a place of power—a fortress situated in the center of the city. For a place as suffused with magical energy as Valan, the tower was quite utilitarian. It stretched high overhead, looming over them, a constant reminder of the Raven Queen.

Not that Lan needed that reminder. He doubted anyone needed a reminder of the Raven Queen. Her power was what

protected them. It was the reason they didn't have to fear an attack from Lorant.

"Who's going after him?"

"I am. Cornwall, Darren. And now you."

"*Now* me?"

Lan often wondered if she held him back because he hadn't connected to a power the way some of the Taihg had. Most who led had some form of magic.

"This isn't the kind of task you should be involved in," Jalyn said. She shrugged. "Not that I'm criticizing."

"Oh, good. Because to me, it sounded like you were criticizing."

"It's not your fault we haven't had to deal with the threat from Lorant over the last few years."

"Sometimes it feels like you wish we had more violence."

Jalyn flicked her gaze past him, and Lan turned to see two other Taihg leading their horses. Darren was a younger soldier, a new recruit, and still learning, whereas Cornwall was grizzled and older, reminding Lan of Kragen—his old sword master—in some ways.

"It's not my desire to have more violence. It's more about recognizing that this silence we've had from Lorant is unusual."

"And you fear that we will have to face them again soon."

"I know we will. Darius rules that kingdom now. We still have to deal with the threat he poses, whether or not he truly summoned some dark magic." The way that she said these words suggested that she didn't believe them.

For that matter, most of the people within Valan didn't believe that Darius had summoned any dark magic. Lan's sister was the only one who did. For a while, Lan had supported her, agreed with her, thinking that whatever she had experienced within Neylash must have been awful enough for her to know the dangers that something like that would pose,

but the more he had come to learn about the claims his sister made, the less convinced he was.

He wasn't the only one, either. He had learned that no one, not even the Raven Queen, believed his sister's claims. Lan hadn't spoken to Sophie much about what she believed of the Shavln, though he suspected that she wasn't handling it well.

"Isn't it a good thing for us to not have detected anything from him?" Lan asked.

"It is," Jalyn said. She nodded to Lan. "Go get Joralt."

"He's not that well trained," Lan said.

"But you are. So I think the two of you are a good pair," she said.

Lan shot her an annoyed look. He headed toward the stables near the barracks and hurried inside to find Joralt, his gray stallion, in his stall. Lan had been working with Joralt, but the damn horse was stubborn, as if he didn't want to learn.

As he approached the horse, Lan held his hands up in front of him. "Let's make this easy today." He had no idea if the horse had any sense of what he was saying, but he shook his head at Lan. "We're just going for a simple ride. Nothing more than that."

He stepped into the stall, grabbed the saddle, and turned to Joralt.

Already Joralt started to buck.

Lan hurried to place the saddle on the stallion. He strapped it on as quickly as he could and wrestled on the bridle. Then he grabbed the reins, and as soon as he did, Joralt finally settled. Lan held on tightly, leading him out of the stall.

When he rejoined Jalyn, she grinned at him. "See? He's just as trained as you."

"You didn't see how long it took me to get him saddled."

"I didn't need to see it. We've all been standing out here waiting for you." She glanced at Darren and Cornwall.

Lan suppressed his irritation, and they started out of the city, leading the horses. Once clear, they climbed into their saddles and began their journey.

“What was he doing coming out *here*?” Lan asked Jalyn.

“Only the gods know,” Jalyn said. “I wouldn’t have come after him were it not for the Raven Queen. She swears she detected something this way, and she knew that her son was out here, so she sent word to the Th’lar, requesting he send a platoon.”

“This isn’t a platoon,” Lan said.

“It’s all the force the Th’lar was willing to send.”

Lan smiled to himself. The Th’lar—the leader of the Taihg—was a practical man. Lan had come to know him a little, about as well as he had come to know the Raven Queen. Both were equally inaccessible to him.

They rode in silence.

It was early, and the sun continued to rise overhead. Lan realized he wasn’t prepared for a journey like this, having not brought adequate supplies, though Jalyn was. She passed around a waterskin when they stopped, giving everyone the chance to take a drink.

“I don’t suppose the Raven Queen gave you any sense of how far we have to travel?” Lan said.

“She did, actually.” Jalyn cupped her hand over her eyes, looking out into the distance. Her chin jutted forward as she concentrated, giving her a stern appearance.

Ever since he’d first laid eyes on her, Lan had found her stunningly beautiful. That hadn’t changed in the time that he’d worked with her. She was strong—stronger than almost anyone he’d ever known—and she could be cold at times, though that coldness stemmed from how she had come to her position. Originally sent to infiltrate the Taihg, she had become a double agent, working with the Taihg to uncover the dangers within Lorant.

“Do you care to share what she said?”

Jalyn twisted in the saddle, arching a brow at him. Her bright blue eyes studied him. “It’s not exact. I don’t have the same magic as the Raven Queen. If she were with us, then perhaps we would be able to track the prince much more easily.”

“How long do we intend to be out here?”

“Until we find him,” Jalyn said.

They continued on. They rode through much of the morning, and as the midday sun blazed in the sky, Lan noticed movement in the distance. He motioned toward it.

Jalyn slowed them again, frowning as she stared in the direction he indicated. “How did you see that?”

“You can see the movement pretty easily,” he said.

“I can’t,” Cornwall said.

“You only can’t because your eyes are so old,” Lan said.

Cornwall chuckled. “My eyes might be old, but I still kicked your ass.”

“You did?” Darren asked.

“What? Did he tell you otherwise?”

“I just didn’t think many people were able to beat Lan in combat.”

“Maybe not with the sword,” Cornwall said. “I don’t need a sword to kick his ass.” He raised his fist threateningly, and Lan could only chuckle.

Cornwall was one of the Taihg whose company he enjoyed the most. So many of the older soldiers had an angry streak in them. Not Cornwall.

“Beating Lan isn’t nearly as impressive as you would think,” Jalyn said.

“Is that a challenge?” Lan asked.

“Maybe for you, but not for me.”

She squeezed her stirrups, signaling her horse to move forward, and Cornwall followed, laughing as he passed Lan.

Darren glanced over at Lan. "Did she beat you?"

"Once."

Darren watched her riding forward, his eyes carrying a dreamy look to them. "Are the stories about her true?"

Lan snorted. "Yes."

"All of them?" He glanced toward Lan. "It's almost impossible to believe some of them."

Lan shook his head. "Anything that you have heard about her is likely to be true."

"What about you? Are the stories about you true?"

Lan shrugged. "It depends upon the story, and I suppose upon who's telling it."

He had heard quite a few stories about himself over the last few years, though very few of them were true. Many of them stemmed from his time before joining the Taihg, but there were a fair number that had spread after that as well, especially given some of the things Lan had seen.

They followed Cornwall and Jalyn, neither of them riding all that quickly. Lan made no effort to hurry after them, knowing that they would catch up eventually.

"You were there when Darius was defeated?"

Lan nodded. "I was there. As was Jalyn."

"What about the battle at Kirtok?"

Lan nodded. "I was there."

"The stories say that you were the one who led the charge."

Lan looked over. Did Darren want the truth, or did he want the embellished truth?

"It was foolish of me," Lan said.

"From the way others tell it, had you not, the Taihg would have been overrun."

"I doubt that," Lan said.



“What about the stories of the crossing of the Lorenth?”

Lan smiled to himself. That one had been a particularly nasty bit of work. He had been forced to fight off the soldiers trailing his unit to give his men time to get across. “I suppose that one is true.”

“What about—”

“What you’ve heard about him is true,” Cornwall snapped.

Darren looked up to the old soldier before turning back to Lan. “Why is it that you don’t work with the new recruits?”

“Because Lan is still learning what it means to be a Taihg,” Jalyn said.

Darren frowned. “What does that mean?”

“It means they don’t trust me,” Lan said.

“Why wouldn’t they trust you?”

“I spent too much time in Lorant.”

Darren’s eyes widened, and he watched Lan for a long moment, though Lan said nothing. There really wasn’t anything for him to say. At this point, even though he had done the things that Darren had heard about—well, he had done *most* of the things Darren had heard about—he still wasn’t viewed the same way as those who had been born and raised within Reyash. He suspected his sister was going through the same thing, though she never said anything about it. Not that she would. Sophie was tough—and stubborn.

As they neared the movement, Jalyn motioned for them to slow to a trot. Lan stayed with her, not moving any faster than Jalyn wanted, letting her lead.

She was one of the Taihg he found easy to follow. Perhaps that came from the fact that she had been through similar experiences to his, or perhaps it was that he liked her, though whether he liked someone shouldn’t have any bearing on whether he followed them.

They found a dozen men riding away from them.

“That stupid shit,” she muttered.

“That’s your prince you’re talking about,” Lan said.

“I realize that’s the prince. That doesn’t make him any less of a stupid shit.”

Cornwall chuckled, and Darren looked shocked at the idea that she would consider referring to the prince in such a way.

“Come on,” she said, kicking her heels into the sides of her horse and starting off at a sprint.

They all followed, moving quickly. Lan stayed with them, trying to keep Joralt in line. The horse threatened to veer off, and it took everything within Lan to keep guiding him forward.

“You don’t need to pull like that,” Lan whispered. There were times when he felt the horse actually understood, though Lan knew that was unlikely.

Of course, the stallion had been strange ever since Lan had come across him grazing at the edge of the forest along the border between Reyash and Lorant. It had been chance, and at the time, Lan had been using one of the many Taihg mounts and hadn’t had one of his own. When he’d found Joralt, he had brought him back to the barracks, and Jalyn had been the one to suggest that he train him. At the time, Jalyn had believed that Joralt had potential.

“You don’t find a stallion like that very often,” she had said.

“You don’t find a stallion like that at all,” Lan had replied.

“Makes you wonder why he was out there.”

“It does.”

“Train him. Ride him.” She had smiled at him. “It will be a good test for you as a relatively new Taihg.”

Lan had done the best he could to continue to train the stallion, and even now, a year on, he still didn’t feel Joralt was Taihg ready.

Joralt started to put distance between Lan and the other three. Lan tried to rein him in, but when Joralt got moving like

this, he just ran. If there was one thing the stallion was good for, it was speed.

Lan glanced back, and Jalyn motioned for him to keep moving. “Catch up to them, and get that stupid shit to stop.”

Lan bent down over Joralt, kicking his heels into the horse’s sides, and whispered, “Let’s go as fast as we can.”

Somehow Joralt seemed to understand, and they raced forward. Lan stayed low, bent over the horse’s neck. The riders in the distance were running, though they weren’t running nearly as quickly as Lan on Joralt.

When he finally caught up to them, he realized there were two Taihg with Prince Nevarn and his group of Reyashi soldiers. They were skilled. One of them, a man named Kristof, glanced over his shoulder, his brow furrowing as he saw Lan, but then his gaze darted behind Lan, and he realized that he wasn’t alone.

“Slow down,” Lan said.

The prince grinned at him. He was about Lan’s age and had thick black hair and an arrogant smile. He wasn’t dressed for a long journey, wearing only a light riding cloak and no armor. If he really was heading out toward Lorant to face attackers, he wasn’t prepared at all.

“Not yet,” the prince said.

“You need to slow down.”

The prince shook his head. “Not yet.”

Lan glanced over his shoulder, and he saw Jalyn and the others approaching, though they weren’t moving all that rapidly yet.

Lan grabbed for the prince’s reins and pulled on them, forcing the prince to slow. The others around him veered off, circling back around. As they came to a stop, Lan released the reins.

Jalyn, Cornwall, and Darren arrived as they finally slowed.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Nevarn asked.

“Your mother sent us to retrieve you,” Jalyn said.

The prince frowned. “My mother sent you? My adviser warned me that there was something out here, which is why I’m out here now. The queen should’ve known that.”

“And what is it?” Jalyn asked, frustration filling her voice.

“Movement,” he said, glancing at Jalyn. “For the first time in years.”

If there were movement, it would be reason enough for the Taihg to be involved here.

“If you are determined to stay with me, then keep up.” Nevarn steered away.

Lan looked over at Jalyn. “You intend to follow him?”

“I’m not going to force the prince to come back if he really believes something is out here,” she said.

Lan hung back.

“She’s worried about when the prince takes over from his mother,” Cornwall said.

“The Raven Queen is still pretty young,” Lan said.

“Young or not, it wouldn’t be the first time that somebody with magic found themselves dying before they expected to. We rely upon the Raven Queen to protect us, nearly as much as we rely upon the Taihg.”

Even though he had been welcomed into the Taihg, they still viewed him as something of an outsider. Eventually, he hoped that he would be viewed with the same reverence and respect as Jalyn, though she had proven herself over the years. Lan continued to try to prove himself, knowing that he needed to do so.

They rode for the better part of the afternoon. The prince drove them harder than Jalyn had, forcing all of them to take a rapid pace. The horses suffered for it. They neared the border late in the day.

Finally the prince began to slow them.

“What were you doing this far out?” Jalyn asked.

“Patrolling,” he said.

“Why were you patrolling out here?”

“Someone needs to.”

The look he gave Jalyn was a dangerous one, one that practically demanded she challenge him, though she said nothing.

Lan stared out into the distance. They were at the border with Lorant. From here, he didn't see anything that was particularly familiar to him, though it wasn't as if there was that much to distinguish between Lorant and Reyash.

“What if your adviser is wrong?” Jalyn asked.

“And what if you are?”

Lan realized the tension between them. Jalyn was the one responsible for arranging the patrols along the border. If there were something here, it would be an indictment of her ability. Lan knew that Jalyn didn't care for the idea of failure. No soldier did.

The farther they went into Lorant, the more Lan believed they might need to turn back. Then he noticed shadows moving in the distance.

Lan frowned, staring into the darkness, and moved over toward Cornwall. “I don't suppose you see anything?”

“We've already established that my eyesight isn't so good.”

Lan moved forward, and when he caught up to Jalyn, she frowned at him but said nothing.

“We should slow,” Lan said.

Nevarn shot him a hard stare.

“I see movement up there.”

“I don't see anything,” the prince said.

“That doesn't mean it isn't there,” Lan pointed out.

The prince continued to glare at him. Lan ignored him. There was no point in paying attention to the prince, not if he was going to push like this. He needed to appeal to Jalyn. If anyone was able to convince the prince to slow, it was her.

“I saw movement,” he said, slowing Joralt to ride with her.

Lan was concerned about what he had seen, as this close to the border, there could be danger. And maybe the prince’s adviser was right. *Could* Lorant be moving?

“We need to move carefully,” Jalyn said. Her hand went to the hilt of her sword to unsheathe it.

Lan guided his horse closer to the prince, who had his own blade unsheathed, moonlight shining along its surface. “What is out here?” Lan asked.

“Now you believe me?”

“I saw something,” Lan admitted. “I don’t know if it was Lorant, but I don’t want to be surprised.”

The prince watched him for a moment and then snorted. “We need to be the ones surprising them.”

The prince drove his heels into his horse’s sides and surged forward.

“Darish curse that man,” Lan muttered.

Jalyn shot him a look. She was always sensitive about using the gods’ names in such a way, but Lan didn’t share that same sensitivity. He leaned forward, touching his horse’s sides.

“Keep up with him,” he whispered to Joralt.

The horse leaped forward, racing after the prince, and put space between Lan and the rest of the Taihg.

They hadn’t gone very far when shadows surged toward them.

Lan’s horse crashed through one of the oncoming shadows, but not before Nevarn jerked his horse around, calling out loudly. “For Reyash!”

Lan just groaned.

They didn't need to do this. They didn't need to do any of this.

And certainly not at night.

But it seemed as if they were stuck with a fight.

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# CHAPTER 2

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“**M**ove!” Lan shouted.

He tried to reach for the prince’s reins again, but he’d shifted them to his other hand, preventing Lan from getting to them.

With a grin, the prince unsheathed his sword and cried out, “For Reyash!”

Surging forward, Lan had to do everything in his power to keep up with him.

“You really are a stupid shit,” he muttered.

Then he was within the shadows.

They *were* Lorantian soldiers.

A spear came toward him, and Lan swept his sword across the tip, keeping it from doing any damage to him or his horse. He kicked, driving his heel into the next man, and spun where he sat, trying to stay mounted. He wanted to ensure he did everything he needed to in order to keep the prince safe.

Most of the attackers looked to be poorly armed. All appeared dirty. None had armor. These weren’t soldiers. These were townspeople, villagers, and from the way they moved, Lan didn’t think they’d had much training, if any at all.

*Darish curse the prince.*

They didn’t need to be here.

“Retreat,” he said to the prince.

Nevarn's blade swept along the row of spears the same way as Lan's had. "Retreat? They're at our border."

Lan looked down at the faces of the people they attacked. They might be near the border with Reyash, but none of them looked as if they were capable of causing any real harm.

This was a mistake.

Could this really be what the prince's adviser had discovered?

Lan tried to put his horse in front of the prince. He didn't want to oppose him, but he also didn't want the prince to attack villagers. They weren't the enemy. They protected their homes. That was it.

"What are you doing?" Jalyn asked as she rode up to Lan.

"I'm just—"

He didn't get the chance to finish.

A loud shout came from behind them. Thunder from horses riding toward them caught Lan's attention. Lorantian soldiers.

*They* had to be what the prince's adviser had uncovered. If they were behind them, then the prince was right. They *were* pushing toward Reyash. And using the villagers.

Lan turned Joralt, motioning to the others with him. "Turn!"

The Taihg responded the fastest.

Cornwall and Darren, along with the two Taihg who'd come with the prince, all turned with Lan. They faced two dozen Lorantian soldiers bearing down on them at incredible speed.

Lan braced for the assault.

The others were quiet, though Lan could hear the fighting behind him. The prince—or the Reyashi soldiers with him—made quick work of sweeping through the remaining villagers.

They reached the oncoming Lorantian soldiers.

When it came to fighting, Lan always tried to gauge the skill of his opponents. He trained on a near-daily basis to improve and knew that most of the Taihg did the same. He doubted that other soldiers would if the Taihg didn't.

Fighting on horseback was a different challenge from fighting on foot. Lan had experience with both. These soldiers were skilled. Facing the Lorantian soldiers in the darkness posed a challenge.

He fought, sweeping his sword around, carving through the first of the soldiers and moving on to the next. The other Taihg spread out around the soldiers, creating a barrier that the Lorantian soldiers would have to fight through.

There were not that many skilled Lorantian soldiers, certainly none like Tohm. He had once been Taihg, though, and had betrayed them. Hopefully, there were no more like him.

Two soldiers converged on Lan. He kicked one and swung his sword at the other.

Something struck him from behind, and he lurched forward.

Thankfully, Joralt didn't react as poorly in fighting as he had when initially saddled. Lan rolled forward and twisted so he could bring his leg around to kick. The nearest of the Lorantian attackers fell forward.

Lan jabbed with his sword. Another fell.

The Lorantian soldiers converged upon them. Lan had to get the prince out of here.

He righted himself in the saddle, and then he lunged.

He knocked one of the soldiers from the saddle, though Lan also tumbled to the ground. Soldiers surrounded him.

Lan's training came back to him. He had dealt with something similar in the past, though the stakes hadn't been as high as they were now.

He swept his gaze around hurriedly, then darted forward. His blade caught one man on the thigh, and he lunged toward

the next, driving his blade into the man's belly. He spun, keeping his blade at the ready, and thrust his boot into the next man's knee, crumpling him.

The others gave him a bit more space.

He darted forward. He had to finish this. He had to find the prince.

One of the soldiers charged him, and Lan stepped to the side, bringing his blade down in an efficient swing to cleave the man's arm. He swept his blade around again and jabbed the end of it into another man's side.

At last the attack eased.

Lan stood there, catching his breath.

"Lan?" Jalyn's voice cut through the darkness.

"I'm here," he said.

The Lorantian soldiers started to pull away into the night. They left the fallen behind. Lan looked down at the soldiers.

How many of them had he taken down?

There had to be five or six. He didn't know how many the other Taihg had brought down.

"What was this?" Jalyn asked, holding Joralt's reins as she brought Lan's horse back to him.

Lan climbed up into the saddle, sweeping his gaze around. "I don't know. The prince's adviser was right."

"Even if he was right, this is strange. We haven't seen anything like this in quite some time."

"I know," he said.

Lan looked over at the other Taihg. "Where's Cornwall?"

"He didn't make it," Jalyn said.

Lan found Cornwall's mare standing near his body. His hands were clasped over his belly, though his eyes stared blankly up at the sky. Lan jumped down and checked for a pulse on the old soldier, but he knew there wouldn't be one. It was too late.

Had it not been for Nevarn, they would not have been out here tonight. Cornwall would have lived.

Lan didn't see Nevarn.

"Where is the prince?" he asked.

Jalyn jerked her head around. She kicked her heels into the sides of her horse and raced back the way they had come. Lan followed, and he found the fallen villagers, but the soldiers that had been with the prince were down as well.

There was no sign of the prince.

"That stupid shit," Jalyn whispered. She whistled, and the other Taihg joined her. "We need to go after the prince. If he was captured by Lorantian soldiers, we need to get him back."

Lan had no idea how they were going to do that in the darkness.

"They won't have gone very far," Lan said.

Jalyn muttered under her breath and looked into the distance.

Lan followed the direction of her gaze. There was light out there. Firelight.

"They really aren't all that bright," Lan said.

"Unless they expected the soldiers to overrun us," Kristof said.

Jalyn led them toward the light. No one spoke.

As they neared the firelight, they slowed.

Jalyn motioned for them to move more carefully, and Lan followed her direction.

"We should leave the horses," he said.

She looked at the others. "Darren. Stay behind."

"I could help."

"Not yet." She climbed down from her saddle, as did Lan and the other two Taihg. They all handed their reins to Darren.

"How do you want to play this?" Lan asked.

“We head down there and see what we can find,” Jalyn said.

“That’s not much of a plan.”

“It’s all we have.”

They headed into the village and found it mostly empty. Buildings were in a state of disrepair, many with holes in the roofs, and the grass around them was overgrown. From what Lan could tell, the village had been abandoned.

“None of this makes sense,” Lan said. “Why would they attack *here*?”

Jalyn shook her head, motioning for them to keep moving. They crept forward, each of them moving with sword unsheathed, heading toward the light. A massive flame at the center of the village crackled brightly against the darkness of night.

“There’s something wrong here,” Lan whispered. “I think they’re trying to draw us in.”

“Why?” Jalyn whispered.

Lan didn’t know the answer to that.

He followed Jalyn toward the flames, but shifting shadows near him caught his attention, and he peeled off toward them. Jalyn hissed his name, but Lan ignored her.

He found a single soldier. Lan was creeping toward him, thinking to surprise the man, when the man suddenly spun back, wielding a short-bladed sword.

Lan brought his blade up, countering. He was forced to dance away, but the attacker was fast—faster than Lan would have expected.

The attacker darted toward him. His short blade moved quickly, reminding Lan of Kragen and his fighting style. Darkness seemed to swallow him.

The attacker feinted in one direction, but Lan darted to the side, anticipating the movement. Somehow the attacker still had the advantage. He pushed Lan forward.

Lan's footing slipped. He dropped, rolling toward the fire.

Which was a mistake.

There were three others there.

*Where is Jalyn?*

For that matter, where was the prince?

Lan jumped to his feet, and he backed away, realizing almost too late that the other attackers were pressing toward him, moving quickly.

This wasn't any simple village—not with soldiers like this. He had thought the village abandoned, but that wasn't the case at all. This was something else.

Lan spun around, preparing for the next attack.

A swordsman was there. Lan had to move quickly. He focused on the lessons he'd learned from his instructors over the years, knowing he'd have to blend a variety of styles. He had trained diligently, wanting to be the most skilled Taijg soldier there was.

He kept his movements compact, bringing his blade down and trailing it until he swept his blade into the man's thigh. He twisted and then jabbed into the man's belly.

Somehow this man wasn't bothered by the change of strategy. He brought his sword around, pushing Lan back again. A shadow behind the man caught Lan's attention, and he had to spin, sweeping his blade as he did.

He parried one attack, then jabbed with his blade.

The attacker caught the end of the blade, but Lan had shoved with a surge of energy, enough that he stabbed into the attacker's belly. He jerked the blade up and then pulled free.

The attacker collapsed.

Lan spun around. Two men faced him. If they were anything like the last one, he didn't know how he was going to fare against them, especially if they fought together. Lan darted forward, spinning through a series of movements.

A heavier-set man darted toward Lan but was slower than the last attacker. Lan brought his blade around, carving through the man's hand. The next man hesitated too long, and Lan drove his blade into his side before darting back.

There were no other attackers nearby.

Shadows loomed on the other side of the fire.

Lan crept forward, moving along the inside of the buildings. This part of the village smelled off, and the distant sound of running water caught his attention. A stream? Maybe a river. He didn't know where he was, though he suspected they were on the outskirts of Lorant.

He had to find the prince.

Everything else was extraneous.

He darted toward the shadows. Two of them leaned over a third, pouring out a liquid. He didn't see any gleam of metal, but the shadows around them made it difficult for him to see much of anything. Lan cried out, holding his blade up as he darted forward, heedless of anything but getting to the prince.

One of the men looked at him, and then they scattered.

He raced toward the person lying on the ground. It was the prince. He was alone. His hands were bound, and Lan cut through the rope quickly, noting that the prince was soaked. The sound of fighting all around him caught his attention, though Lan focused only on Nevarn and the need to get him to safety.

"What happened?" Lan asked.

"I don't know. They got in behind me, knocked me out, bound me, and—" The prince's eyes widened.

Lan spun around, swinging his blade in a sharp arc.

Three men stood before him. Lan backed away, putting the prince behind him. He held his sword out and spun it to try to push back the attackers.

"Where's your sword?" he asked.



Nevarn was a skilled fighter. Lan had seen him, having trained alongside him. It would be helpful if he had his blade.

“I don’t know. They took it.”

The nearest of the attackers darted toward Lan, while another peeled off and came at him from another direction. They were skilled—and apparently comfortable fighting together.

Lan whistled. He needed Jalyn’s help.

Lan twisted to the side, diving to his left, before bringing his blade back up in a sharp arc.

The suddenness of the movement caught the attacker off guard, and he thrust his blade up into the man’s belly. Lan rolled forward, crashing into one of the other attackers. This one fell, and Lan kicked as he jumped to his feet, bringing his blade around and carving through the next attacker’s neck.

Lan panted, looking around the village square.

“Where did you learn to fight like that?” Nevarn asked.

“Which part?”

“I suppose all of it. You don’t even seem to care about your safety.”

Lan cared, but he’d learned that fighting required a certain level of fearlessness to survive. That had been ingrained in him when he had first come to learn how to be a soldier. “I’ve had many sword masters over the years.”

“That last bit didn’t look like there was any bit of sword master to it,” Nevarn said.

Lan shrugged. “That last bit was luck.” When one of the men started to get up, Lan kicked him.

Movement nearby caught his attention, and Lan spun around. It was only Jalyn. She was bloodied on one arm but otherwise looked unharmed.

She looked at the ground, frowning. “They were more skilled than I was expecting.”

Lan nodded. "Where are the others?"

They had lost everyone except the two of them, Darren, who had their horses, and the prince. The prince darted forward, and Lan turned to see him grabbing a sword from the ground and driving it into the chest of the one attacker Lan hadn't killed.

The prince got to his feet, then glanced at the blade before tossing it to the ground.

"You should have been more definitive with them," the prince said.

Lan glanced over at the fire. It was crackling with warmth, only he didn't feel any warmth. The only thing he felt was unease. These attackers had known that they were out there—and had wanted the prince.

"We should get going," he said. "We aren't staying here."

"We have the warmth of the fire," Nevarn said.

"No," Jalyn said, shaking her head. "We go back."

Lan was thankful that he had Jalyn. He wasn't sure what Nevarn would say if it were just the two of them. Maybe he would force Lan to stay, and as he was a prince, Lan didn't know what he'd be able to do about that.

Lan didn't relax as they left the small village. He didn't relax even when he climbed into the saddle, Darren looking at them with a question in his eyes. He didn't relax even as they started off, riding quickly into the night. It wasn't until they had put distance between themselves and the crackling fire in the village that Lan finally started to relax. Even then, questions rolled through his mind. They'd lost a dozen people. All for what?

Lorant had attacked.

They had gone years with no attack. What did this sudden change mean?

Jalyn's silence told Lan that she was equally troubled.

They rode through the darkness and didn't stop until they were well away from the Lorantian border, a safe distance into Reyash. Only then did they camp.

Even when they did, no one spoke. Every so often, Lan glanced back toward Lorant, and he realized he wasn't the only one who did. Jalyn looked back that way as well, her sword resting upon her legs. Even the prince stared in the direction of the border, though it wasn't a look of worry on his face. Lan thought he saw an expression of longing, for whatever reason. He hoped that was only his imagination.

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# CHAPTER 3

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## SOPHIE

The roof of the tower looked out over the city of Valan, a sweeping expanse that revealed part of Reyash from one vantage and drew Sophie's gaze out toward Lorant, and to the city of Neylash beyond. From here she could feel the energy of Lorant. It was a reminder of the power of the magic she'd learned there.

A raven circling overhead drew her attention, and she scowled at it. She didn't need any reminders of ravens here. The Raven Queen was all she needed. She wasn't present in the city all the time, but when she was here, her presence was not always obvious. It could be difficult to know when the Raven Queen came to the city, as she didn't require the same level of protection that a sovereign without her magical ability did. Still, Sophie could feel the magic the Raven Queen used when she came to the city.

Sophie found herself looking at the movement throughout the city. The streets of Valan were narrow, especially near the tower, as though the city itself served as a fortress to protect the precious tower and its inhabitants. Farther out, the streets widened, allowing carts and wagons and entire squads of soldiers to move along them, pushing the pedestrians out of the way. Somewhere down there, her brother Lan trained with the Taihg—soldiers of incredible skill—while here in the tower, Sophie continued to work on her magic.

Her hands gripped the railing at the edge of the roof. The occasional gust of wind made her uncomfortable, though she

knew she wasn't in any real danger. No one had ever fallen off the tower—that she knew of.

The sounds of the city were muted up here. Occasional shouts made it up to her, some voices louder than others. Otherwise, the tower roof lent a peaceful feel to everything around her.

Yet Sophie didn't feel at peace.

After backing away from the edge of the tower, she stood in the middle of the flat section, where she could better set her feet and focus on her poses. Each pose had a particular purpose, a connection to her magic that she couldn't accomplish in any other way. Sophie had mastered most of the basic poses and continued to expand her repertoire using books borrowed from the expansive tower library, but what she lacked was an instructor willing to demonstrate the techniques. This forced her to experiment with the poses, something that could be dangerous.

Which was why she often found herself attempting the poses atop the tower.

Not only could it be peaceful, but she didn't have to worry about magic going awry. In the years that she'd been in Valan, she'd searched for different places to practice these poses, but none of them had been as suitable as the roof of the tower. She embraced the solitude of it—and she didn't have to fear destroying something, the way she did in other places.

Shifting her feet, she started simply. The prayer pose was one of the first she'd learned, though her instructor had been a man teaching her in a place that was a sworn enemy of Reyash. Though Ridaln had misled her, there was no doubting that he had taught her. In the time that she'd worked with Ridaln, she had learned to use magic, and that foundation had allowed her to continue to progress, even now that she was in Reyash.

There were times when Sophie couldn't help but wonder how much she might have learned had she continued to study with Ridaln. He might have been a frustrating instructor at times, but he had taught her effectively.

She shifted, moving from the prayer pose to the flag pose and finally to the resting pose. Each time she shifted, the nature of magic she called upon shifted with her, flowing from her in a surge of energy.

She released it, letting the power sweep harmlessly away from her, out into the city from atop the tower. When she had attempted to use various poses in other parts of the city, she hadn't released that power nearly as harmlessly. The small grove at the edge of the city had taken the brunt of the force of her magic. The garden had taken some of it as well.

Now that she had the foundation of her poses established again, she started to work through some of the more complicated ones.

Even those weren't as tricky as they once had been. She hurriedly moved between them, from the var to the olar and the usnow poses, to the reflex and the gilán and the dearth. All of them had various purposes, and all of them were somewhat more complex than the basic poses.

Sophie paused to stretch. Some of these poses required that she maintain her posture for long stretches of time, leaving her thighs burning, though in the years that she had been working through them her strength had increased. Her coordination, not so much. She still stumbled from time to time, feeling like a fool when she did. Thankfully, on top of the tower, there weren't many people who had the opportunity to notice when she made a fool of herself.

If only she could create magic without pulling upon the energy and effort of a pose.

That would be the next step in her evolving control over magic, but it was a step she had come no closer to understanding. That was one thing she had thought she might learn while here in Valan, though in the time that she'd been here, she had come no closer to it. Her first instructor had used a tapping technique, barely moving his fingers or his lips to summon great magic. Sophie knew the Raven Queen had the ability to use even more incredible magic, and she probably didn't have to do any of that.

When Sophie used magic, it was obvious to everyone around her.

She often attempted to reproduce the tapping patterns she'd seen Ridaln using.

In the years since she'd last seen him, Sophie had often worked through her memory of those tappings to determine whether he had shown her anything, even unintentionally. She recalled the way that he had used just the slightest movements, and in the time that she had been trying to reproduce them, she had not been able to find any understanding of what he did.

She feared asking the Raven Queen, though mostly that was because she had only brief encounters with her. And even when she did have an opportunity to speak with her, Sophie had become leery of asking too much.

The door to the roof of the tower opened, and Sophie straightened hurriedly, disrupting the flow of power she had been holding in the gilan pose. The pose was relatively complicated, forcing her to set her feet slightly wider than her shoulders and arch her back just enough that she could look upward while her head and her spine were in perfect alignment. The pose was complicated in that manner, but even more difficult was how she had to place her hands outward from her, angling her arms back toward her chest, creating something of a circle.

Power exploded away from her.

Had she been disrupted even a moment sooner, there probably wouldn't have been any power within the pose, but she had just slid one foot slightly to the side, changing the alignment of the pose, and the sudden shift had created a burst of magic energy throughout her.

The pair of soldiers pushing open the door were caught by surprise.

Sophie's energy slammed into them, sending them flying back through the door.

"Oh, Darish curse me," she whispered.



Sophie hurried forward, sagging for a moment as her body attempted to recover from the brief use of magic. She scrambled toward the stairs, headed down them, and found the two soldiers lying motionless. It had been a while since she had attacked anyone with magic, even unintentionally.

The top of the tower was isolated, but thankfully, there were two servants scurrying along the hallway, and Sophie looked up at them, waving. “Go get Thea.”

As reluctant as she was to give this command, the only way that she was going to help these two soldiers who were now unconscious because of her was through Thea.

She stayed with the soldiers, moving them so that they were lying not so awkwardly. She did check to make sure they were still breathing and still had pulses, and she was thankful that neither man appeared seriously injured, though with the pose she’d been using, it wasn’t just the slamming into walls that could potentially have been a danger to them. The magical assault could also cause trouble.

Footsteps thundering along the stone floor caught her attention, and Sophie looked up to see Thea storming toward her. She was an older woman, her dark gray hair tied back with pale blue silk, and her crystalline blue eyes shining with intensity. She hurriedly reached for something in her pocket and pulled a wand out as she limped over to crouch down next to the two soldiers.

“What happened this time?” she asked.

“I was practicing on the tower roof. They opened the door...”

Thea shot her a hard look, then turned her attention back to the two men. She held out the wand, and a glowing greenish light began to emerge from the end of it, washing over the nearest of the soldiers. The man took a deep, gasping breath, and then he sat up.

Thea rested her hand on his chest, holding him down for a moment. “Easy. You need to take a moment before you get yourself moving again.”

The soldier swallowed, licking his lips. Sophie had some experience with healing such as Thea had used on him, and she knew how much it would dry out his mouth, leaving him needing water. Probably food as well.

“What happened?” he asked.

“You made the mistake of following your orders,” Thea said, shooting Sophie a glance. “And this one thought she would practice her form of magic out in the open.”

“I have to practice it somewhere,” Sophie said.

“I know you do,” Thea whispered.

She turned to the other soldier and pressed the wand down on him, letting power flow into him. The energy she used was much more considerable than before, and the power continued to flow, a sweeping of green that washed over him.

Thea clenched her jaw as she worked, and Sophie had the distinct impression that it took much more power than Thea had anticipated to help him.

“Is there anything I can do?” Sophie asked.

“I think you’ve done quite enough,” Thea said.

Sophie had been around the Karell a few times when working with magic. She had attempted to train with them when she had first come to Valan, though she had quickly learned that the kind of power she possessed was different from that of the Karell. Now that she understood the truth of the Karell, Sophie suspected her nana had been one of them, if only to test for those who were capable of using magic. Her own power was different. Sorcery, at least to hear Ridaln talk about it, was a different form of magic from that which the Karell used.

As far as Sophie knew, she had the same type of magic as the Raven Queen, though she had never been given the opportunity to practice it with her. Sophie had believed that coming to Reyash would offer her that opportunity, but the Raven Queen had wanted nothing to do with teaching Sophie. The only connection that Sophie had to the Raven Queen was

through her son, Prince Nevarn, though he was more annoying than useful.

The glowing from the end of the wand intensified. It washed over the soldier, and with a soft grunt, Thea jabbed at him. Light exploded, sweeping over him, and the soldier sucked in a sharp breath.

“He must have taken the brunt of the attack,” Thea muttered.

“I didn’t mean to hurt him,” Sophie said.

Thea looked up at her. “I know you didn’t. That’s why you need to master control.”

Sophie got to her feet. She glanced up at the stairs leading toward the roof and then looked back at the soldiers. She’d been using the roof for the last few months without ever coming across anyone. Why now?

“I was just practicing.”

Thea got to her feet, shoving her wand back into her pocket and wiping her hands on her gray gown. She clasped her hands in front of her, glaring at Sophie. “Well, your practicing nearly devastated the grove. You were exiled from the garden, I remember. And you have been sent away from the kitchen.”

“Not for magic,” Sophie said.

Thea cocked her head, studying her. “Perhaps the tower isn’t the best place for you to continue your studies.”

Sophie blinked.

When she had been taken away from Neylash and Lorant, she had thought she would be given an opportunity to progress with her magic. She’d thought they would be interested in learning more about her time with Ridaln, or even in understanding what Darius had planned with the Shavln. But she had found the reception far cooler than she had anticipated.

None seemed altogether impressed that she had studied with Ridaln. Sophie didn’t know whether that was because he

wasn't viewed as a significant sorcerer or whether they believed that he was now gone. Perhaps it was the latter.

Knowing that they had to deal with Darius, and whatever magical threat he might pose, brought about a different concern—despite the fact that Darius had been silent in the years since she had escaped him. There had been no sign of Ridaln, which left Sophie thinking that he had not survived. Surprisingly, that bothered her when she took the time to think of it, though she knew that it should not.

“I'm just trying to be ready,” she said.

“There's been no evidence of Darius moving on us—or the Shavln.”

“I was there. You can't know what I saw. Oleda—”

“Oleda had been buried so deeply within Lorant that she would have told you anything to convince you.”

“That wasn't my impression of her,” Sophie said softly.

“You didn't know Oleda the way I did,” Thea said.

Sophie met the woman's gaze, not willing to look away.

It was one thing for people to speak scornfully about Ridaln. Sophie had had enough experience with the sorcerer to feel conflicted about him. He had been the one to notice that she had potential, and he had taught her how to use poses to generate magic. Without Ridaln, she wasn't sure what she would have been.

Not a sorcerer.

And certainly she would not have become a Karell, as Sophie didn't have that potential.

She had a much harder time hearing someone speak poorly of Oleda. Oleda had been the one person who had been consistently kind to Sophie in Neylash. In fact, Oleda had been kinder to her than anyone in Valan had. Sophie thought that a strange irony and couldn't help but question whether Oleda would have helped her more than she had been helped here so far.

“I knew Oleda well enough,” Sophie said.

Thea flicked her head to the two soldiers. “Get moving. Finish your patrol and whatever assignment your commander gave you.”

The two men nodded hurriedly, and they headed up the stairs toward the tower roof. So much for Sophie going up there again to continue her magic practice.

When they were gone, Thea turned to Sophie. Even with her wand in her pocket, there was a sense of power within her, one that left Sophie uncomfortable. Though the type of magic the Karell possessed was different from what Sophie had, for whatever reason Sophie could feel it. She supposed she should be thankful for that, as it allowed her to know when Thea used magic around her. Even without the wand, Thea wasn't helpless.

There were times when Sophie wondered how Thea might have fared against Darius when he had released the Shavln.

“I need to see her,” Sophie said.

Thea tipped her head to the side, frowning at her. “She's going to tell you the same thing she told you before. Work with Parvella.” Thea wrinkled her nose as she said the woman's name, which brought a smile to Sophie's lips.

“Parvella hasn't really taught me anything. I don't know if she can,” Sophie said.

“You have to be patient. Nothing valuable is easy to acquire. Run along. I'll deal with this. You get back to your studies.”

Sophie looked away and started along the hall. She didn't know where she wanted to go, though at this point she wanted to be anywhere other than with Thea. It wasn't that everyone in the tower treated her the same way, though Thea could be the worst of the bunch. She said things others just implied, suggesting an anger at Sophie for things that were out of her control.

She weaved down the stairs, debating whether to head to her room before deciding against it. Working magic—even as

briefly as she had this morning—had the effect of making her hungry. Regardless of what Thea might say, she wasn't banished from the kitchen. And she hadn't used magic there that would get her exiled. The gods knew how much that would devastate Sophie were that to happen.

The tower was an interesting structure. Situated at the center of Valan—the city itself was nestled nearer the Lorantian border than Sophie thought the Raven Queen would prefer—the tower preceded those who now controlled Reyash. She'd been intrigued by it ever since coming to the city, wanting to know the purpose behind the tower and to see if she might be able to learn anything about it, as it didn't seem anything like the structures elsewhere in the city.

As far as she could tell, the tower had been built as a keep. It certainly served as one. Not only did it sit atop the hill at the center of Valan, but it stretched high enough that one could see vast distances all around it. The tower itself was massive, though not nearly as decorative—or warm—as the palace in Neylash. It was much more functional.

When she reached the kitchen on the second level, Sophie hurried toward it. Time in the tower had built up her legs and endurance for stairs in a way that climbing into Ridaln's hidden tower never had.

The kitchen was active, the way kitchens often were. Heat radiated from the ovens. Cooks and bakers moved from station to station. And a general bustle of activity moved all through the area as everyone focused on food. Sophie paused in the entrance for a moment, taking it all in. The conversation with Thea had brought back memories of Oleda, memories that were surprisingly warm, given her experience in Neylash. Maybe that was only because of Oleda and how skilled she was at baking, though Sophie still thought there had been a connection between them. Oleda *had* helped her.

“What do you need now, girl?”

Sophie turned and smiled at Lira. She was a few years older than Sophie and usually treated her better than others in the tower. Her round face was often pinched, as if she was

constantly struggling with the obligations of her position. Today her full lips curled into a hint of a smile.

“What makes you think I need anything, *girl*?” Sophie replied.

Lira swatted at her playfully while dusting some flour off her apron. “You don’t come down here that often. Not unless you need something.” Lira flicked her brown gaze past Sophie, to a pair of servants carrying a tray, and hollered at them until they straightened it. “Damn fools are going to spill half the food we made this morning.”

“I could help.”

Sophie had made the offer several times over the years, and mostly Lira had refused. Not because she didn’t think Sophie could help—at least, Sophie didn’t think that was the case—but because Lira didn’t want to draw Thea’s ire.

“You and I both know you need to be doing something more than working in the kitchen. Now go grab whatever pastries you want, and don’t be telling anyone I let you.”

“Who’s going to care?”

Lira frowned at her, biting her lower lip. It made her tanned face look even younger than she was, though the hardness in her eyes countered that. “Don’t need *her* coming down on me. I’ve had enough trouble with her kind. You don’t work this kitchen as long as I have without learning a thing or two.”

“How long have you worked this kitchen? Thirty years? Forty?”

Lira glared at her. “You better be careful, girl.”

Sophie smiled. “I’ve been as careful as I can be.”

Both of them made a point of avoiding saying Thea’s name. Sophie because she feared who might be listening on behalf of Thea, and Lira probably for the same reason, though Sophie didn’t know if there was more to it for her.

“Why would she send you from the tower? You got the magic.”

Sophie shrugged. It was always “the magic” with Lira. “I have it, but I don’t have *her* kind. Does that make sense?”

“The magic is the magic. There is no sense. Not to a simple kitchen girl like me.”

Lira turned away, hollering at another pair of servants carrying trays from the kitchen. The men were twice her age, and she corrected them as if they were her juniors. She stepped toward a counter, calling out something to a cook as well, before turning back to Sophie.

“Damn fools,” she muttered again.

Sophie laughed softly. “I doubt there’s anything simple about you.”

“You be careful, Sophie. Don’t let them chase you from the tower if you know you’re right.”

With that, Lira hurried off, waving her arms at one of the cooks.

She might not be a Karell, but there was something about Lira that reminded Sophie of Oleda. Not her baking. As much as Sophie might like Lira, the younger woman didn’t make the same flaky, delicious pastries that Oleda had always managed to make. They were tasty enough, though nothing that she’d found in Valan—and she’d looked even outside the tower—had come close.

Much about Lira reminded Sophie of Oleda. Mostly it was the way that she commanded the kitchen, but partly it was in her warmth. Sophie had found most of the kitchen workers to be warm and welcoming, especially those who came to help from time to time, not only to steal a few snacks.

Sophie went to the cabinet near the back of the kitchen, nodding to a few of the familiar cooks, and pulled it open to reveal the shelf of treats. None in the tower enjoyed the same kind of pastry as Dannith did, so they didn’t make them quite as often, though there usually were similar pastries.

After filling her pocket, Sophie turned to find her way out of the kitchen.



She wasn't sure what she should do now, but she didn't want to return to her room, and more than that, she wasn't willing to allow Thea to be the reason that she stopped practicing.

The old Karell might not care much for Sophie, and she might not believe Sophie, but Sophie remained determined to find proof of the Shavln, only she had no idea what that would involve.

As she chewed on her pastry, she nodded to Lira and started to head out of the kitchen, and she tried to think about what else she needed to do, coming up with no answer.

The energy within the kitchen had changed. As Sophie looked around, she frowned. She should have said something to Lira, though she hadn't really noticed that the kitchen was as bustling as it was. She'd been so focused on what had happened to her that Sophie hadn't been as observant as she should have been.

She nodded at Anda, one of the cooks she knew. "What's going on?"

"Oh, nothing more than *she's* visiting. You know how we get when she is here."

Sophie didn't need Anda to spell out who she meant. She understood. The Raven Queen was coming to the tower.

Anda flashed a smile before hurrying off, having earned a hard stare from Lira.

Sophie received one as well, and she smiled as charmingly as she could at Lira, though the cook ignored her and turned back to her work.

Maybe Sophie could get word about Darius—and the Shavln.

It had been difficult for her to hear anything. She had asked Thea, though Thea was not willing to speak of it, claiming that it was not her place. During her training sessions with Parvella, Sophie had asked additional questions, but Parvella typically focused on the various poses she wanted Sophie to master.

She had not learned anything about Darius.

He was still out there, she knew. He had freed the Shavln.

And it seemed as if others were not concerned.

Even with the Raven Queen's return to the tower, Sophie doubted that she would get the answers she wanted. She wasn't sure how she could find them, but she hated being left in the dark.

Maybe someone else could help her, though.

With that thought, she grabbed a few more pastries, wrapped them in a napkin, and hurried out of the kitchen.

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# CHAPTER 4

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## SOPHIE

Sophie had long since come to ignore the pair of guards blocking access to the hallway. They were mostly decorative, as the Raven Queen was responsible for whatever protections were placed here, much more so than any soldier. Still, the swords sheathed at their sides, along with the gleaming helms and chain mail they wore with the crisp midnight-blue uniform marking them as part of the Queensguard, gave them an intimidation factor that could not be overlooked.

Sophie took a deep breath as she approached, forcing a smile, and half expected to be turned away. Whenever she'd tried to visit Dannith before, she had been refused entry. Mostly it had been Thea who had sent her back, seemingly crawling out of some hidden hallway to intercept Sophie before she had the chance to come and see the deposed king. This time, no one stopped her.

She glanced at the soldiers, who ignored her.

Why didn't they react to her coming through here?

Maybe they just didn't care. Or maybe it was because Sophie wore the crest of the Raven Queen—a raven surrounded by a field of stars—on her lapel, suggesting that she had authorization. Either way, Sophie was thankful that she had an opportunity to visit.

In the few years that she'd been in the tower, Sophie had not spent much time with Dannith, though not for lack of trying. When she had first come to the tower, she'd been

granted access to him, though Sophie had come to learn that access had been tied to her relationship with him, and the belief that Dannith would share more with her than he did with others. When it had become apparent that he wasn't sharing anything with Sophie, she had gradually lost access.

A part of her missed her conversations with him, not that she knew him all that well. She and Dannith had been friendly, but not friends. They had shared pastries. Nothing more than that.

But he represented a part of her life that stayed with her.

It was while in the palace in Neylash that she had come to learn about her ability and to train with Ridaln. Had she not ended up there, Sophie wasn't sure what would have come of her.

*I would've been with Nana and Papa.*

Had they not died, she would have been able to stay with her family, and maybe she would have grown up to be a weaver like her grandmother, only Sophie wasn't sure that was what she was meant to do or be. Her grandmother's weaving was tied to the Karell, Sophie suspected.

She reached the door at the end of the hall. It was simple, unlike some of the other doors within the tower, not marked with any of the symbols for the various gods that were celebrated here. She hesitated for a moment before knocking.

A muffled voice on the other side greeted her. Sophie tested the door, pushing it open. She stood there for a moment, hesitating.

Dannith's room was of a reasonable size, though not nearly as massive as the Raven Queen's apartment. He had a single enormous room that was larger than Sophie's entire home with Nana and Papa. A thick, plush multicolored rug covered the floor. A hearth at one end crackled with cozy flames. The air smelled of fragrant tea, mixed with the scents that came from flower arrangements in a pair of vases situated by the door.

She found Dannith sitting at a desk near the hearth, leaning over a notebook while writing. He paused when she entered,

looking over at her, the dark lines in his face softening when he saw her. He was a kindly man, with bushy brows, dark hair, and eyes that seemed to take in everything, much more so now than they had when she had first met him.

“Sophie,” he said, warmth in his voice. He set his pen down. “It’s been too long.”

“I’m not always allowed to see you,” she said, glancing over her shoulder before stepping into the room and pulling the door closed. “At least, they don’t want me to see you. I think they are afraid that you and I will conspire against them.”

Dannith chuckled and waved a hand at her and then pointed toward a chair near his desk. Sophie stepped forward, sweeping her gaze around. The room was comfortable, despite its massive size. There were a pair of armchairs situated in one corner, bookshelves stuffed with books. A bed was tucked into a corner, as if to conceal the fact that this was the only room Dannith could use.

Sophie reached the chair and took a seat, perched on the edge of it. She clasped her hands together, immediately forming the beginnings of a pose, though she knew it wasn’t necessary. As far as she knew, Dannith didn’t have any power of his own.

In the years that she had been in Valan, there hadn’t been any war. Not really. There certainly hadn’t been the same type of war that there had been in the years before. Everything had been calm, time giving them an opportunity for peace.

Sophie didn’t know whether peace was realistic, given everything they had gone through, but having that semblance of peace, however brief, seemed significant to her.

The Taihg had been able to regroup, to train new recruits. The people within Reyash, men and women and children that Sophie had never known before, had been increasingly relaxed. Sophie didn’t have any idea how long the war had been taking place, but she had been on the fringe of it her entire life. Having been introduced to a greater aspect of the

war, she recognized that no one wanted the fighting. How could they?

“I don’t suppose you brought any treats?”

Sophie reached into her pocket to pull out the bundle of pastries that she’d taken from the kitchen, and she slid them over to him. Dannith’s eyes narrowed, and then he winked at her.

“None here are quite as good as Oleda,” he said with a sigh.

“It doesn’t bother you that she was sent to spy on you?”

He shrugged. “Should it? I had plenty of spies here.”

“Do you still?”

He held her gaze for a moment before glancing down at his notebook. “There are some things that I don’t talk about, Sophie.”

“Of course,” she said hurriedly. “I’m sorry.” And she didn’t really want to talk about it with him. That was the kind of thing that the Raven Queen and Thea had hoped that she would drag out of him, but Sophie had no interest in doing so. She didn’t want Dannith to betray his kingdom. She didn’t have any real ties to him or to the Raven Queen. “And that’s not really why I came.”

Dannith smiled at her. “I hear you have been doing quite well in your studies.”

“You’ve heard that?” She hadn’t even realized that Dannith would be given information like that, nor that he would care.

“There are certain things that I ask about. Some things are considered nonstarters, and I don’t get to hear much about my kingdom any longer, which is difficult, but others are not off-limits—including you.”

“I didn’t realize that you would be concerned about me.”

“You are one of the few people I know in this land. And you were responsible for saving me. Had you not...”

“I saved you, but I don’t think it made a difference,” Sophie said, looking around the room.

“This?” He waved a hand. “This is better than the alternative. Darius intended to... Well, I’m not entirely sure what he intended to do. It’s unfortunate that I have to wait until *they* remove him on my behalf, but seeing as I don’t have their connection to power, I suppose I can be patient.”

Sophie shifted on her chair. He spoke about the Karell, though Sophie hadn’t been able to learn whether the Karell really were trying to unseat Darius—or anything about Darius at all, for that matter. “It was all about the Shavln.”

“That is what I’ve been told.”

“You don’t think so?”

Could Dannith not even believe in the danger? Sophie had figured that if anybody would, it would be him. He had seen it firsthand. He had seen what Darius had been willing to do.

“My advisers used to talk about powers the sorcerers could control,” Dannith said, turning his attention back to the notebook. His brow furrowed, and he pressed his lips together in a tight line. “Back in the early days of the war, at least. That was when we were looking for any advantage we could find to defeat our enemies.” He snorted. “Such a violent time.” He shook his head.

“You sound like you didn’t want anything to do with the war.”

She thought about the stories that she’d heard about the war from Nana, but Nana had kept most of those simple. Many of her stories were like that, though. She had told Sophie stories in order to entertain but also to teach. There weren’t many lessons that she could learn from violence and bloodshed.

“I don’t remember much about that,” Dannith said. He looked over at the door. “Which is what I’ve been telling them when they ask. I don’t deny responsibility. I had a hand in it, much like they had a hand in what they did, but I do question how much my advisers pushed me.” He breathed out heavily.



“And I question how much the Karell tried to protect me from them.”

Sophie had that sense as well. Oleda wasn't the only one who had protected Dannith in the palace. There had been others.

“I don't suspect you came here to talk about the war, though.”

“I don't even know,” Sophie said, throwing herself back in the chair. She rubbed a knuckle into her eye. “I've been training the way that Ridaln was teaching me, but I'm not making the same progress as I made with him, and I fear that I need to be ready for the Shavln.”

Dannith was quiet for a few moments. “I think Ridaln was a better man than they give him credit for.”

Sophie had been feeling that way as well, though she wasn't going to tell anybody that. It was hard enough to speak positively about somebody like him, who had battled the Raven Queen.

“He was my first instructor,” she said. “And he could be demanding, but I don't think he was trying to hurt me.”

“Not intentionally,” Dannith said.

Sophie looked up.

“He had plans. How could he not, when he had learned from Darius?”

“And now he's gone,” Sophie said.

“Perhaps,” Dannith said, resting his hand on the table and drumming his fingers for a moment. It reminded her of the way that Ridaln had tapped his fingers together. For a moment, Sophie was left wondering if perhaps Dannith might actually be Ridaln, using some sorcery to mask himself and conceal himself inside the tower. That moment was fleeting, however. There was no way that he would have been able to do so for as long as he had been here. And Sophie had been there when Dannith had been escorted away from the palace, when Ridaln

had also been present. “It’s been my experience that sorcerers are difficult to kill.”

“Did you actually try to kill the Raven Queen?”

He shrugged. “I wouldn’t have been opposed to it once. But now I fear that we need all capable of fighting, so that we can ensure that nothing worse happens.” He looked around. “I wish I could speak more freely, Sophie. I really do.”

“They don’t let you?”

“There are certain things that I can’t share. Not here... and perhaps not with you.”

“I get that a lot,” she said.

“It has nothing to do with you, though. If Darius was successful, and he freed the Shavln—”

“It wasn’t Darius that had to succeed. It was me,” she said.

“It was Darius,” Dannith said, the edge to his voice brooking no argument. “You may have been a tool used for the task, but he was the one who wielded that tool. As I was saying, though, if Darius was successful and freed the Shavln, then we must all be vigilant.”

“I haven’t even been able to get anybody to talk to me about the Shavln.”

“Because none really understand it,” he said. “At least, that was my understanding from when Darius spoke of it. He mentioned power. All sorcerers want power. Some chase it through poses, some through wands, and some through other means.”

“The Karell aren’t the same as sorcerers like Darius.”

“Magic is magic,” Dannith said. “All of it is beyond my understanding, but that doesn’t mean that it is not somehow connected. And I suspect that someone like yourself, someone training in sorcery, can see that.”

She wasn’t about to argue with him that the way she used magic was quite a bit different from the way the Karell did, but that was partly because she didn’t fully understand how

the Karell reached their power. It was strange. There was something to the weaves that Sophie had learned when she was younger, though those weaves were quite a bit different from the poses she used. And she didn't require a wand, the way that the Karell did.

"But it's a dark power," Sophie said.

"That is what they tell me."

"You don't believe it?"

He turned his attention back to his notebook. He stared at it for a moment, leaving Sophie wondering just what he was writing. Maybe notes to his people. And if what he had alluded to was true, it was likely that he had spies in the tower. Could he be using those spies?

Could he be working against the Raven Queen?

It would be nearly impossible, Sophie thought, especially under the watchful eye of the Raven Queen's people, but then again, she didn't know whether Dannith had other capabilities. Maybe he had trained in sorcery. Maybe he was a Karell. Or maybe he had some other power.

"It's not that I don't believe that it's a dark power, but it seems to me that power itself is not necessarily good or bad." He looked up at her, and the brightness and vibrancy that she saw in his eyes was different from what she had seen in them before. There was an intensity there. "If there is a darkness, then something—or someone—makes it dark."

"Like a sorcerer?"

He shrugged.

"It would take a pretty powerful sorcerer to influence something like that, though."

"It would," he said.

"Maybe it's something more powerful than a sorcerer," Sophie mused.

Dannith just nodded, turning his attention back to his book. She could tell from his expression that he had already

considered these possibilities, which left her wondering what answer he'd come up with.

What could be more powerful than a sorcerer?

When she asked Dannith that question, he set his pen down for a moment, watching her.

“What do you think, Sophie?”

“I don't know. Darius was pretty powerful, and from everything that I've heard, the Raven Queen is also powerful, and even then it seems odd that there would be a sorcerer capable of influencing some power and corrupting it. That's what you are getting at, isn't it?”

“Something along those lines,” he said.

“And if it's not a sorcerer, what in Darish's name could it be?”

“Oh, I don't think it's Darish's name that you need to be worried about.”

She frowned. “You think it's a god?”

Dannith was silent.

“But if it's a god, then it is some god that has been kept from our world. Intentionally.”

“Yes.”

“And if it is a god, and it has been freed, how can we hope to stop it?”

“That is a much better question, Sophie. And unfortunately, it's one that I don't have an answer for.”

He took one of the pastries and peeled off the end to chew on it slowly.

Sophie sat quietly, her mind churning. In the time that she'd been in the city, she hadn't given that much thought to the Shavln, other than that it was some dark power that Darius had freed. Maybe that was a mistake.

And if he did have some way of accessing some new god power, what could she do about it? What could any of them

do?

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# CHAPTER 5

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The sword whipped toward his head, and Lan rolled to the side, barely avoiding the strike. He brought his own blade up but managed to do so just a fraction too slowly. He was quick, but his opponent was quicker.

Spinning around, Lan drove his heel outward before quickly withdrawing it. It wasn't a real threat, more of a feint, but Magnus recognized the movement for what it was and barely moved out of the way.

He was a large man, and his massive two-handed blade remained held out before him, ready for any possible attack. Magnus had taught Lan for the last few years, and his skill was unrivaled among the Taihg, which was part of the reason that Lan continued to push himself when facing Magnus. Of all his instructors, Magnus was the only one that he had not consistently beaten.

"Did you really think I would fall for that again?" Magnus asked, bracing. A trace of energy came from him, and the movement that he held. Lan had not yet managed to master something similar.

Most believed that the Taihg had access to magic. Some did, but Lan had not yet learned how to gain such a connection. When he had asked Magnus over the years, he had told him that he needed to master the blade before he could master anything else. That irritated Lan these days, especially because he felt he had mastered the blade, much more so than most of the Taihg, including quite a few who had power of their own.

“I was hoping you might,” Lan said, getting to his feet and wiping his mouth. He’d bitten his tongue when he’d rolled, but the pain was minimal. It was not the worst injury that he had sustained when sparring with Magnus, and this was probably not the last time that he would sustain an injury. When dealing with Magnus, Lan had come to know that he had to be prepared for wounds.

“You can’t throw yourself at every fight,” Magnus said. He spun slightly, moving his massive body far more rapidly than somebody his size should be capable of. “That’s the lesson that I’ve been trying to instill in you for the last few years.”

Lan shrugged before snorting. “Some lessons are harder for me to learn. I can be a bit thickheaded.”

Magnus watched him for a moment, then let out a heavy sigh. He scratched at his bearded chin with one thick finger. “We still struggle with your initial training.”

“I don’t struggle with it,” Lan said. Even as he spoke, he knew the lie. As did Magnus.

When Lan had first come to learn the sword, he had done so training with soldiers who had thought to use pain and suffering as a way to break him, to convince him it was the only way that he could learn to fight. Lan had learned to fight, but he had later learned that there were other ways of teaching.

“You still suffer. I see it every time you train. It’s the reason we have to be careful with your assignments.”

Lan wanted to argue with him, but Magnus was one of his superiors, and Lan knew better than to argue too much with him in particular, not only because he outranked him, but also because Magnus was a friend. Lan valued his advice.

“I want you to master the blade only. Nothing more. Find that place inside of you.”

“You’ve been telling me that for the last few years,” Lan said.

“Have I?” Magnus snorted. “Of course I have. The advice doesn’t change. Your skill has improved. You are one of the



best of us. At least, with the blade. But in all things, you need to find what centers you.”

Lan stood back, still holding his sword. He hadn't expected to have a conversation like this while sparring. They were in the middle of the barracks yard, with other Taihg soldiers sparring around them. The sound of blades, metal clattering off metal, surrounded them. Many Taihg soldiers, including quite a few that Lan had served with, were there. The ground was hard-packed earth beneath his boots, the barracks wall that surrounded the yard simple stone, though he had learned it was imbued with some magical energy. An errant blade or arrow wouldn't harm the stone.

“Why are you bringing this up now?” Lan asked.

Magnus looked around before his gaze settled on a pair of figures off in the corner of the barracks yard. Lan followed the direction of his gaze, realizing that one of the figures was the prince. It wasn't uncommon for Nevarn to come to the barracks to train. He was relatively skilled with the sword, though probably not good enough to overpower Lan—at least, not yet. Lan suspected that as the son of the Raven Queen, Nevarn had some magic of his own. Maybe he trained with the Taihg because he intended to lead them at some point.

“Him?” Lan asked.

“I heard about what happened.”

Magnus had just returned to the city, which made it surprising that he had heard about the situation with Nevarn. Maybe that was the reason that Magnus had come back, though.

“Jalyn shared with you?”

“She reported, if that's what you're asking.”

Jalyn. She was training in the yard as well, though using a long staff today and fighting with three younger Taihg trainees. She was incredibly skilled, which was apparent even from a distance, the staff whistling through the air as it clattered off the blades. None managed to get close to her.

Magnus started to chuckle.

“What?” Lan asked.

“I see the way you look at her. Just be careful.”

“I’m looking at her as one of my officers,” Lan said.

“Right,” Magnus said, a grin splitting his wide face. He’d gained a scar on one cheek in the time since Lan had last seen him. It was slightly jagged and hadn’t healed straight, suggesting that he hadn’t had access to any of the Karell healers that often traveled with the Taihg. “Just be careful. Too many men have gone down that road.”

“Is that right?”

“Well, look at her.”

Lan didn’t need to look at Jalyn to see her, as he could easily visualize her. With her bright red hair and her pale skin, she was every bit the storybook Pale Princess that he had heard about when he was younger. It was difficult to push those images out of his mind when he spoke to her, though now it was easier, especially as he had trained—and fought—alongside her.

“Did she tell you everything that we encountered?”

“She reported the attack, and how the prince was captured, and what you had to do to save him. Had we known that Lorant was so active along the border, we would’ve sent more patrols, and we wouldn’t have lost so many men.”

That had been difficult for Lan. He hated losing men. “I don’t blame her.”

Magnus arched a brow at the comment. “Why would you blame her?”

“We were on the border, Magnus. There were patrols out there. I don’t know what’s going on, but that is Jalyn’s domain, isn’t it?”

Magnus’s brow clouded for a moment before he spun back to Lan. “There are always patrols along the border. Especially in the last few years. After what we saw...”

Lan didn't need him to go into what they had seen. He had been there. The only reason he'd been permitted to be a part of that mission was his sister, but that didn't change the fact that he knew what had taken place inside Lorant. He was one of the few who knew that Dannith, the king, was now in the tower, presumably protected, though that left Lan wondering if he was more a prisoner of war than a guest.

"Don't look at me like that," Magnus said.

"Like what?"

"Like you want to send an incursion in. We have a hard enough time convincing the prince not to send troops in."

"I didn't realize that he wanted to attack." Then again, Lan had seen his eagerness to charge after the Lorantian soldiers. Still, there were quite a few soldiers who were like that, so it wasn't altogether surprising that a young man like Nevarn, somebody who hadn't seen much battle, would be intrigued by the possibility of fighting.

"He's not alone in it," Magnus said. He let out another sigh. "Too many want to rekindle the war. We have peace."

"For how long?"

Magnus frowned at him.

Lan shrugged. "Well, from what my sister says—"

"I know what your sister claims, but the Karell have seen no evidence of the Shavln. For all we know, it was merely a ploy for Darius to gain power."

Most of it was beyond Lan's understanding. Darius was a sorcerer who had somehow altered his appearance so that he looked like the king. As far as Lan had heard, he now served as the king. It was part of the reason that the Raven Queen kept the true king in the tower, for the possibility that they would be able to unseat Darius.

It was the kind of politics that Lan wanted nothing to do with.

Ever since he was young, he had wanted nothing more than to be a soldier. After he'd lost his parents in the war and

gone to live with his nana and papa, he had thought that he would have nothing more than a simple life. There was something about that now that was appealing, though Lan couldn't imagine anything different from what he now had. Maybe he could never have a simple life again. But after his grandparents had been slaughtered, he had been given an opportunity to become the very thing that he had always wanted to be.

He had never wanted to play a part in politics, though.

"I don't really know anything about it," Lan said, shaking his head and glancing at the tower in the distance.

The tower rose high above the rest of the city, as it was situated on a small hill that stood at the center of Valan. The top of the tower was shrouded in cloud today, which was unusual. Lan suspected that it was tied to some magic used around the tower. His sister was in that tower, training to be a sorcerer. That thought still left him filled with surprise. Sophie, a sorcerer. It was the kind of story that she would have loved when she was younger, and he suspected that she still would, though he didn't see her often enough to know if that was the truth. His time with the Taihg often took him out of the city and away from her, though he tried to send word every time he returned.

"I just do as I am directed," Lan said.

Magnus laughed. "Do you, now? I think we can both agree that you do quite a bit more than just what you are directed to do. Think about how you led the charge along the northern border with the Ipand invaders."

Lan started to smile. That had been one of the very first times he'd been permitted to command a unit of his own. Even now, those opportunities were rare. Lan thought it was tied to the fact that he did not have his own form of magic, as so many of the other Taihg did, but a part of him questioned whether there was more to it than that. He wondered if perhaps it was tied to what he had gone through, and the fact that his training had originated in Lorant—with a man who had betrayed the Taihg.

“It was a bad order,” Lan said.

Magnus snorted. “Bad or not, you need to follow commands. That’s why I’m here.”

“That’s not why you’re here.” Lan frowned. He hadn’t seen Magnus for the better part of a few months, as their patrols often separated them these days.

“No, that’s not why I’m here,” Magnus said softly.

“Why *are* you here?”

Magnus’s gaze drifted toward the tower before he glanced at Nevarn training in the corner of the barracks yard again. When he finally turned toward Lan, his expression was neutral—at least, seemingly so. Lan knew Magnus well enough, though. He had trained with him for the better part of a year, before they had been given different assignments. As Lan had continued to progress through the Taihg, Magnus had done so as well, being given assignments that had carried Lan’s onetime mentor away from him.

“I’m not permitted to talk about it.”

“Come on,” Lan said.

“It’s nothing.”

Lan frowned. “I know it’s more than nothing. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be here. Well, not just that, but you wouldn’t be trying to hide it from me. Whatever you are dealing with now must be significant.”

A conflicted expression crossed Magnus’s broad face. “I don’t know how significant it is.”

“Do you need skilled soldiers?”

He breathed in for a moment and then shook his head. “Not you.”

The comment pained Lan, though he knew that it shouldn’t. He felt as if he were not worthy of going with Magnus, which was difficult to even contemplate, especially as Magnus had been his primary instructor from the very beginning. If Magnus didn’t feel that he was worthy...

“Don’t look at me like that,” Magnus said.

“Who’s going? If you’re taking others with you, at least tell me that they are skilled.”

“They are.” He flicked his gaze over to where Jalyn was working. “Jalyn is leading some as well.”

Leading.

“You’re taking several units?”

Magnus nodded.

“Where?”

“After Nevarn’s experience...”

“You’re leading them into Lorant,” Lan realized. When Magnus said nothing, Lan shook his head. “Are you sure that’s not going to bring us closer to war?”

“It’s not a matter of trying to fight Lorant. We need to better understand what they are planning. We’re bringing small squads, along with the Karell, to scout. Nothing else.”

“I could go—”

“I know you could, but you aren’t.”

Lan wasn’t sure what to say and didn’t know how much to be hurt by the fact that he wasn’t included. “Is it because the Karell are going, or is it because you are going into Lorant?”

“Do you think we distrust you?”

“I don’t know.”

Magnus snorted. “It has nothing to do with your previous experience. If anything, that would be a boon. You have not yet connected to anything more, despite your potential. That is the reason that you cannot go.”

“And if I could?”

“We head out in the morning, Lan. There isn’t time for you to gain what you need. We will need to work well with the Karell.”

“I see.”

“Again, it seems that you are inferring a slight where none is intended. You’re serving well.”

“At least tell me what’s going on.”

“I don’t honestly know,” Magnus said, his voice dropping to a soft, rumbling whisper. “It isn’t about Lorant, though we are heading there. It has more to do with what the Karell have uncovered. Something dangerous.”

“The Shavln,” he said.

“Possibly.” Magnus shrugged. “Though most among the Karell are convinced the Shavln has truly been released, they suspect there are other mechanisms that are involved before it can be truly freed. So for now, we are as safe as we can be.”

“If it’s not that, then what is it?”

“Complicated,” Magnus said after taking a moment to hesitate. “Karell are missing.”

“How do you know?”

As far as Lan knew, the Karell didn’t have a centralized structure. There were quite a few who served in Reyash, though they were not under the authority of the Raven Queen. He didn’t know all that the Karell were responsible for, other than having some role in ensuring a measure of magical peace. There was more to it, he suspected, but until he stirred up some power of his own, he wasn’t sure what that would entail.

“Reports have come through,” Magnus said. “And the Raven Queen herself is the one who has requested the investigation. I don’t know what she’s detected, if anything, but we will go and see what we can find.”

“How long will you be gone?”

He didn’t care about how long Magnus would be away from the city so much as he was curious about how long they anticipated being away, as that would give him an idea of what they were doing. This had something to do with what had happened when Sophie had been in the palace, and with the sorcerer that had attacked her. He was certain of it.

And maybe she knew something more.

Lan hadn't spent that much time with his sister, but he was in the city, and he didn't have any upcoming assignments that he knew about. He was to train. He was to be a part of the routine patrols. But he had quite a bit of free time as well.

"It's uncertain. We will return when we return. That's all I know." Magnus twisted his back for a moment, swinging his blade from side to side. "Now. Since I'm here, why don't we see if we can't correct some of your swordwork deficiencies?"

Lan looked over at Jalyn. Two of the trainees had been knocked down, and only one still faced her. With just the staff—well, maybe it wasn't just the staff—she could handle quite a few opponents. Magnus would have been the same, he knew. And Kragen... well, Kragen was his own unique challenge.

If all of them were leading small squads into Lorant—combined with the Karell—whatever they were after had to be significant.

It really was time for Lan to go and see his sister.

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# CHAPTER 6

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Movement out on the horizon drew Lan's eye.

The horse beneath him pranced with a nervous energy, one that Lan shared. He tried to keep Joralt calm, but the stallion wanted to run. That was the reason they had gone out for the day.

"Easy," he whispered.

Joralt seemed to understand him, though that wasn't new. The lean gray warhorse always seemed to understand him—not that Lan had anything to do with that. By the time Lan had acquired the horse, he'd already been trained.

The horse pranced to his left.

*Mostly* trained.

Lan patted him on the neck, looking out into the distance. The movement out there was different than he'd anticipated. Out on the plains here, he only expected to see deer and the occasional wolf. Never anything else.

This was something else.

Lan continued to study the horizon. Movement had a way of drawing his attention. He searched for it, if only to be able to report back what he'd encountered. With Magnus and the others planning to depart on their special mission, Lan had some free time, and so he'd taken the opportunity to scout—not that he expected to find anything, but he was curious, if nothing else.

His attempt to see his sister had met with failure.

That wasn't terribly surprising. Sophie had responsibilities, after all. She was a sorcerer now. He didn't know what that meant, other than she had to train with poses and magic and other sorts of impossible-to-even-fathom things, but he had been disappointed.

Almost as disappointed as he had been in being denied the opportunity to go with Magnus and the others. That had stung more than it should have.

"Do you see anything?" he whispered to Joralt.

The horse stomped his hooves, almost as if he were saying no.

Lan sighed, patting Joralt again and nudging him with his knees. They started off, the reins loose in Lan's hand as Joralt trotted across the plain, plunging through grass that would have been too high to move through quickly on foot, let alone see through. The vantage from atop Joralt was much better.

Still not enough, though.

Had it been enough, he would have been able to determine what he'd seen.

Lan barely had to guide the horse. He seemed to know where Lan wanted to go. Maybe his training had been better than Lan gave him credit for.

Joralt whinnied, and Lan laughed.

They weren't running nearly as fast as Joralt wanted, but on the grassy plain, that wasn't possible. It might not even be advisable here. They were on the edge of Reyash, close enough to the border that they needed to be careful. There was always the risk that they'd cross over the border unintentionally. Were that to happen, there would be no way for the Taihg to protect him.

They angled through the grass, Lan searching the entire time for some way to see beyond the next hillside, looking for signs of movement. If there was anything to be concerned about, Joralt would have made more noise. Instead, he remained quiet.

Nearing the summit of another of the rolling hills, Joralt slowed.

When Lan tried to nudge him forward, squeezing his knees on either side, Joralt ignored the signal.

“Come on,” he urged. “You can keep moving.”

The horse ignored him.

Something was off. Lan unsheathed his sword and shifted so he could stand a little taller in the stirrups. He still didn't see anything.

“What is it?” he whispered.

Joralt whinnied softly, an anxious sound. That was unusual for him. Lan looked around, trying to stay in a position where he could see everything, and remained on his toes as he peered around the hillside. There was nothing to see.

Slouching back in the saddle, he patted Joralt on the neck. “Why don't we ride a little farther? If you detect anything, you can turn us around.”

Joralt pranced from side to side. Lan didn't know if the horse would agree, and he didn't know whether he'd even be able to coax Joralt into pushing farther ahead, but if something was unsettling the horse, Lan needed to investigate.

They started off again, though much more slowly than before.

Lan remained low on Joralt's back. Each time he started to sit up a bit more, the horse slowed again. Only when Lan crouched once more did he take off again.

They moved slowly through the grass, almost carefully.

Lan held his sword tightly, afraid to lower it, though he didn't know if there was any reason for his concern. His heart started to beat more rapidly in his chest. There weren't many times when fear got to him these days. For the most part, his training had extinguished any fear. Besides, when he went on patrols, he usually wasn't alone.

This was different.

It was supposed to be nothing more than a chance for him and Joralt to stretch their legs. Joralt more than Lan, but even Lan had needed to get out of the city for a little while. The walls of the city could be confining, even when he didn't spend much time behind them.

In the distance, he heard something moving.

Joralt slowed again.

“What is it?” Lan whispered.

He leaned over the horse's neck, trying to get into a position where he'd be able to see better, but there was nothing to see. The only thing he *could* make out was more grass, growing taller the farther they went.

They reached the top of a rise.

Antlers rose over the grass.

A head swiveled toward Lan. A massive buck looked directly at him.

He almost started laughing.

“You really got me a little worked up this time,” he murmured to Joralt.

The horse didn't move. Did the buck scare him?

*Some warhorse.*

Lan needed an animal that would be able to withstand the dangers they would face. As a Taihg, he didn't know what he might be expected to do or where he might have to go, but he was prepared for anything. He needed his horse to be the same.

“Come on,” Lan whispered.

He didn't need to irritate a buck like that, certainly not one that size. He likely had the rest of his herd with him. With those antlers, he could gore Lan and Joralt.

Even as he patted Joralt on the side, the horse didn't move.

Lan leaned over, whispering into the horse's ear. “It's all right. You don't have to worry about him. He's not going to

attack.”

Lan kept his gaze on the buck, and though he didn't think that he would attack, he didn't really know. When it came to something that size, and that powerful, he had learned caution. Everything was potentially dangerous out in the wilderness.

Joralt stood frozen in place.

Lan patted him again, squeezing him with his heels to encourage the horse to get moving, but he wouldn't. The buck turned away, disappearing into the grass. Lan waited a few moments, thinking that Joralt might relax a little and finally get going, but he didn't.

“Anytime now.”

It was almost as if Joralt couldn't move.

Lan climbed down from the saddle and pulled on the reins, trying to guide the horse forward. Joralt resisted any attempt to pull on him.

Lan grunted. “Come on. It's all right. You don't have to be afraid.”

Slowly Joralt started to move. He did so with a single step, then another, but each one was taken hesitantly. Lan dragged Joralt as carefully as he could.

There was a rustle as grass was stepped on.

“It's just a buck,” Lan said.

Joralt suddenly whinnied and then bolted. The reins were snatched from Lan's hands before he could react.

Joralt was trained well enough that he shouldn't bolt completely, but it was possible that he would keep going. Lan took a deep breath, pushing down his frustration. At least he still had his sword. He could use it to carve a path through the grass.

Starting after Joralt, he hacked at the grass but didn't need to do too much. Joralt had trampled a path in his haste to get away.

There came a soft rustle behind Lan again.

He paused, turning.

He thought the buck had bolted, but perhaps he'd remained.

Lan would rather face the buck head-on than be gored by him.

Besides, if the buck spooked the same way that Joralt had, there was no telling what might happen. The buck would be far more interested in protecting his herd.

Lan turned back and headed toward where he'd seen the buck.

He had plenty of time to go after Joralt later. For now, he would see whether there was anything to uncover about the buck. Moving carefully, he picked his way through the grass. There was no further rustling of grass being trampled near him. There was no sign of whatever it was that had spooked Joralt. The horse shouldn't have been afraid of the buck. They'd gone hunting together, and Joralt had done fine then.

It was something else, then.

Lan stayed low, winding his way through the grass until he got to the point where it was thicker. He couldn't pick his way quite as easily as he had before, and he had to move a little bit more cautiously.

Lan used the sword to sweep the grass apart. He didn't chop at it, and he was more careful about how much noise he made. Whatever it was that had spooked Joralt was still out there.

After climbing a little while longer, feeling his way through the grass, he paused.

Lan didn't hear anything out here.

In the distance, he heard the sound of grass being trodden on again.

It was soft at first, but it began to pick up speed and volume.

Whatever was out there was coming—and coming quickly.

Lan frowned and braced himself as whatever it was plunged toward him.

The buck suddenly burst into the space in front of him.

Lan dove to the side, getting out of the way.

Two smaller deer ran past, chasing after the buck, moving in a panicked sprint.

Something chased them, and Lan needed to know what it was before returning to Valan.

Picking his way through the grass, Lan hurried as quickly as he dared. He had started to calm down when he heard a deep and thunderous rumble.

It was a clear sky, so there was no reason for thunder. It wasn't only that, though. The sound had come from below him, as if the thunder were rolling through the ground and up toward him.

Something like that would explain why Joralt had bolted. The horse was probably more attuned to the sounds around him. Lan would have liked Joralt to wait for him, especially if there was something terrifying out here, but at least he could understand.

The sound didn't come again.

Lan remained motionless for a few long moments. He kept thinking the sound would return, but it didn't.

He pushed his sword through the grass to either side, but he didn't see anything.

The rumbling came once more. This time it was low. A deep, aching trembling that rolled through the ground. Lan felt it beneath him, and he was aware of how it left the ground shaking.

Fear sent his heart racing.

*Magic.*

It had to be.



Within Reyash, they were mostly protected from magic, but not entirely. Lan hadn't much experience with the Karell, though his sister trained with them. Lan spent his days working on his sword technique, waiting for the time when he might learn the special type of Taihg magic.

He headed back the way that he'd come.

Lan didn't want to make any noise, in case whatever he'd heard could hear him, but the grass seemed to paw at him, so he couldn't move nearly as quickly as he wanted. Every so often, he caught the path of the deer as they'd bolted, but somehow he ended up losing that path and would have to pick his way through again.

The rumbling sounded behind him again.

The sound was louder. The source was closer.

He started to run.

He felt foolish. Lan was a trained Taihg, a skilled soldier. He shouldn't be afraid of some strange noise out in the countryside. Still, he couldn't deny the fear that coursed through him, much like he couldn't deny that the buck and the other deer had been concerned enough to bolt. Even Joralt, though the horse wasn't always the best judge of things like that.

Grass rustled behind him. It sounded the same as when the buck had plunged toward him, but he doubted it was the buck.

Lan turned.

Much like with the buck, he would rather be prepared.

He had no idea what was out there, though the sound indicated that whatever it was came quickly, tearing through the grass toward him.

Lan held his sword out and whispered a soft prayer.

It likely wouldn't do any good. Lan usually prayed to Darish, and the woodsman god wouldn't listen out here. Maybe Cernal, the bountiful god, but certainly not Darish.

The rustling of grass crashed toward him.

If it was only another buck, he was going to feel incredibly foolish, but Lan didn't think that was the case. He'd seen *something*. He didn't know what it was, but there had been something out there that had troubled Joralt.

When the rumbling came again, Lan was tossed off his feet. It felt as if the ground itself had thrown him. When he landed, he smashed down on more grass, and his breath was knocked free of his lungs. He steadied himself, trying to use his training to ensure that he could get back up, but he hurt too much to stand up quickly.

Rolling to his side, Lan moved as much as he could but wasn't able to get up.

A flash of movement streaked by.

Then it stopped.

Black fur reared up in front of him.

Lan was too startled to react.

It was larger than a bear. Massive. Huge arms spread out on either side, and enormous bloody claws glistened from the ends.

The creature roared.

The ground rumbled with its power.

Lan stabbed forward with his sword.

He wasn't going to be able to run. This creature ran faster than him. He'd heard it moving through the grass, and he didn't think he had any chance of outrunning it. What he could do was try to fight—as foolish as that might be.

The sword met the creature's hide and barely penetrated it.

The creature roared again.

It swiped at Lan.

He ducked, rolling to the side, trying to stay below those enormous arms. It was much larger than anything he'd faced before, but size could serve as a disadvantage. That was a

lesson Lan had learned very early on in his training. He waited for the next swipe, but the creature didn't take one.

Lan sliced at the creature.

He still hadn't seen its head. While it reared up, nothing was visible other than the enormity of its body. It looked something like a bear, but more terrifying than any bear that Lan had ever seen.

It swung at him.

Lan sliced again.

The movement caught the creature along its arm.

It roared.

He tried to position himself in the fighting style that Magnus had taught him all those years ago. *That's not going to work here.* What he needed was power.

Lan slashed at the creature, his blade barely nicking the hide. He tried to drive his blade toward the creature's belly, but its skin was too thick.

The creature lowered itself, landing on four legs, and looked at Lan.

The creature had a massive nightmare of a head. A long snout covered with dried blood snarled at him. A mouthful of sharp, jagged teeth gleamed, blood still dripping from them. It was the eyes that troubled him the most. There was something in those eyes that made Lan feel he was looking into the boundless darkness of night.

Tearing himself free of the fear, Lan forced himself back into action.

This might be a fantastical creature, but that didn't mean it couldn't be hurt. He'd already cut through its arm, and he'd stabbed the creature's belly.

Lan darted forward, twisting in a series of evasive moves, and he tried to catch the creature in the snout.

It snapped at the blade, heedless of how it might cut through it.

Lan tried again, backing away. The creature had trampled down the grass around him, so if nothing else, he was able to move a little bit more freely.

The creature swiped at him.

Lan jumped.

Not fast enough.

Claws raked across his chest. Lan wore heavy mail, but it wasn't enough to protect him completely. Those claws peeled apart his flesh, far more easily than he would have expected. Pain surged through his torso.

Lan tried to suck in a breath, but everything hurt.

He backed away, holding his blade up. He wouldn't let this creature kill him. Lan had survived much worse than this.

He angled his sword toward the creature, trying to make himself look larger. Most animals feared aggressive animals.

*Not this one.*

It slapped at Lan again. He jumped.

The pain in his chest made the movement unbearable, but he ignored it, rolling and getting to his feet, then swinging the blade back around. As it connected with the creature's outstretched arm, the animal roared again.

Lan missed the attack from the other side.

The other arm slapped him on the back, and Lan stumbled forward.

Right toward the creature's snapping jaw.

Lan spun as quickly as he could, bringing his sword up. He stabbed underneath the jaw, and he barely managed to penetrate the creature's hide, but he sliced down, trying to tear through it.

The creature reared up, roaring again. The ground rumbled underneath the force of the movement. This was Lan's opportunity. If he could stab into the soft underbelly, then he might be able to significantly harm the massive creature.

Lan stabbed.

The creature crashed forward, its jaw landing on Lan's arm.

He nearly dropped his sword, and it was only through years of training that he had the ability to maintain his grip.

His arm went limp.

Holding the sword with one hand, Lan couldn't do anything to deter a creature like this. He had to run. But given his injuries, he wasn't going to be able to run very far—or very fast.

“Have at me!” he cried. He roared, swinging his blade, and prayed to all the gods that he could think of for some sort of strength and power, but he knew they wouldn't answer.

The creature roared as it moved toward him.

Lan ducked to the side, barely avoiding the attack, and when he came up to his feet, he was too slow.

The creature snapped.

Lan twisted his blade and drove it into the creature's face, hoping to slide his sword into its eye—and missed.

Still, the creature jerked back, roaring one more time, before turning and lumbering off.

Lan lay there, panting, and the panic didn't leave until the trembling beneath him from the departing creature faded to little more than a soft murmur.

# CHAPTER 7

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Lan could barely move. He sat in place for a long time, trying to take deep and steady breaths, trying to suppress the pain coursing through him. He struggled. Every breath was agony. The creature had ripped through him with enough force that Lan wasn't sure whether he was going to make it back to Valan.

His arm throbbed.

Looking at it, he realized the bone was broken. It pressed up against the skin but thankfully hadn't broken through. If it had pushed through the skin, that would have been a much more serious injury, and perhaps enough that he wouldn't have survived. He'd seen injuries like that get infected, and when they did, it was rare for the wounded to live.

*I have to splint it.*

There was nothing to use as a splint.

There were no trees around him. During the time that he'd been out in the grasslands, he hadn't seen anything that could be useful now. Maybe if he bundled some grass together, he could get it stiff enough to use as a splint, and he could even use a long stalk of grass to lash it to his arm.

Lan took a deep breath, readying for the pain he knew would come, and got to his feet. Agony surged through him. It came from the wound in his chest just as much as it did from his arm. Were his arm not injured, he would peel away the mail to see just how badly he'd been hurt, but he didn't even

dare do that. He wasn't sure that he would even be able to get the mail back on were he to remove it.

He just had to leave it alone.

When he was up, he held his sword loosely in his good hand, and he tried to swipe it at the base of some taller grass at the edge of the trampled clearing where he had battled with the creature. Even making simple movements like that caused pain to surge through him.

Lan gritted his teeth. He had experienced pain. Suffering. Beatings.

*I can withstand this.*

He carved through the base of the grass while trying to ignore the pain. Finally Lan leaned down, using his sword as a crutch, and he gathered the grass together with his good arm and tried to twist it.

A bundle of two dozen stalks was a little stiffer than nothing, and he was going to have to create a much denser bundle to protect his arm. If he didn't, not only would there be pain with any movement, but he would run the risk of the bone popping through his skin. The moment that happened, he could plan on his inevitable death.

The sun moved toward the horizon while he worked on creating a bundle of grass thick enough to stabilize his arm. By the time he had enough, Lan was dizzy from the effort. He took a seat, gritted his teeth, and wrapped the grass around his arm.

Pain shot along the broken limb.

When his body hurt like this, Lan swore at the gods, knowing the danger in doing so, but he couldn't help it. He gradually managed to bind the grass around his arm and pull it tight. The splint held, and there wasn't quite as much pain as before. He wobbled while leaning on his sword as a crutch for a while until the discomfort retreated. There was nothing to do but get moving.

It was slow going, but he followed the tracks he'd made earlier.



Eventually, he made it back to where the buck and the deer had plunged through.

The walk would take him a long time. The only hope he had was that Joralt would be waiting for him somewhere. The damn horse wouldn't have run too far. His training—such as it was—should have prevented him from bolting completely.

Lan walked for the rest of the day without seeing any sign of Joralt.

After a while, he began to realize he wouldn't find him.

That meant walking all the way back. It had taken the better part of the morning to ride as far as he had. Walking—injured—would be another day at best, which meant he had to rest for the night. He'd need his strength.

Under normal circumstances, resting at night didn't bother him. He'd slept under the moon enough times that he didn't mind the quiet and the solitude, but he did mind the pain. Lan managed to push the pain out of his mind, but doing so took a great deal of concentration. There was a limit to how long he could suppress it.

A solitary tree created a hazy shadow in the distance. Lan headed toward it. The trunk and its branches would offer a bit of protection.

Complete darkness had fallen by the time he reached the tree. Lan staggered toward it.

He rested against the trunk and started to drift in and out of consciousness. He tried to hold himself together. If he drifted completely, he ran the risk of being completely unaware if the strange creature attacked again.

The last time, there had been a bit of warning, but he might be too tired for the rumbling of the ground to seem like anything other than a dream were he to sleep as soundly as he felt he needed to.

Perhaps just rest. That should be all he needed to do now.

Lan closed his eyes.

A howl jerked him awake.

He didn't feel as if he'd been sleeping that long, but the moon had moved in the night sky. A soft breeze whispered through the branches overhead, almost calling to him. Lying still, Lan could imagine the wind saying his name.

He shivered.

His arm throbbed, and the grass binding felt too tight. Now that he'd reached a tree, he thought that he could secure a better splint, but doing so would involve cutting down a branch. Considering how much it had hurt just to place the grass around his arm, he thought it was better to leave it alone.

Lan doubted he'd sleep anymore.

The little sleep that he'd gotten had helped to refresh him. It wasn't much—from the change in the sky, he didn't think it could have been more than a few hours—but enough that he wanted to get moving. The sooner he got back, the sooner he could find a healer and get his arm bound so that it would recover in the proper alignment. The bone healing at an odd angle was another concern he had.

After using his sword to get to his feet, Lan staggered into the night. The darkness surrounded him. The pale silver moon overhead gave off just enough light for him to follow his path. Now that he'd left the grasslands, it was easier for him to know where he needed to go. He kept thinking that he'd find Joralt, but the horse must have run all the way back to the barracks.

*Stupid horse.*

That wasn't quite true. The horse couldn't have been that stupid, or he would have stayed in the grasslands. If anything, Joralt had been the smart one of the two of them. If Lan made it back and survived, he'd have to praise him.

*If?*

Had he gotten to the point where it was a question of *if* he made it back?

That wasn't him.

Lan had survived worse. He could survive this.

Then he'd have to figure out what kind of creature had attacked him.

A bear. That was what his mind kept telling him, but what kind of bear had fur so thick even a sword couldn't pierce it? What kind of bear kept attacking even though it had been cut a few times?

None.

That hadn't been a bear.

Magnus might know. He knew all sorts of things, and Lan wouldn't be surprised if he knew about strange, nearly-impossible-to-kill creatures.

The path led him forward. The moon lit his way, and he couldn't help but feel the god Tolem was shining down, guiding him. Maybe Tolem felt bad about what had happened to him and how the other gods hadn't answered his prayers.

By the time morning came, Lan didn't think he was any closer to the barracks. He'd been walking for most of the night. He didn't even know if he'd been heading in the right direction. Had he gotten disoriented?

Lan stopped and watched the sun rise.

As far as he could tell, he was still heading where he needed to. Why did all of this feel off?

It was him. Not anything else. *He* was the reason everything felt off.

His sword dragged behind him. Lan didn't trust himself to sheathe it and be able to unsheathe it if necessary—not that he'd be able to fight were it to come down to that. Rather, he needed the sword for support.

Where was he?

There should be a path here somewhere. When he'd ridden off with Joralt, they'd followed a path for most of the morning, only veering off later, when he'd become curious about the grasslands.

Following the moonlight might have been a mistake, though he didn't think Tolem would have misled him intentionally. The god of the night wasn't the one who led travelers astray. That was Oshen.

Could Oshen have been looking down on him last night? Perhaps Lan was the butt of some celestial joke. There had been other times when he'd felt that way, though not so much recently.

His stomach rumbled, and an old thought came back to him. *Survive, and then eat.*

Lan almost laughed.

Those lessons had stuck with him longer than he had expected. Even now, when he ate regularly and wasn't tormented, the lessons from his first days in captivity stuck with him.

Survive.

He *would* survive.

It was a broken arm. That was all it was. His chest throbbed, but he didn't think that was the worst of injuries. It didn't even throb the way it had before, so it couldn't be that bad.

That was what he told himself.

Lan stumbled and was thankful for the sword when he jammed it into the ground to keep himself upright. He looked up at the sky, realizing that it had to be midday.

How had he been walking so long already?

His mouth was dry. Even more than needing to sate his hunger, he had to find water.

*Had Joralt not run off, I would have had enough water.*

Lan imagined Joralt back at the stables, comfortably eating hay. It did nothing to settle his stomach.

When they'd ridden out, he'd come across at least one stream that Joralt had needed to jump. There'd been another

he'd waded through, so there should be a source of water. Lan just had to find it.

With each step he took, his arm throbbed. Lan tried to ignore the pain, thinking only of the need to keep moving, wanting to get to a stream, to anything that would give him the ability to slake his thirst.

By evening, as the sun started to set, he still hadn't seen any sign of a stream.

He'd lost track of direction, with the throbbing in his arm his only companion. It took every bit of concentration to stay on his feet. He used his sword to prop himself up. Pain surged through his chest with the movement, another flash of burning that came with planting the sword. He grimaced through the agony. Each time he felt the pain return, he told himself that he'd felt worse. There had been worse. This was nothing compared to so much that he'd experienced in the time since his grandparents had died and he'd been taken away from his home village.

That did nothing to change the steady throbbing within him.

Darkness started to fall.

Still Lan hadn't seen anything. There was nothing other than the ongoing rolling hills. They were similar to those in the grasslands, though there were differences that he didn't fully recognize. Lan's vision had started to blur, and though he tried to maintain his focus, there was something about what he saw that made it difficult to keep everything sorted out.

When he stumbled as the darkness fell in full, he couldn't get up.

A howl split the night.

Lan tensed, thinking there was some creature out there that he had to be concerned about. He didn't think that it was the bear—*Not a bear!*—that he'd encountered before. The sound was all wrong. There wasn't the same thundering that he'd heard before. The ground didn't rumble.

There was nothing but a soft howl.

Lan pushed himself up, and he stood in place for a few moments, trying to clear his mind. He couldn't get his head around what he'd experienced. The only thing that he was able to pay attention to was the pain that throbbed in his arm.

There was some in his chest as well, though it wasn't the same.

Pain throbbed in his chest now, lingering, the kind of pain that he couldn't help but feel he wouldn't get rid of without a magical healer.

His mind rolled back to when he'd been tormented.

*Survive, and then eat.*

Lan had survived.

At the time, he'd questioned whether he'd be able to survive, though back then Lan had thought that he was serving the Taihg. Knowing what he did now, he couldn't believe that he'd ever been so naive as to believe the Taihg would attempt to train someone that way, but how could he think anything else? It was the only thing that he'd known.

*Survive...*

The thought stayed with him.

When he managed to get to his feet again, he couldn't tell how long he'd been down. It might have only been a few moments, but now the moon was in a different position, leaving him thinking that it had been much longer than he believed.

Lan held on to his sword, but it trailed behind him.

That might be a mistake. What if he had another encounter with the strange creature that had attacked him before? He'd barely survived, and even now, he wasn't sure that he'd make it back to the city alive. Someone had to know about what he'd faced.

The next time he stumbled, he managed to catch himself.

Then he tripped.

A splash jolted him awake.

Lan rolled over. Water surrounded him.

For a moment, he rested.

His mind struggled to make sense of everything.

*There's water.*

That seemed significant to Lan for some reason.

It took a while for his mind to catch up and realize that he needed to drink.

He rolled over, pressed his lips into the cool water, and drank.

When his head started to clear, he was able to make out what he was doing and realized that he'd fallen into a stream. Was this one of the streams that he'd seen with Joralt on the way out toward the grasslands earlier?

As he got up, he did so slowly enough that it was difficult for him to focus on anything other than the pain within him.

That agony lingered.

Lan tried to ignore it, but he wasn't able to push most of it out of his mind.

His body throbbed.

Lan leaned forward. His head swam.

The injury to his arm was much worse than he'd realized—or was it his chest?

If only he were able to remove the mail, he might be able to determine just how injured he was. Instead, he had to guess. When it came to the pain, he couldn't help but question whether the injuries were significant.

One thing that his time with the Taihg had taught him was assessing his own injuries. When he tried to do that now, he wasn't able to tell anything about the nature of them.

Everything seemed to throb. Lan rolled over to his side, and as he attempted to get up from the streambed, he found that his body didn't react the way he wanted it to. He gripped the sword, but even then it slipped away from him.

It might be that he was too weak.

Lan had to get the mail off.

Until he did that, he wasn't going to know just how injured he was. He struggled with it, pulling on it, and he felt pain surging in his injured arm.

He stumbled, falling to the side, and clutched at the injury.

He fell into the water.

The cool water took away some of the burning from the injury to his chest.

Lan just lay there, losing track of time. Water rushed past him, rolling over the mail, flushing through the wound.

After a while, he knew that he had to get up.

Even if this was where he was going to rest for the night—and Lan wasn't sure that this was where he wanted to be—staying in the water would be dangerous. The chain mail would hold him down, and eventually, he would probably drown.

What he needed to do was get to the shore, and once there, rest.

That was all he wanted.

Lan rolled over. The pain in his arm surged brightly, a new throbbing that he hadn't experienced before.

He cried out, but his voice sounded so hollow. So empty. It sounded so weak.

When the pain began to ease, he slowly got up.

In the darkness, it was difficult to know how late into the night it was. It felt incredibly late, though he couldn't remember if he had fallen near the stream only moments or hours ago.

Rather than wandering off, Lan stayed by the stream. It seemed to be the safer option. By following the stream, he might be able to guide himself toward safety.



Even if he didn't, by staying near the water, he had a supply of something to drink.

That thought lingered within him.

*Survive, and then eat.*

Everything within him called out to him to survive.

How had he ever believed that he had been hurt this badly before?

It seemed as if this was the worst kind of pain that he'd ever experienced, but even as he suffered through it, Lan couldn't help but feel as if everything was hurting in a way that he had never known before.

Staggering to his feet, Lan looked at the ground.

When had he fallen?

He should have noticed that fall.

A strange rumbling echoed toward him.

Was that thunder?

It didn't seem like thunder. It seemed far closer. It seemed like something different.

The agony made it difficult for his mind to focus.

Lan looked up.

When had he landed on his back?

As he lay there, resting and looking up at the sky, the stars swirling around him, Lan couldn't help but feel as if there was some mystery in the night that he needed to understand. As he looked up, he tried to see if there was something within the darkness that he might comprehend, but the night remained an enigma to him.

After a while, the pain began to ease. It was a pain that he hadn't even realized he was experiencing until he started to move again. At least he still had his sword.

Training must have ingrained that in him, forcing him to maintain his grip on his blade, and he dragged himself forward, taking the next step and then the next. Each time he

took another step, Lan believed that the pain was going to overwhelm him, but each time, he tried to push it back, to ignore it.

When he fell again, he was at least aware of it.

Lan looked up at the sky. There were no clouds. The stars shone down brightly, and he looked at the constellations, naming them quietly in his mind. There was one for each of the gods, and they stretched out in front of him.

The thunder still rumbled.

It was a strange and almost rhythmic sound.

As he lay there, resting, the thunder called to him, reminding him of something that he should know. Lan tried to figure out what it was, but it didn't come to him.

When he got back to his feet, he staggered a few more steps. Each time he took a step, he splashed through the stream. Each step that he took carried him a little bit farther, and each step that he took guided him away.

But away from what?

The thunder rumbled again.

Strange that the thunder would shake so deeply beneath the ground, trembling under his feet. When he staggered again, he was thrown forward. He landed awkwardly, and he tried to catch himself, but his injured arm made it difficult.

He cried out.

Pain surged freshly within him, and for the first time, there was a brightness in his mind. The pain clarified everything that he had been experiencing.

Lan lay there, the empty sky suddenly making sense to him. The thunder suddenly made his heart tremble deep within his chest. Everything worried him.

The thunder wasn't natural.

He had experienced it before, and he knew he needed to fear it. As Lan tried to piece together what he was

experiencing, feeling the thunder trembling beneath him, he knew he had to get moving.

The creature.

With a jolt of clarity, he came awake.

After lurching to his feet, Lan staggered forward a few more steps, but he finally stumbled again.

When he fell, he landed with a splash in the stream. Lan lay there for a long moment, trying to gather his thoughts, and it wasn't until the thundering shook the ground again, making the water splash around him, that he finally managed to recognize the need to get up. He had to move.

When he got to his feet, Lan felt compelled to stagger along the streambed.

Each step carried him farther, but it wasn't fast enough. The thundering beneath him compelled him. When he turned, a shadow loomed in front of him.

Lan brought his sword up, but he wasn't going to be strong enough. He was too injured to fight. Even if he hadn't been injured, in the darkness and with the terror that swirled around him, Lan may not have had the strength or the mental clarity to fight.

"Where are you?" Lan cried out into the night, knowing that it did no good.

The shadow loomed closer. The ground trembled beneath him.

He swung his sword, and each time he moved, his injured arm cried out against him. His chest screamed, the pain within it fresh, as if everything he had experienced came to him anew.

"Show yourself!"

The creature roared.

The enormity of its voice shook the night, and Lan stood within the water, feeling it flowing past his ankles, almost as if his life were flowing away from him.

Maybe this time he wouldn't survive. He wouldn't eat.

That didn't mean he was going down easily.

If he was going to die, he was going to jab his sword into the creature's belly. Lan was going to bring down the creature and make it suffer as much as he had.

The creature lumbered toward him another step, and Lan swung his blade. It was a wild sweep. It struck something. He heard an enormous roar again.

He couldn't see anything against the backdrop of the night sky. There was only the shadow. The rumbling. The darkness.

Lan staggered back. He splashed in the stream.

Then he tripped.

As he fell, he brought his blade up again.

He swept it across the sky, trying to carve through the darkness, trying to call attention to the blade, to scare the creature away.

The sweeping blade struck something again.

Lan knew that he didn't have enough strength behind the blow. How could he when even with two arms he hadn't inflicted any real damage on this creature? As he backed up, crawling through the stream, he continued to probe outward with the sword, sweeping it from side to side, wanting to do anything to distract this creature from biting down on him.

Lan felt another bite of resistance.

Only this time there came something else.

A snarl.

Lan fought, but it was not going to matter.

He cried out.

Lan had no idea what he said or how he said it. He only knew that he felt as if he were crying out to the gods. There was a drawing of power from somewhere deep within him. There was a lightning flash.

Hadn't the sky been empty?

Lan no longer knew. It was as if a storm cloud had rolled in, and thunder and lightning exploded all around him. Within the lightning bursts, he was able to see flashes of the enormous creature that he'd seen earlier in the day. It loomed overhead. The lightning crackled from the surface of his blade, seeming to catch it, and Lan lunged.

He drove the blade up into the creature's belly.

Within the surge of energy, Lan forced as much power outward as he was able to. Then he slumped down. Water from the stream swirled around him. He couldn't do anything more.

The thunder seemed to be retreating.

Where was that lightning? Even that seemed to have faded.

He was on his knees, crouching in the stream, and when it seemed as if the thunder and lightning were not going to return, he crawled out of the streambed, then slumped down on the ground, and it wasn't long before fatigue overwhelmed him.

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# CHAPTER 8

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Sophie waited near the stairs.

She'd been standing here for the better part of an hour, resting against the wall and looking upward. She held the ferar pose to conceal herself. It worked so long as she stood in place and didn't move, but the moment she faltered, she became visible. She didn't know how long she'd be able to hold this position, but she was determined to do so for as long as it took to get an opportunity to speak with the Raven Queen.

She was rarely at the tower. Sophie never knew where she went. She only knew that the Raven Queen spent long stretches of time away from Valan, within other parts of Reyash. Nevarn hadn't shared much with Sophie about the Raven Queen's travels, though she had a feeling that he wasn't supposed to.

More than that, she had a feeling that Nevarn spent time with her only because he had been asked to observe her. She didn't know if the Raven Queen was the one who'd asked her son to keep an eye on Sophie, but she wouldn't put it past her.

She waited, the tension in her arms and legs leaving her trembling. She did whatever she could to hold the power, but she had been here for a long time, long enough that she didn't know if she would be able to hold this pose for much longer.

When she was convinced there was no movement along the hallway, she released the pose, shifting her footing just a little bit to ease the power away. It drifted along the hallway, heading down the stairs.

There had to be a way to release power that wouldn't be quite as noticeable, just as there had to be a way to use magic without holding such incredibly complicated postures. When she'd still been working with Ridaln, he had wanted her to master control of her power, to hold a particularly complicated pose and then gradually release the magic that was pent-up within it, but Sophie had not been successful at it.

She waited for a moment before hurrying along the hallway. When she was satisfied there were no servants, no soldiers, and no Karell, she headed toward the Raven Queen's door. Sophie paused there for a moment, listening.

She didn't hear any voices on the other side. That might not mean anything. It was possible that the Raven Queen had sealed off her apartment, using magic to prevent anyone from accessing her. Sophie knocked on the door before she could second-guess herself.

When the door opened, Thea looked out at her.

"What are you doing here, girl?" she whispered, looking along the hall.

Thea managed to give Sophie a look that was both a warning and somehow a comfort. There were times when she reminded Sophie of Oleda—though there were other times when she definitely did not.

Should she go for deception or honesty?

Honesty won out.

"I wanted to visit the Raven Queen."

Thea shook her head. She was dressed more formally than she usually was. Most of the time, Thea preferred a gray gown, though there were times when she embraced a little bit more color. Today was different. She had on a blue-and-green-striped dress, the colors of Reyash, and it was embroidered with the symbol of the Raven Queen, that of a raven on field of stars.

"She's busy."

"I wanted to ask her a few questions."



Thea cocked her head to the side. “What sort of questions do you think you would ask of her?”

Sophie hadn’t anticipated seeing Thea, though perhaps she should have. As the head of the Karell within the tower, Thea was everywhere. When it came to the Raven Queen’s visits, Thea was often involved. However, on the times that Sophie had visited the Raven Queen before—which were admittedly rare—Thea had not been present.

“I wanted to know if she has discovered anything about the Shavln. Well, and about what she’s planning to do about Darius. Dannith has been—”

“Sophie,” Thea started, as if she wanted to guide her a different way. She drew herself up and shook her head. “I don’t think the queen needs you to keep coming here and pestering her about something that those better trained than you are dealing with.”

The Raven Queen had been the one to assign Parvella to her, so Sophie had to believe that the Raven Queen thought she had some potential, but perhaps her connection to Ridaln—and through him, Darius—made others suspect her too much.

“I was just looking for information. As I said, I spoke to Dannith—”

Sophie knew those words were a mistake as soon as they came out of her mouth.

“If you are going to involve yourself in things that aren’t —”

“What is it?” A rich, powerful voice came from behind Thea.

The Raven Queen was beautiful. Perhaps only twenty years older than Sophie, and with shiny black hair befitting her name. Her skin was pale, almost seeming to glow in the lantern light inside the antechamber. Dark eyes stared with an intensity that had taken Sophie aback the first time she’d seen them.

The Raven Queen wore the same colors as Thea, though the colors seemed bolder, if such a thing were possible. The embroidery on her dress was much more ornate, and Sophie could only imagine how long the seamstresses had worked to create the patterns on the dress. Her nana had taught her to recognize and appreciate such things.

Sophie tipped her head. “It’s Sophie Varison,” she said, speaking past Thea. There was a danger in risking Thea’s ire, though she thought Thea had a soft spot for her.

“What do you need, Sophie Varison?” the Raven Queen said, striding forward.

Thea stepped to the side, still glaring at Sophie.

“I just wanted...” Sophie glanced from Thea to the Raven Queen, hesitation bubbling up within her for a moment.

She’d spent how long standing in place, holding on to the ferar pose, attempting to keep herself concealed, and now that she was here and speaking to the Raven Queen, Sophie hesitated?

*That’s a mistake.*

Now that she was in front of the Raven Queen, she needed to use the opportunity to see if the Raven Queen would share anything with her.

“I...” She wasn’t sure whether to ask about the plan for Dannith or about Darius. The latter won out. “I wanted to know if you’ve uncovered more about the Shavln.”

The Raven Queen studied Sophie. She didn’t move, though power emanated from her in a way that reminded Sophie of the way that Ridaln had used power. With the Raven Queen, Sophie didn’t notice any movement whatsoever. It wasn’t in her hands, not in the way that Ridaln had tapped his fingers. It wasn’t in her lips, something that she had seen Ridaln doing as well. It wasn’t even in a blinking pattern, as Sophie had watched her eyes when she had been around the Raven Queen before.

There was no sign of movement.

That was the kind of power that Sophie wanted to progress to. Right now, she required poses, which were tricky to form and hold, to summon the kind of power that she was capable of. Over time, she might progress to using power the same way that Ridaln had, with simple taps of her fingers, or perhaps the blinking of her eyes, or maybe something else that she hadn't even considered. Another pattern, nonetheless.

But when she reached the level of the Raven Queen...

Then she wouldn't even need such movements.

"There has been no word from Lorant," the Raven Queen said.

"I know there hasn't been anything from Lorant," Sophie said, glancing briefly at Thea, "but I wondered if perhaps there has been anything from Darius. Maybe some sign of the Shavln. From what I've been able to understand, now that it's released, that power might not stay within Lorant. And I know you're planning on restoring Dannith to the throne, especially as he's bored here—"

The Raven Queen shook her head. The simple movement carried with it a hint of power, and Sophie found herself forced to break off.

"The Karell are making preparations to remove Darius, but it's not straightforward. And they are searching for evidence of the Shavln."

The way she said this suggested they'd done more than just search. The Karell moved easily, and with their magic, they would have uncovered something if there was a danger. That had to be why Thea had warned Sophie as well.

"There has been no sign of the Shavln. If he managed to release that power," she went on, leaving Sophie wanting to argue with her about what Darius had managed to accomplish, "he has not uncovered the means of controlling it. We are in no danger with him holding the throne right now."

"Does he need to control it for it to cause us difficulty?" Sophie asked, glancing from the Raven Queen to Thea. "The other Karell, including Oleda, understood—"

“That’s enough,” Thea cautioned.

The Raven Queen glanced at Thea before turning to Sophie. “Oleda was a skilled Karell, though I share Thea’s concern that perhaps Oleda had been embedded too long within that land.”

“She helped me,” Sophie said.

“As you have said each time that we have spoken,” the Raven Queen said.

Sophie cursed to herself. It didn’t help that every time she came to the Raven Queen, she asked for the same answers.

“I’m sure that he has informed you that we have had the Karell and the Taihg searching for any signs of unusual power. We haven’t uncovered anything.”

“And they still look?”

“The Shavlñ may be nothing more than children’s tales,” Thea said. “And you *are* partial to stories.” She said the last softly, in a whisper.

Sophie wanted to back away. This wasn’t going at all how she had hoped. Maybe she should have brought Nevarn with her, though she wasn’t even sure if he believed her concern.

Sophie turned her attention to the Raven Queen again. She had to see if the Raven Queen would believe her. Sophie had to hope she would believe her. If she didn’t...

“I know what I saw. If you’d let me search, I’m sure I could find answers.”

“You aren’t a prisoner here, Sophie,” the Raven Queen said.

Not a prisoner, but she had seen what happened when she went out into the city.

She was followed.

The first time she’d gone out into the city, there had been only a sense of being watched. Nothing more than that. Over time, Sophie had come to learn they *did* follow, and lately they didn’t even do it all that discreetly.

Of course, most of her ventures into the city were harmless. She went looking for pastries or books—though that probably drew the wrong kind of attention as well—or down to the Taihg barracks to visit Lan when he wasn't out on patrol.

“None doubt what you can do, Sophie. That's why you're here. And don't worry about what we plan with Dannith.” The Raven Queen paused a moment, and Sophie could feel power emanating from her, though it wasn't clear. “Focus on your training, though perhaps the tower roof is not the safest location for you to practice.” She smiled at Sophie. “There can be too much wind.”

Sophie frowned. She'd been going up there for months and hadn't experienced any sort of dangerous wind, though perhaps the Raven Queen was only telling her that so that she wouldn't spend time up there. What other reason would there be for her to not work on the roof? Probably something she wouldn't be allowed to know.

“Where can I work? The grove wasn't a great idea.”

The Raven Queen smiled tightly. “No. I think the trees would be angry if we allowed that to continue.”

Sophie frowned at the comment. “And the garden...”

“Yes. Another place that it's best you don't use.”

“Where, then?”

“You have quarters within the tower,” the Raven Queen said.

Sophie didn't want to practice in her room. She had to do that often enough with Parvella that getting out of her room, even to the tower roof, was her only reprieve.

“That's the only place?”

“Protections have been placed on your behalf. It is safe for you to work there.”

At least Sophie hadn't been asked to leave the tower. She understood the way they viewed her. Dangerous. Of

questionable loyalties, especially considering how much of her training had been done in Neylash with Ridaln.

“I still need someone to instruct me.”

“I believe you have Parvella,” the Raven Queen said.

Parvella had been helpful, but Sophie hadn't learned nearly as much from her as she had from Ridaln. “I really need somebody to help me take the next leap in my studies.”

The Raven Queen smiled at her. “You will have to work with Parvella. She is fully capable of teaching you what you need to know to advance. In addition, you have access to the records and sorcerers' journals, which can guide you.”

Sophie sighed. They didn't help as much as she had hoped they would. She'd used many sorcerers' journals to find new poses, but it was difficult to know what most of the poses would do. She needed to understand the purpose and the nature of each pose, so that she could know the purpose to such power and how to release it.

“Do not fear, Sophie Varison. We are safe here.”

Sophie met the Raven Queen's eyes. As she did, she felt the power radiating from her. And perhaps she *was* safe. Despite Sophie's protestations, how could she ever believe that she could do or know more than the Raven Queen? The stories of her power were legendary.

Thea took Sophie's arm and guided her into the hallway. Once there, she turned to Sophie. “I think it's time you let this go. Like the Raven Queen said, the Karell have been looking. There's been no word concerning Darius or the Shavln.”

“I'm sorry. I was just hoping to find information. I was there when it happened.” It was more than that for Sophie, and it was hard for her to acknowledge, but she felt she needed to say something. “It was partly my fault.”

Even that was not entirely true. It was more than partly her fault. She'd been using poses that had permitted her to release some of the Shavln power. Darius hadn't been able to do it himself. He'd needed someone else.

“I know what it’s like to blame yourself for tragic events,” Thea said, glancing behind her. “I lost my family when I was a younger woman.”

“Your parents?”

Thea shook her head. “My husband and my children. So many were lost in the war.”

That had to be where she’d picked up her limp. “I’m sorry.”

Thea clenched her jaw. “It’s the price for being a Karell. We have power, and we use it for the betterment of others, but there are limits. Unfortunately.” Her voice trailed off at the end. “I wasn’t able to save them, much like you weren’t able to save your family. All we can do is keep working, learning, and getting better and stronger. That is how we ensure others don’t suffer the same fate.”

Sophie didn’t feel as if that was any real reassurance, but perhaps it didn’t need to be.

And Thea, while she could be hard, had always seemed caring. Maybe that was another trait of the Karell. Increasingly, Sophie had wondered if her nana had been one of them, even though she had seen no sign to suggest she had been.

As Thea started to turn away, Sophie knew that she needed to make amends somehow. “Thea?”

The woman paused.

“I’m sorry. I’ll do better.”

Thea looked back, suspicion brimming in her eyes. “You had better do more than be better. I may be gone from the tower for a time, so try not to get into too much trouble.” Thea sighed, then shook her head before turning away and heading back to the Raven Queen.

Sophie needed to practice, especially if she was going to be of use to the Raven Queen.

But practice meant working with Parvella.

Sophie had been around Parvella for the better part of the few years that she'd been in the tower, and she hadn't found that she was useful for teaching much of anything. Parvella did seem to recognize when Sophie's posture didn't match the pose she attempted, but that was about it.

Sophie felt adrift.

Maybe that was the reason that she kept pursuing the Shavln. She believed there was a danger, having seen Darius attempting to release incredible power, but there had been no sign of the Shavln—not that Sophie knew what it would look like, as she barely understood it.

What she needed was purpose.

When she'd been in Neylash, she hadn't had a purpose until Ridaln had given her one. Then she had begun to think that with her connection to magic, she should be more useful, and she *had* been more useful. Coming to Reyash was supposed to have given her an opportunity to do and be something more, only in the time that she'd been here, she hadn't felt as if she'd had that opportunity. She had barely progressed with her magic. She hadn't had that much time to spend with her brother. At least *he* had a purpose. And she hadn't uncovered anything of the Shavln, though that shouldn't be on her.

Sophie reached her room and sank into her chair before closing her eyes. There were times when she wondered if she might have been better off having Ridaln as her instructor. At least she had progressed with him. But then, when she had been working with Ridaln, she hadn't had much of a purpose then, either.



# CHAPTER 9

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**B**right sunlight shone down into his eyes. Lan tried to blink it away, but it persisted. When he moved, pain shot through his arm.

A memory of the night before came to him. His arm was broken. That was the reason that it hurt. There had been a storm. There had to have been. Otherwise, he wouldn't have seen the lightning. But he didn't know if the thunder had come from the storm or the return of the creature.

*The creature.*

Lan tried to sit up.

Everything hurt for a moment.

His head throbbed, and though he attempted to move carefully, pain lanced through him.

*What happened?*

He looked around him. The stream that he remembered from the night before ran alongside him. It was the reason that he'd survived. Without the water, he might not have made it through the night. He moved his arm and found that it didn't hurt nearly as much as he'd expected. Thankfully.

At least he still had his sword.

He had felt the same way earlier in the night. He remembered that when he'd fallen for what must have been the fourth or fifth time, he had been thankful that he'd held on to his sword. What would have happened had he lost it? The blade wasn't necessarily the most skillfully made, but it was a

gift, and it provided a certain level of protection that he wouldn't have without it.

After taking a deep breath, Lan got to his feet.

Every step left him trembling. He steadied himself by leaning on his sword, and he could feel the energy in the air, as if the storm had left a residual power that hung around him.

His injured arm throbbed, though much less than he'd expected. It reminded him of years ago, when he'd been with Tohm and the other Neylash soldiers, and the Fixer had helped to heal him. At the time, Lan had believed his fast healing was something the Fixer had enabled, but now he wasn't sure. The more he learned about himself—and his sister—the more he wondered if perhaps he was accessing some power. It wasn't something that he did intentionally, but there seemed to be some power at his disposal.

If nothing else, that power allowed him to survive situations he shouldn't.

*This is one of them.*

Lan started off, following the stream.

The water flowed gently here. He remembered the stream being more active, but maybe that hadn't been real. It left him wondering which memories were.

The creature's attack had seemed real enough, but if that was the case, how had he managed to scare it off? There was no doubt that *something* had scared it off, though he didn't know if it was something that he'd done or the storm he remembered.

Lan staggered forward. Every so often, he paused to take a drink. His mind started to clear as he walked.

*That seems important.*

Lan looked for evidence of the creature, but he found nothing.

Either it wasn't here, or it had been his imagination.

The sun had already been up for a few hours by the time he got moving. A few trees dotted the horizon, but in the distance, he noticed a much darker patch of trees. A forest.

He hadn't noticed it on his ride out.

If it had been there along his route, he would have seen it.

How far off the path had he gone?

Lan shouldn't have gone so far from the path as to lose his way. He figured that he had seen something that had guided him this way.

The stream headed toward the forest.

That seemed to be where he needed to go.

The creature—and the attack—had come from the opposite direction.

If he was to return to the Taihg, and to the people he knew, he was going to have to follow the path toward the forest—and then beyond it.

It was midday when he reached the outskirts of the forest, where he paused.

The pain that he'd been feeling wasn't nearly as bad as it had been earlier. He looked down at his chest, but the mail made it difficult to tell anything about the injury. The grass around his arm still held it rigid, and he couldn't see anything beneath it, though he could still feel the throbbing within his arm that suggested the injury was significant.

The darkened forest loomed in front of him. He wanted to leave the forest, not go in deeper, but the sound of twigs snapping behind him pushed him forward into the trees.

When he was beneath the canopy, the air took on a different feel. There was a hint of coolness to it, but it was more than just the chill that he noticed. The smell of the air had changed as well. He followed the same path that he'd been following so far, staying by the stream.

The forest was quiet.

That quiet was almost disturbing. The sounds around him seemed muted. Every so often, he'd hear the sound of something moving overhead, as if there were squirrels or other animals scurrying through the trees, but when he looked, Lan didn't see anything.

Flashes of light came through the canopy, giving him a sense of the passage of time.

When he stopped in a clearing, he was able to make out where the sun was in the sky.

*Have I really been walking for most of the afternoon?*

It was later in the day when he began to realize that the pain in his body was no longer severe. The throbbing in his chest wasn't nearly as profound as it had been before. The pain in his arm wasn't what he remembered.

When he reached another clearing, it was nearly evening.

He was still following the stream, the soft burbling his only companion. He could still hear movement in the treetops every so often, but every time Lan attempted to see the source of the movement, he couldn't find anything. It was just him and his thoughts, along with the burbling stream.

He paused to take a drink.

The trees rose high overhead, and he tried to ignore the way the branches started to pull on him, snagging on his jacket, though sliding off the mail. He ducked down beneath them, ignoring their swaying as he hurried through the darkened forest.

A soft murmuring came from a distance.

It wasn't that of the wind. There wasn't much wind here, and what little there was didn't blow with enough force to hear it. It didn't sound like it came from a person, either. The soft sound was low-pitched and drawn out, soft enough that he thought it might be his imagination.

Lan shifted his grip on his sword. *The sound is real.* It had to be.

Unless he'd been injured so badly that he couldn't keep his mind straight. That was a possibility. Lan had seen how others with significant injuries could find their minds wandering and have a difficult time keeping everything straight in their heads.

He leaned on the trunk of a tree.

Lan lost track of how long he was there. Tracking time in the forest was made challenging by the thickness of the canopy overhead. The sounds of the forest were soft. The occasional trembling of leaves. The wind, though faint, rustling in the treetops. The burbling of the stream. And the murmuring, that was the most prominent.

*Is it growing closer?*

Lan moved away from the trees, and the murmuring got louder. A faint light began to glow in the distance. Maybe sunlight, but no sunlight would shine down on the forest floor in such a way, illuminating everything in a soft grayish glow. Something cautioned him against going any closer.

The murmuring intensified.

Lan shifted his grip on his sword.

*I should turn back.*

The Karell—and his sister—would be able to handle something like this.

They'd need a warning, though. If there was something magical in the forest, Lan needed to know what it was so that he could warn the Karell. That was his responsibility as a Taihg.

A cold chill swept through him as he started forward.

He shivered, though he didn't know if the chill came from his uncertainty or from something mystical passing over him.

Pale light bathed the forest.

The murmuring shifted.

That made him pause to look around. There had definitely been something to that murmuring, though maybe it was just

his tired mind imagining things. The sound was soft and gentle, almost a lulling.

Lan knew to be cautious around that sort of thing. It was a trap, and one where he could end up on the wrong end of some strange magic. Could the entire forest be designed to draw him in?

“Hello?”

His voice sounded muted. He doubted there was any reason to limit how loud he called out. In the time that he'd been in the forest, he hadn't seen or heard anyone else.

The whispering didn't change.

Lan had wondered if his intrusion into this part of the forest, heading toward whatever the magical source of light was, had changed anything.

As he moved forward, the light shifted with him. The trees were different here. These were massive, with trunks that were easily a dozen feet wide. Giant roots crept along the forest floor, intertwining as they stretched from one tree to another, as if the trees formed a network.

The whispering intensified.

“Hello? Who's out there?”

Lan didn't expect a response. He didn't know if the whispering was natural. The only thing he thought to accomplish by calling out was to see if the whispering would change. It didn't.

A few more steps.

He had to climb over a protruding section of roots running along the ground, gnarled and twisting, where several trees had overlapped as they had grown together.

When he reached a clearing, the light intensified, and as Lan looked around, he tried to identify the source of the light, but he couldn't.

The air was even cooler than it had been before.

The whispering seemed to come from the perimeter of the clearing, all around him.

*It is coming from the trees.*

Lan looked up, surveying the branches. The pain in his arm was forgotten, as was the pain in his chest. It was still there. Every so often, a twinge would roll through him, and he would remember just how badly he'd been hurt, but for the most part, it lay dormant, and he thought only of the strangeness that was all around him.

“Hello? Is there anyone there?”

The whispering started to shift.

The light started to change.

He held on to his sword, staying ready. “Show yourself!”

There had to be someone with magic here. Whoever was here was taunting him, tormenting him with the kind of magic they possessed. He looked all around, feeling the energy in the air. It had changed.

The whispering started to become clearer. Words were discernible within it.

*She comes.*

The whispering said it over and over again, and Lan turned toward the center of the clearing.

“Who comes?”

*She comes. She comes. She comes.*

Over and over, it said the same thing. The light continued to build, swirling around him. The coolness to the air increased even more.

Lan tried to push back his fear. Fear was an enemy. Fear did no good to him at this point. The only thing fear accomplished was immobilizing him. Lan had learned long ago how to suppress his fear, to find a way beyond it. Now he had to put his learning to use.

*She comes. She comes. She comes.*



The whispering became more urgent. Lan didn't know if it was a single voice or many. He couldn't hear anything other than the steady calling.

When he had first heard the murmuring, it had sounded soft, gentle. Almost soothing.

This steady whispering was something else.

Intense. Urgent. Carrying with it something more.

*She comes. She comes. SHE COMES!*

The light swirled around him again, and now a shape became visible.

It was just inside the clearing, formed by the roots as they twirled around.

The shape began to solidify. The whispering faded, leaving nothing but the memory of it. Lan could almost believe that he had imagined it.

The voices had spoken with a sense of urgency.

The strange light swirled even more, and the figure started to take on color. A brown cloak stretched down from shoulders to the ground. Dark hair flowed over the top of the cloak. Grayish skin, almost the color of a cloudy sky, shone through. It seemed to be suffused with the pale light that he'd seen before.

"Who are you?" Lan asked as the figure resolved.

She turned toward him. There was something powerful about her. Lan was able to feel her power, though he wasn't entirely sure what it meant for him. The woman clasped her hands in front of her, tipping her head to the side, as if she was able to hear voices that he could not.

Was the forest speaking to her? It seemed to have been speaking to him before, but with her arrival, the whispering had ceased. Even the creaking of the trees overhead had eased. The only sound he was aware of was his pounding heart.

"You don't need that." Her voice carried to him, sounding cold.

He frowned, trying to understand, but with a burst of wind, his sword was thrown from his hand, and Lan stood unarmed. He looked behind him and realized that the sword had flown completely free of the clearing, and it had landed outside the boundary of the trees and the roots twisting together.

She started toward him, gliding along the ground in some ethereal manner, the cloak barely moving with each step. She circled him before coming to a stop only a few paces away.

Everything within Lan was cold.

It was fear, but it was the panicky kind of fear that one felt when one knew one was in grave danger. He knew nothing about this woman other than his entire being was at her mercy.

“Who are you?”

His mind provided several answers, but the one that he feared the most was the one that he thought might be the least likely. Could she be connected to the Shavln?

The only thing that he knew about that power was that it had been released years ago. They had seen no sign of it since, and the Raven Queen had not found any reason to be afraid of it. It was as if Darius had set the power free but done nothing with it.

“I am the Mistress of the Woods.”

“I’m sorry if I have intruded upon your forest,” Lan said. “I was wandering. Lost. I didn’t mean to—”

She circled him, and Lan tried to follow her movement, but he struggled to keep up. There was something strange about the way that she moved. It wasn’t even a gliding movement. It seemed as if she floated.

*She’s not real.*

She was a manifestation of magic.

“You have the mark,” she said.

“Who are you?”

Light began to surge again.

This time, rather than spreading all around, filling the entire clearing, the light targeted him. It flowed outward and rolled through him.

It was cold. Lan cried out, attempting to move, but the icy grip of the woman's magic held him in place. He had nothing. No weapon. No way to escape. She held him as easily as if he were a child.

In the grips of her magic, he *was* a child.

Lan's entire body went stiff as he struggled against the cold rolling through him. It started at his heart, and then it rolled outward, working through his chest, down his arms, and into his legs. When it reached his neck and then his head, Lan cried out again.

"What are you doing to me?"

"You have the mark," she said.

The nature of her voice had changed. Now there was something else, something almost terrifying, within it. He tried to look up, but he couldn't see anything other than the shadowy form hovering over him. Her power continued to squeeze through him. Everything cried out, all parts of him wanting to escape, but there was no part that could. Lan struggled, but it was futile.

The Mistress of the Woods loomed closer. Why had he ever thought that she was surrounded by light? It seemed to be darkness. Shadows. It was concentrated around her. The figure that came toward him was grotesque, terrifying. The power around him squeezed inward, cold and biting.

"You have the mark."

The voice tore through his terror.

The whispering that he had heard, the steady murmuring, the urgency that he had noted when he had come to this clearing all took on a different meaning. He had thought it was voices of celebration, as if they had been awaiting her coming.

They had *feared* her coming.

Lan wished for the power that Sophie had. At least she was able to form poses and explode magic from her. It was something about his sister that he felt jealous about. It would certainly be more valuable now than what he was able to do. All he could do was stand here and wait for the Mistress of the Woods to consume him with her magic.

The cold tore through him.

“Darish curse you,” he muttered, the only thing that he could get out.

Some deep part of Lan reacted. It was dangerous to invoke a god’s name, especially here. But something changed. A warm gust drifted toward him.

The Mistress of the Woods hissed.

The darkness retreated. For a moment, Lan caught sight of her and thought that he truly saw her. A darkened face, the cloak rotting, seemingly made of leaves and detritus of the forest. The light was nothing more than an illusion.

She retreated from him. Her hold on him stayed, and Lan still couldn’t move. The cold was within him, but even that started to withdraw.

*He comes. He comes. He comes.*

The voices within the forest started to pick up, the whispering carrying a different urgency now. Lan couldn’t move. He tried to get away, but the power was constricting him, keeping him from doing anything.

*He comes. He comes. HE COMES!*

The voices cried out the last, almost a celebration.

The shadows around him exploded, and warmth flowed past him.

Lan staggered back, and in the distance, another shadowy form stepped toward him, carrying Lan’s sword.

# CHAPTER 10

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Lan prepared himself to attack, though without his sword, he wasn't sure how much he'd be able to do. The figure approaching dragged Lan's sword behind him.

The forest no longer whispered. Everything had gone silent. The chanting of the trees, the strange building energy, now hushed.

*He comes.*

Who, though?

Shifting his footing in the center of the small clearing, Lan looked all around him, searching the forest floor for any potential dangers. Other than the approaching figure, there was nothing else in the woods with him. Lan turned his attention back to the figure, bracing for what might happen next.

The man—and it seemed to be a man, given his size, though with a cloak covering his face, it was difficult to tell—stopped at the edge of the clearing.

Lan tipped his head to the side, trying to listen to the trees. They'd warned him before, though he hadn't been aware that there was anything within the chanting worth heeding. Even now, he didn't know if the lack of chanting mattered. There was nothing more. No whispering. Nothing to suggest the forest feared this newcomer.

Did that mean Lan didn't have to fear him, either?

There was something about him that seemed off.

Lan wasn't sure why that would be, but the sight of him suggested a strangeness. While Lan watched the man, it seemed that the man watched him. He had an uneasy feeling that he was being studied, though he didn't know if the man found anything in him.

"You have the mark," the man said.

This was the second person who had said that. First the strange, dark Mistress of the Woods, and now this figure. Could this be Darish? Lan had invoked the god's name, but he had never heard of anybody actually seeing Darish.

"What mark?"

The man started to move around the inside of the ring of trees. He didn't move too close, though, as if he feared entering the clearing. With each step, Lan noticed something he hadn't before: the trees—at least the roots of the trees—withdrawed from this man.

Was he with the Mistress of the Woods?

"The Mark of Odian."

Lan's frown deepened. The man motioned toward Lan's arm, and Lan glanced down. The moonlight drifting through the trees revealed the birthmark there. "That's just a birthmark," he said.

"It is the Mark of Odian."

"I've not heard that name before."

The man growled low in his throat, more animal than man. "But I sense that you should not have been marked."

Lan glanced at his sword. It was as if the man was holding it as a taunt to Lan. He didn't make any attempt to raise the sword and instead simply dragged it behind him, as if the sword was nothing more than an accessory.

"I don't know how I was marked," Lan said. "It's just a birthmark. Nothing from this Odian."

Was Odian the Mistress of the Woods?

With a sudden surge of movement, the man brought the sword up and around, the blade taking on a glowing light, and he slammed it forward. The man stopped his movement short, holding the blade just above Lan's neck.

There wouldn't have been anything he could have done against an attack like that.

Lan looked up at the man. "Who are you?"

"You should not have been marked," he said.

"You keep saying that, but it doesn't change anything. Who are you?" Lan's eyes darted to his sword before looking up at the man again.

"I am the Hunter," he said.

The Hunter. Not Darish.

The man took a step back, giving Lan a chance to look at him. The deep green cloak he wore shimmered as he moved, the light catching it, making it appear like leaves fluttering in the wind. Lan found himself staring at the cloak, unable to take his eyes off it. That was a mistake, he knew, as it distracted him from the Hunter.

"Why are you here?" the Hunter asked.

"I was attacked, and..." How much should he really offer this person? He supposed it didn't matter whether he shared. "I came looking for safety."

"There is no safety in these woods," the Hunter said.

"Why are you here?" Lan asked.

The Hunter cocked his head to the side, staring at Lan. He dragged the sword behind him and continued to make a steady circuit around Lan. "How is it that you survived the thisten?"

Lan blinked, and he could feel something about the Hunter as he looked at him, as if some strange energy was coming from the Hunter. That might only be Lan's imagination, but he didn't think so.

There had been a time when Lan wouldn't have known about power, and he certainly wouldn't have been able to feel



it, but in his time working with the Taihg, he had come to understand the powers that existed in the world. At least, he had come to understand them better than he had before becoming a soldier. There had been a time when he had believed that power such as the Taihg and the Karell possessed was nothing more than stories told to him by his nana. They were stories his sister had always loved, but they were stories nonetheless. Lan had learned that stories had a basis in something. Would his nana ever have told him a story about someone like the Hunter?

“What is the thisten?”

The Hunter moved forward in a blur.

It happened so quickly that Lan didn't even have a chance to react. He grabbed for Lan's arm, and he peeled away the grass Lan had lashed to it.

Lan braced for the pain, prepared for his arm to scream out the way it had when it had broken, but there was not nearly as much pain as he'd anticipated.

“You've even recovered,” the Hunter said. He grabbed the mail on Lan's chest.

Lan reacted, spinning to the side, swinging his good arm up. The Hunter grabbed it, and he forced it down, as if Lan were nothing more than a child. Lan jerked his arm free, dropping and spinning, sweeping his leg toward the Hunter's legs.

He missed.

The Hunter jumped over Lan and dropped, landing atop Lan, then peeled the mail off his chest forcibly. Lan cried out, trying to force the Hunter off him. He couldn't do anything. It was as if the Hunter were made of stone, so solid that Lan could do nothing against him.

When the mail came free, the Hunter ran his hand across Lan's chest. Then he got up. Lan looked down. It was the first time that he had seen the injury.

Only there was no injury.

He was certain that when he'd been attacked by the creature, its claws had ripped through his chest, and Lan could remember how those claws had torn at his flesh, the pain he'd felt when they had, and the difficulty he'd had taking so much as a breath.

Now there was nothing left of that injury. It was as if it had never occurred.

Lan took in a deep breath, running his hand over the uninjured flesh.

"This?" Lan asked, pointing to his chest. "This was the thisten?"

The Hunter studied Lan, though he didn't say anything.

Lan pulled the rest of his mail over his head, looking at it. It had been torn, the edges jagged, no longer providing any sort of protection.

How had he recovered so quickly?

And it wasn't even the first time something like that had happened. When he had trained with Tohm and had been beaten to the point where he should have died, the Fixer had saved him. At least, that was what Lan had believed at the time. This was just further proof that it had had nothing to do with the Fixer.

"What is the thisten?"

"Normally or now?"

Lan blinked at the question, uncertainty filling him. "I suppose now."

"It is a harbinger of something worse," the Hunter said. "Darkness. Death. Destruction."

With that, there came a soft rumbling. Lan had heard the rumbling before, and when he heard it now, he tensed. When it passed, Lan turned to the Hunter.

"That sounds like everything that I've been trained to handle," Lan said.

The Hunter frowned at him. “Trained? You cannot train to face these thisten.”

“How many are there?”

“Many,” the Hunter said.

“What about you?”

“I am the Hunter.”

Lan started to smile, but he realized the Hunter wasn't amused, nor was he joking.

“Who is the Mistress of the Woods?”

“A fool who plays with power she cannot comprehend,” the Hunter said.

“She didn't seem to be a fool,” Lan said. “She seemed... dangerous.”

“Dangerous to one who isn't prepared to handle her.”

“And you are prepared to handle her?”

“I am here.”

“That's not an answer,” Lan said.

“It is all the answer that is needed,” the Hunter said.

The Hunter tossed Lan's sword.

He turned his back, and Lan looked at him, debating what to do.

He grabbed the sword and shoved it into his sheath. He looked down at the ruined mail, considering whether he should slip it back on, and he decided to do so. The mail had saved him. Without it, the thisten attack would have been worse. He'd had his chest torn through, but the thisten hadn't done anything more than that.

The Hunter started away from Lan, and Lan chased after him. “Where are you going?”

“You felt the thisten.”

“You're going after it?”

“I am the Hunter.”

“What happens if the thisten gets past you?”

The Hunter turned to Lan. “It will not.”

“And if it does?”

The Hunter didn’t answer.

Lan trailed after the Hunter. It was curiosity more than anything else that drove him. Curiosity about what the Hunter might do, but also curiosity about who the Hunter was. He exuded a confidence, and that alone struck Lan as somewhat curious, but it was more than just his confidence that made Lan wonder. It was the power within him. There was no doubt in Lan’s mind that he had power, at least enough that he was capable of moving so quickly.

“What were those voices that I heard?”

The Hunter turned to him. “Voices?”

“When you came to the clearing, and when the Mistress of the Woods was there.” The voices had come both times, though in the case of the Mistress of the Woods, the voices had been far more agitated than they had been with the Hunter. “There were voices. The whispering. I don’t hear it now, but it was there.”

Lan was certain that he had heard it. The steady murmuring had echoed around the clearing, calling out to him. It had sounded in a rhythmic fashion, a steady call.

*She comes.*

*He comes.*

“You heard the *ilah’tanr*.”

Lan frowned. “What is that, exactly?”

“The voices of the trees,” he said.

“How was I able to hear the voices of the trees?”

“I am not sure. It should not have been possible,” he said. “Perhaps they took pity on you.”

That didn't seem to have been the case. When he had heard them, it was more of a steady murmuring, nothing more than that, and certainly it had not sounded as if the voices had taken pity on him in any way.

The Hunter continued onward, leaving Lan behind.

Lan didn't need to stay here. There was no reason for him to stay any longer. Why, then, did he feel such need to remain?

Having lost Joralt, he knew he should keep heading back toward the city. At this point, there were likely to be people who had noticed his absence. The Taihg would have been deployed to search for him.

That wasn't necessarily a problem, but they wouldn't know how to find him. Lan had no idea where he'd gone off course.

His role serving the Taihg made him think there was something else he needed to do. He needed answers. The answers weren't so much for him. Not any longer. The answers were as much for the Taihg. If there was some strange creature out in the woods that would attack, then Lan needed to better understand it—along with understanding what it was the harbinger of.

He followed the Hunter.

The Hunter looked back at him. "You are free to go."

"I'm free to follow you as well. My people need to know more about the thisten."

"Your people will be able to do nothing about them."

"Are you sure?"

The Hunter turned toward him, staring at him. "Your people will be able to do nothing when it comes to the power of the thisten. They will be even more impotent if *it* comes," he said.

"And what is it?" Lan asked.

He didn't answer. The Hunter started off again, and Lan followed.

“Tell me more about the Mistress of the Woods,” Lan said.

“There is nothing for you to know,” the Hunter said.

“She attacked me. There’s something for me to know.”

“She feared what you represent.”

He stalked off, disappearing behind some trees, moving almost too quickly for Lan to keep up. He hurried forward, trying to see where the Hunter had gone, but he could not.

Lan tried to move more quickly through the forest, but there was no way for him to reach the Hunter. The Hunter was far too swift for him. By the time he reached where he thought he might find him, the Hunter was gone.

He needed to leave. He needed to warn the Taihg. But how was he going to get out of the forest?

The trees were enormous, rising high overhead, blotting out the sky. He could find his way out. He was certain of that. It was just a matter of figuring out which direction he needed to head in. Without being able to orient himself, he could wander.

That was a danger.

More than that, he could end up going in circles.

Strangely enough, when he thought of that, he remembered a story that Nana had once shared with him and Sophie. In that story, there had been a man who had ended up lost in a dark forest, and he had wandered endlessly until the woods had finally claimed him.

Was that what would happen to Lan?

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# CHAPTER II

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A gentle breeze gusted in through the open window, carrying the scents of a dozen species of flowers. Sophie breathed them in and then sneezed, disrupting the pose she'd been holding, the *huran*. It was a complicated pose that had taken her the better part of an hour to create, and that was just to gain an understanding of the form. Power seeped away from her, though she'd learned enough to be able to maintain a level of control as it did.

“Darish curse you!” she snapped at the window, slamming the shutters closed. All that time had been wasted for a sneeze.

“I doubt Darish would take too kindly to you misusing his name because you find yourself tickled by the scents of his garden.” Parvella was a thin woman with straight black hair and a severe expression at all times. Other than her eyes. Cool calm shone in her crystal-blue gaze. “Besides, weren't you the one to open the window to let in the breeze?”

Parvella worked at her weaving, producing a complicated pattern. Colors swirled together, reminding Sophie of the hues within the garden. Parvella barely looked up at Sophie as she worked, and her lips were pursed tightly together except when she took a break to admonish her student.

“If Darish had known any better, he would have allowed me to hold the pose a little longer. Now I'm going to have to start again.”

Parvella glanced up. “Focus. Concentrate. Hold the image.”



Sophie almost groaned. It was Parvella's usual advice.

"And perhaps this time you won't hold your feet quite so far apart."

Sophie glared at her. "You could have said something while I was working on it."

"I thought it best for you to learn on your own." She turned back to her weaving, sending the needle up and down.

Sophie's poses might pull on one sort of magic, but weaving had its own power. If only Sophie had known that before losing her nana, perhaps she might have been able to learn from her.

"I'll show you learning on my own," she muttered.

Turning her focus back to the pose, Sophie placed her feet first. As her feet were the foundation for the pose, if she didn't set them in the right way, the rest of the pose would be affected, leaving whatever magic she summoned less powerful than it could be. Considering the nature of the power she was working these days, and the complexity of the poses, a small misstep—such as Parvella had suggested she'd made—would have dramatic consequences on her ability to draw power.

Once her feet were set, she moved on to the flex of her hips. This pose required the correct angle at the knee and ankle. Twisting slightly to the side or not holding it as solidly as she intended would dissipate the power before it had a chance to build through her. Next came her abdomen and back. It required tensing and holding, and it took her the better part of ten minutes to find a way to contort so that she could hold the pose. Her legs had already begun to burn, though she had long ago learned how to ignore that sensation. The legs were the strongest part of the pose, and with power already starting to build, she leaned on that fact to help her hold it.

Next came the arms. With this pose, she had to twist them to either side, holding them out, and her shoulders ached from when she had done so the first time. Following the image of the pose she had long ago memorized, she twisted her arms until satisfied that she had gotten it right.

Lastly came her head and neck. The sorcerers she'd worked with often neglected this part, since they didn't have to hold the full pattern. It was why she had progressed as quickly as she had. Sophie understood the need to hold part of the pose with her head and neck, but really, a large part of it came from the expression on her face. That had just as much to do with the power she was able to command as anything else. She liked to think it was because her expression helped to concentrate the power that flowed through her base, though she didn't know if that was the key to the poses.

By the time she was done placing herself into the position, her body throbbed. Power flowed within her, and she held it. The last part would be twisting and releasing it—and making sure not to sneeze.

Sophie let the power fill her, getting familiar with it. Like all the complicated poses, this was one that she thought she could make more quickly the next time. Each time she mastered a pose, she was able to set it again much more efficiently. It came from her muscles knowing what was needed almost as much as her knowing the appearance of the pose. She could pick up the appearance of a pose from the journals, but the feel of the power was something she could only learn from experience. This pose—much like most of the poses she had taken to—was designed to release a protective spell.

The door to the room slammed open, and Sophie tipped to the side.

Lifting her foot released power the same way as sneezing had. It exploded from her, and though she tried to hold it and prevent it from being misdirected, the shifting of her feet unsettled the nature of the pose, and she lost control.

The only thing Sophie could do to keep from harming anyone was release it toward the window. The power exploded into the shutters, obliterating them, and arced out the window and toward the garden.

“I told you that you don't need to attack Darish like that,” Parvella said.

Sophie coughed, let out a frustrated sigh, and set her feet to try again. “That wasn’t my fault, and you know it. You shouldn’t be opening the door like that.”

Parvella glanced at her along the length of her sharp nose. “And I have instructed you on holding your pose regardless of what’s happening around you. You continue to allow yourself to be distracted. And now poor Tolmar will need to replace the shutters in the room. Again.”

Sophie looked away from the window. The breeze gusted into the room once more, now carrying even more fragrance from the garden. This time it was her fault. The released power had struck somewhere within the garden, and in doing so, it had released the flowers’ perfume.

“He likes me, so I doubt he’ll care that much.”

Parvella tsked. “You say that, but how many times will you make the poor man repair these shutters? He’s not getting any younger, and the work isn’t getting any safer. It’s a wonder he hasn’t fallen out of the window while trying to replace them.”

Sophie set her feet again, determined to get the pose right. It wasn’t the first time that Parvella had tried to distract her while she was holding her poses. Most of the time when Sophie worked with Parvella, the woman did something to distract her. It was a basic lesson, but it was one Sophie still hadn’t mastered, and because of that, she expected Parvella would continue to do things like slamming open the door to see if she could unsettle Sophie.

At least it was nothing like when she had worked with Ridaln. There were times when she thought about what it had been like when she had first been learning the poses. He had taught her some of the basics, demonstrating poses like the prayer pose, as he had wanted Sophie to master them so that she could move on to ever more complicated poses. When she had first learned about magic, she had marveled at it and couldn’t believe that she had such power.

Now, reaching for some of those basic poses took no more than a moment. Sophie used them to help her prepare for the complicated ones, holding the simplest poses so that she could

ready her mind for the more technical ones. It was about more than just readying her mind; she also had to ready herself so she could accept the power she would draw.

Letting out a slow breath, she positioned her feet and flexed her legs. The process went more rapidly this time, so that by the time she reached her arms, she was not nearly as achy as she had been the times before. If nothing else, Parvella and her distractions allowed her to gain a better understanding of the poses so she could assume the necessary positions more rapidly each time.

When the door slammed open again, Sophie tensed but didn't jump. She continued to shift her arms, trying to get them into the right position, power flowing through her.

"That's not much better," Parvella said.

Sophie was tempted to curse at her, but that wouldn't do anything other than amuse Parvella. For all her stern exterior, she took great joy in irritating Sophie. It was one of the things that she disliked about the woman.

She moved her neck and held it for another moment, letting the power linger within her. This was the part of the pose she struggled with. It was as far as she'd managed to get before distractions had set in. Twisting her head to the side, she started to frown.

Movement in the hallway caught her attention.

Sophie strained not to move. From here, she didn't have that much more to do before she could complete the pose. She'd never managed to get this far, and even if she completed it, she didn't know if she had formed it correctly. She thought she had, but the only way to really tell would be when she finished all the movements.

"Sophie?"

She breathed out, trying to suppress the frustration surging up within her. "Nevarn," she said, keeping her teeth gritted. She didn't want to open her jaw. Doing so would likely disrupt the pose, though in the diagram, there wasn't any information about the position of the mouth. Her experience with similar

poses told her that she even needed to set her mouth in the right position.

He appeared in the doorway and smiled at her. With his curly golden hair and formal robe, she couldn't help but find him pretty, but that was the problem. Nevarn *knew* he was pretty. Worse, he seemed to enjoy finding every opportunity to make a comment about her use of magic.

"I thought I heard you in here." He bowed his head politely to Parvella. "Mistress Parvella. I'm sorry to interrupt."

Parvella set her weaving in her lap. Why would she do that for him and not for Sophie? "You haven't interrupted anything that has not already been interrupted." She got to her feet and tucked her weaving under her arm. "You should continue to work on all aspects of this pose, Sophie. Your feet remain a bit too wide, and your legs are too flexed. And don't get me started about your arms."

When she headed out of the room, Sophie twisted toward the shattered window and released the pent-up power, letting it flow out of her in a torrent. She didn't worry about where it went.

"I didn't mean to get you in trouble with her," Nevarn said.

Sophie turned back to him. "If you didn't mean to, then you wouldn't have interrupted. You understand how hard some of these poses are to form."

"I know what I've been taught."

"And I've told you not to bother me when I'm holding a pose."

She really shouldn't let herself get so upset with Nevarn. It wasn't his fault that he didn't understand the nature of the poses.

"I came to see if you'd like to walk in the garden."

Hope shone in his eyes. He really was pretty.

Sophie glanced over at the window. Now wasn't a good time for her. She had been so close to holding the pose that she'd been working on, regardless of what Parvella said. There

wasn't much about the pose that she had left to master—other than not releasing it too soon.

“Let me finish this pose, and then I can.”

His face lit up with a smile, and he closed the door.

“You're just going to stand there?” she asked.

“You said you needed to complete the pose.”

Sophie shot him a hard look. She *had* said that. She hadn't expected him to stay and watch. It would be better for her if he didn't. It wasn't that she couldn't re-create the pose with the distraction. It was just that it was so much easier if she didn't have distractions.

“Fine,” she muttered.

While taking her position again, she tried not to think about Nevorn watching her.

Sophie focused.

That was the key to this. She had to find focus.

As much as she didn't want to drift back to the lessons that Ridaln had taught her, she had learned quite a bit with him. Those earliest poses were the easiest for her. That might be because she hadn't been allowed to learn much more complicated poses, but the frequency of practice before moving on to something more complex had embedded those poses in her mind.

Eventually, she would have to be able to summon power without a pose.

*Walk before you run.*

Another lesson from Ridaln.

She tried not to share with the instructors here how she continued to go back to what she'd been taught by him. They wouldn't understand.

“What does this one do?”

“It's a protective pose.”

“What does that mean?”

She glanced over to see him watching her intently. He was close enough to her that she could reach out and touch him, but that would disrupt the pose.

A soft breeze picked up again, and the fragrances from the garden drifted in. Mostly the scents of flowers, though there were other scents. The garden grew more than just flowers.

Sophie breathed them in, trying not to let the smells distract her too much, though the garden was rarely a distraction. Most of the time, the garden provided relaxation.

“It means I need to protect myself from the Shavln. Poses like this will do that.”

“We have plenty of people who can place protections, Sophie. You don’t need to worry your...”

She twisted carefully so that she could look at him. She hadn’t yet worked to the point in the pose where she had to be concerned about the position of her neck, but she was getting close. At least he didn’t challenge her on the Shavln the way others did. “Worry my what?”

Nevarn coughed, and he fidgeted as he headed over to the window to run his hand around the damaged frame. “It’s getting colder.”

“I’m not cold.”

“The air is cold. Pretty soon snow is going to fall. We haven’t had a typical snowfall over the last few years. Yoshin thinks this year will be different.”

Sophie closed her eyes as she focused on the pose, trying to hold it as tightly as she could. “Yoshin can’t see the future. This year doesn’t feel any different than any of the other years I’ve been here.”

“You’ve only been here a few winters.” Nevarn turned from the window.

“Long enough.” This last part was the most difficult. She was close now. Pain burned through her legs and arms, accumulated from the many other times she’d tried throughout the day. This time would be different.

Parvella had warned her to be firmer with her arms, but Sophie thought she had that well under control. It wasn't her arms but her neck. Maintaining control would be the most difficult aspect of this pose, especially with Nevorn watching her.

She closed her eyes. There was no point in keeping them open for this last bit. If he watched, she'd let him. The pose was close enough. The power within her built.

As usual, the power bubbled up from some deep place within her. It often seemed to come from her feet, as if she were pulling the magic out of the ground, though she knew better. Most of the power came from deep within her. It required her to pull on it, to let the energy flow through her, directed by her pose.

*A little bit more.*

She twisted her neck.

This time, she pressed her lips together in the same tight line she'd seen in the picture. There weren't too many poses that required specific facial expressions, but this was one of them.

Nothing changed.

The pose wasn't *quite* right.

Some aspect of the power hesitated within her.

She had to call to it, but she had to find out *how* to call to it.

Moving would only release what she'd already drawn.

That was a danger.

She didn't want to release it yet. When she did, if she managed to create the protection she'd been working on, then she could see if releasing it out toward the garden would even make a difference. Sophie didn't think she'd damaged anything in the garden, but with the kind of power this pose called on, it was possible she had done more than she'd intended.



“Sophie?” Nevarn asked.

She ignored him.

She just held the pose, thinking about the kind of power she tried to reach. Nothing came to her. No answers.

As she started to release the power, she became aware of something new.

The power struck her as different. There was some aspect of the pose that seemed to be not quite right, so she moved. Not much. She didn't need to move all that much to change the nature of this pose. When she shifted, a surge of energy exploded through her.

She resisted the urge to let out a whoop of excitement.

She'd done it.

All the time that she had been working on this pose, she had failed. Until now.

It was a strange thing for her to be aware of the energy flowing through her in such a way. Stranger still was how obvious it was to her now that she held the pose. Of course, other poses had been like that as well. When she had first started holding some of these poses, she had not really known how to summon all the power. When she accomplished the pose, she always knew that it was correct. The energy exploded and filled her.

Opening her eyes, she flicked her gaze toward the window. “Move,” she said through gritted teeth.

Nevarn frowned at her, looking through his pretty eyes at her, but he stayed with his hand resting on the window. “Why would I move? I told you that I wanted to take you down to the garden, and—”

“Move.”

He finally took a step to the side.

Sophie lifted her foot.

Doing so unleashed the energy she held. There wasn't the same destructive force to it. Sophie managed to control the

direction and sent it out the window to trail off into the countryside.

She smiled to herself, staying in the pose with only her foot raised.

“Well?” Nevarn asked.

“I think it worked,” she said.

“How will you know?”

She had started to answer when some aspect of the energy that she’d released struck something.

That was new.

Usually when she released the energy, she felt the power as it flowed out, but she wasn’t aware of much else. In this case, once the power had escaped from her, she could feel it hitting something.

Sophie tensed, trying to hold the rest of the pose, but she couldn’t tell if the power that she was holding was going to remain under her control.

She tried to focus on the power she had released but couldn’t detect anything.

“Are you going to let it go all the way?”

“Quiet,” she whispered.

“I don’t think magic needs quiet. At least, that’s not what my mother says.”

Sophie flicked her gaze toward him before turning away. “Magic doesn’t need quiet. *I* need quiet.”

Nevarn smiled at her, completely missing the tension she felt.

She was tempted to let go of the pose and push him out of the window. Sophie kept her eyes closed, focusing on detecting what her magic had hit, and tried to hold the energy.

The faint trace of power continued to flow away from her, though there was enough of a connection to it that she could feel it.

Eventually, the energy would trail away from her. Even now, as she held it within her, she could feel it was starting to disappear. If she could hold the pose again, she might be able to re-create this sensation, but the pose had been incredibly difficult. Had it not been for her testing how her body was supposed to be positioned, she might not have succeeded in forming it.

The link to the energy started to disappear.

Sophie was moving her foot, readying to set it back down, when some other aspect of the pose shifted again. It pushed a little bit more power out of her.

The strange connection between her and the power she was holding surged again. It met a resistance. Sophie had not felt this resistance before. Could that be significant somehow?

She headed to the window and rested her hands on the windowsill, looking out into the daylight. She could feel something was off, though as she looked over at Nevarn, she knew that she was the only one who did.

It wasn't close, thankfully. Still, the idea that something was off troubled her.

She had barely survived the Shavln before, despite what others might claim about her.

She had no idea if she would be able to survive it if they were to attack again. It was the reason she trained, the reason she prepared. That was what she told herself.

Not because she loved magic.

Though she did. There was something about holding a pose and feeling the power that was available to her that felt right.

“Are you ready to go to the garden?” Nevarn asked.

Sophie took a deep breath, inhaling the scents from the flowers, all the aromas that she could detect down below. Her gaze drifted down toward the garden, and with a sinking feeling, she realized that her two previous mistakes with the

pose had caused damage to more than just the window shutters.

She really needed to be more careful with these poses.

“I think I have to,” she said.

“I don’t want you to feel like you have to do anything with me.”

“It’s not that I have to do something with you,” she said. “I need to go down and apologize for destroying the rose beds.”

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# CHAPTER 12

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SOPHIE

Sophie wandered through the rose garden after Nevarn had taken his leave of her. She trailed her hand over the remnants of the flower beds she'd destroyed. It had been unintentional, but that didn't change the fact that she'd been the one to do it. Vast swaths of flowers were now dead because of her. She held one rose fragment, half the pale-yellow petals having been blown off, before setting it down. At least the air smelled nice.

"This was you?"

Sophie looked up to see Jalyn watching her. Even now, years after she'd first seen her, there was something about Jalyn that struck Sophie as impressive. Perhaps it was how she'd learned to fight, the swordsmanship she displayed, rivaling even the most skilled of the men. Perhaps it was her beauty, that of the fabled Pale Princess, with the flaming red hair and pale skin.

"Not intentionally."

"I should hope not. I wouldn't want to know what the flowers had done to upset you were that the case. Unless it was disappointment at some boy not providing the *right* flowers."

"There's no boy."

Jalyn smiled, quickly surveying everything around her. "I suppose there would not be. You're old enough to attract the attention of men."

"There aren't any men who pay me any attention."

Jalyn looked back over at her. “None?”

“None that I want attention from.”

Jalyn’s pale blue eyes looked up toward a tower window, a hint of a smile drifting across her face. “Not even Nevarn?”

Sophie looked up, but there was no sign of Nevarn—thankfully. She didn’t want the distraction of him again. “He’s fine.”

“That’s generally not the way one describes the prince.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s the way he gets described by *me*.”

Jalyn bent over and grabbed a clump of flowers, pulled them up, and held them out. The stems were all bent and damaged, leaving the flowers drooping as if bowing to Sophie. “Don’t let the queen hear you talking like that.”

“Like what?”

“Nevarn being ‘fine.’ She would be most disappointed.”

Sophie sniffed, turning away. “I think she’d be disappointed were I actually interested in him.”

Jalyn tossed the flowers to the side. “You might be surprised.” She shrugged. “Your taste in boys—I’m sorry, *men*—is really none of my concern, anyway. Your training is.”

“My training is going fine.”

“I can see that. So fine that you decided to demonstrate it on Mistress Vistan’s flowers. She will certainly understand. Perhaps she’s the reason you felt compelled to call down such power.”

“She didn’t plant the colors I like.” Sophie smiled. “I prefer brighter colors.”

“The brighter colors are more dangerous,” Jalyn said.

“Dangerous how?”

“You have to be careful if someone gives you red roses. It usually means they want something from you.” Jalyn leaned over and grabbed another fistful of damaged flowers, then

handed them over to Sophie. These were a deep pink, almost red.

“What do you want from me?” Sophie asked.

“I’ve told you what I want. I’m supposed to ensure you’re training. At least, while I’m still in the city.”

She spun suddenly, sword unsheathed, and swung it at Sophie.

Sophie reacted by raising her hands, thrusting them out.

The shifting nature of the gilán pose was easy to hold, nothing like the hurán pose she’d been holding in the tower. Using this one, she could create a barrier around herself, and did so quickly.

Jalyn stabbed at it.

The barrier shimmered with the brutality of her sword strike, but it held.

There had been a time when it hadn’t held. That was the purpose of the training. Sophie needed to be ready to summon power at a moment’s notice. Not all the power she was asked to draw upon would be a protective kind of power. Some of it would be dangerous.

She twisted, sliding from one pose to another.

The energy exploded away from her.

Jalyn was ready for it. She ducked beneath the burst of magic and spun around, her sword streaking toward Sophie.

Sophie reacted by dragging magic out and solidifying the barrier around her.

The sword bounced off the barrier.

“You almost got me with that one,” Jalyn said. “I’m starting to feel the shift.”

“That’s good, but I still haven’t *actually* gotten you.”

The practice was for both of them. Sophie benefited by using her magic in ways she might were she to see fighting—though there seemed to be a concerted effort to ensure she



never did. Jalyn benefited by learning to handle magical attacks. She might not have magic of her own, but she could learn to anticipate the attacks Sophie used, and she could gain skill in avoiding them.

Sophie made a slight shift.

This one was subtle. The pose she shifted to was meant mostly to create a circle of power around her, but holding the pose after already using a protective pose allowed her to turn that energy outward.

It exploded in a ring around her.

Jalyn braced for it.

Sophie added a second attack. Switching from pose to pose was challenging for her, especially after how much energy she'd used trying to master the huran pose in her room. There was a risk she wouldn't be able to contain the power she attempted to hold, and if she lost control over it, she could do more damage to the flowers—and to Jalyn.

There was a reason Sophie hadn't unleashed her full potential on Jalyn before. She didn't want to hurt her.

Jalyn arced her sword down.

It carved through the magic.

Sophie had to jump to the side.

When she did, the rest of the pose crashed, and she lost control over it.

Jalyn darted forward and swung her sword down, stopping a hairbreadth from Sophie's neck.

Sophie pushed the blade away and got to her feet.

"You really tried to get me that time," Jalyn said.

"You nearly took off my head," Sophie snapped.

"If I had wanted to take off your head, I would have."

Sophie eyed the sword. "I still think you need to teach me how to fight with a sword."

“You don’t need to waste your time learning a skill you won’t have any need of.”

“Are you so sure that I won’t have any need of it? What happens if I run into a situation where my magic is depleted?” There were times when magic failed. Sophie had encountered those often enough in her training, when she simply had to stop, no strength left within her to keep fighting. If that were to happen when she was actually facing somebody with power, then she would have to find some other way to defend herself.

What better way than with a sword?

“If you get to that point, you only need to know one thing about fighting with a sword,” Jalyn said.

“What’s that?”

“Stab with the pointy end.”

“That’s not how it works.”

“I know that’s not how you want it to work, but when you are facing someone else—and I suspect what you mean is facing someone with magic—you already have an advantage.”

“I’d only have an advantage if I actually learned how to fight with a sword.”

Jalyn shook her head. “We’ve had this discussion before.”

“And we’re going to keep having it until you relent.”

“I’ve told you what you need to know.”

“You’ve told me that I need to stab with the pointy end.”

“Even that is difficult. Trust me when I tell you that the first time you need to use a sword in actual combat, you will find that all of the practice that you put into mastering technique goes away. The only thing that matters is ensuring that an opponent’s blade does not go into your belly. At that point, knowing how to stab with the pointy end is enough.”

Jalyn backed away, looking at the flower beds. “Perhaps I should leave you. I’m sure that Master Vistan will want your help restoring the garden.”

Sophie sighed. That was a use of power that she thought she might be able to achieve, though it was going to sap her strength.

Even if she didn't use magic, the idea of helping to clean up the destruction was frustrating enough.

It shouldn't be. Sophie needed to clean up after herself. That had been made very clear to her in the time that she had spent training in Valan. With her kind of magic, and her lack of control, there was a need for Sophie to better understand just how her power could be used, and just how dangerous it could be when misused.

That was all part of the lessons that she learned.

"I detected something," she said to Jalyn as she started to turn away.

"What do you mean?"

"I was practicing a pose."

Jalyn's gaze drifted down toward the destroyed flower beds. "This pose?"

"Well, that pose when I'm not distracted. When I was able to hold it and release it, it stretched quite a way from me. I felt something out there," she said, nodding toward the distance.

Not just the distance, but toward Neylash.

It had been a long time since Sophie had been in the capital city of Lorant. The memories remained strong. She wondered if those memories would always stay with her, lingering as she tried to forget them. Of course, if she forgot them, then she would forget how she had begun to learn the simplest of the poses that gave her power.

She should be thankful for them.

However, it was difficult for Sophie to feel thankful for her time in Neylash when she had lost so much there. Most of her childhood. Her innocence. Her family. All of that was gone.

The brother that she had known was no longer. In his place was a soldier. A Taihg. It was what he had always wanted to

be, and something that Sophie had never believed him capable of.

“It was probably nothing,” Jalyn said.

“Nothing? I felt something, Jalyn. I know what it was.”

“What do you think it was?”

“Well, I don’t *know* what it was, but I suspect what it was. Isn’t that enough? With the Shavln out there—”

“We have people out watching, Sophie. If there were anything, any sign of the Shavln, we would know.”

The Karell were searching.

That was what Jalyn meant. But Sophie wasn’t like the Karell. They had a different source of magic, using wands to summon power, to concentrate it. Her own power was different and called upon in a manner that required a different sort of focus. If only she was able to summon the same sort of power as the Karell, then she wouldn’t need to train as she did.

“I still felt something,” Sophie said.

“Maybe you did,” Jalyn said. “Pass on the word, and I will do the same.”

Sophie sighed before nodding. What choice did she have?

Magic took time to master. That was what her instructors here had said, and it was the same thing that Ridaln had told her when she had been working with him. She had to walk before she could run.

Eventually, she would have to learn how to run, and from there she would have to learn how to sprint.

Sophie didn’t know if she would even do anything more than a steady jog when it came to magic. She tried, struggled with the power that she wanted to control, but it was times like today when she felt as if she merely fumbled at it.

“I will meet with you when I return,” Jalyn promised.

Sophie only nodded.

It was only after Jalyn had left that Sophie questioned where she would be going.

But it was too late to ask.

Jalyn was one of the more powerful Taihg, so Sophie knew she had responsibilities. It was just that she didn't know *what* they were.

Sophie wandered through the garden, picking up flowers as she went. She used the sefron pose to destroy the shattered flowers. It was a simple pose, one that barely took any effort on her part to maintain it, and as she held the pose, she could feel the energy explode into the flowers one at a time.

She could try to gather them all together, but Sophie lacked the concentration that was required to create that kind of magic.

When she reached the end of the garden, she looked up. The tower loomed over her. So much of her time was spent in the tower, training, trying to master her poses. She worked day after day to become more skilled at magic.

It still seemed to come too slowly to her.

Sophie sighed.

Sometimes the confines of the tower were too much for her. She should be thankful. There was not the same uncertainty that she'd had before, though the reality of what she'd learned when she'd come here had been something far different from what she had expected. The reality was almost terrifying.

Neylash had used her. Darius had used her.

There were times when she wondered if Ridaln still lived. How could he when Darius had released the Shavln? Still, Ridaln might have been difficult, brusque, but he had been capable with magic.

Sophie started working through the poses. She always started with the basic ones. The prayer pose. The gunter pose. The dancer pose. A dozen others. All of them were relatively basic, and all of them summoned a different kind of power.

The power was something that she could concentrate, and as she did, she was able to find a way to hone it, harnessing the energy in various ways. The only limitation was how it could be used.

There were other poses, like the one she had been working on today, where the pose itself had a specific purpose behind it. Those were important to master, but they were also difficult to master.

Maintaining some of them was incredibly complicated, and though she eventually could do it, it was a matter of having the patience—something Sophie didn't always have—in order to achieve the desired outcome.

She stumbled, and the pose that she had been holding—the blith pose—left her with power to dissipate. It did so with a bit too much vigor, and it exploded upward, curling into the sky. At least outside, Sophie was able to direct her power upward so that it wouldn't be quite as destructive.

It faded, disappearing into the sky.

She breathed out as she contemplated beginning another pose, but that wasn't what she wanted to do. Not really.

She wanted to have purpose. She was restless.

Maybe the only way that she would get over her restlessness was finding her brother.

It had been a while since she'd spoken to Lan. He was always so busy with the Taihg, having a purpose, while she didn't necessarily feel her attempts at magic gave her one—yet. She understood that in time, and as she continued to gain skill and control with her magic, she would have a greater purpose, but for now, the purpose that she had in her magic, and the use that she was able to put it to, was not nearly what she had hoped it would be. Even after all these years of training, she still didn't have nearly what she wanted.

If she were to go against someone like Ridaln, someone with real power, holding a pose wasn't going to be effective. It was going to take her finding power through smaller

movements. Ridaln had used tapping as his method of concentrating power, but how would she find her own focus?

It was a question that she'd asked herself time and again but without answer.

Sophie headed through the garden, nodding to Master Vistan as she hurried past her. She was an older woman, and dirt stained her cloak. She had her gray hair pulled back so that it didn't fall into the dirt, and a quick smile to her face.

When Sophie reached the courtyard outside the garden, she hurried onward.

She tried not to look back, but she couldn't miss the soft gasp as Master Vistan realized what had happened.

The city stretched out in front of Sophie. The city was set into a hillside, with the tower nestled atop the hill, and a series of shops and homes and other buildings encircled the tower. Everything had a certain energy to it, though nothing magical, Sophie believed. It was more a bustle of activity. When she'd been training with Ridaln, Sophie had not been permitted to go into Neylash, so she had always had to sneak around. She hadn't managed to explore quite as much there as she had while here. Considering that her only responsibility in Valan was to train with her poses, she had plenty of time to explore. But after a while, exploring had gotten a bit old.

Sophie looked all around at the city. There were no confines here, no restrictions to where she could travel, and nothing that prevented her from going anywhere within the city. She was given a place within the tower and not held captive, as she once had been.

It was freeing.

She looked down the hillside toward the river valley far below.

The street meandered down, and in the distance, she was able to make out the outline of the Taihg barracks. It was a low, blocky gray stone building. Soldiers filled the space around the barracks, many of them Taihg, though not all.

That was where she would find Lan.

He was probably training or patrolling or doing any number of important tasks.

He was always doing something important. His experience in Neylash had made him important, whereas her experience in Neylash had made her a curiosity.

Sophie hurried along the street until she reached the bottom of the hillside. Stone buildings rose on either side of the street, thatched roofs overhanging them, still dripping from the rain the night before. Some of the buildings were more active than others. She passed a few homes, but many of the buildings along the central street were businesses.

Down in the city, she wasn't able to see the barracks nearly as clearly as she could from the hillside and the tower. As she meandered, she had a sense that someone was following her.

She felt it as an unsettling sensation on the back of her neck.

She spun but saw nothing.

The city was generally safe. All cities had a measure of danger to them, from pickpockets to beggars to professional thieves, but Sophie had never really felt unsafe here. Still, she hurried.

Magic felt useful most of the time, but there were times when she wasn't sure that the kind of magic she was able to draw would be the most beneficial in defeating the Shavln. The Karell had proven they were far more capable when it came to that.

Sophie couldn't shake the feeling that she was being followed.

She ducked around one corner and paused, looking along the street.

Nothing seemed unusual. The people along the street were all moving with a purpose, and none of them looked in her direction. It was a strange thing for her to feel as unnerved as she did. Most of her time in the city had been spent feeling safe. Protected. Not in any danger. There was value in being able to train and work with magic, but she also didn't feel the



same edge of unease she thought she needed in order to work as quickly as she had when she'd been in Neylash. There the fear of what was taking place around her had driven her.

When she didn't see anything more, she turned down the street again, heading toward the barracks.

Footsteps behind her caught her attention, and she spun.

Nevarn was there.

"What are you doing?" she snapped. She really should be kinder to him, but it was times like this when she thought that he followed her too closely for comfort.

"I saw you leaving the tower grounds, and I thought that I would see where you were going."

Sophie shook her head. "You're following me."

"Only to see where you're going."

"My brother."

"What?"

She closed her eyes. *Darish give me strength!* "I'm going to see my brother. It's been a few days since I've seen him, and I know he might be busy with the Taihg, but seeing as I'm done with my training for the morning"—or the day, as she didn't know if she would have the energy to do much more today—"I wanted to go and visit with him."

"I'll come with you."

Sophie glared at him. "I don't need an escort."

"I didn't say you did."

"You want to come with me." She sniffed. "I'm not some delicate flower that needs to be protected."

"No. You destroy those."

She glared at him again. "I've apologized to Master Vistan." At least, she would when she returned. She had to think Master Vistan would understand. Besides, it wasn't the first time that Sophie had made a mistake and blasted flowers. Usually the damage wasn't quite so severe.

“I’m sure you did. She probably doesn’t mind, anyway. She likes you.”

Sophie shook her head. “Why do you want to come with me?”

“I haven’t been to the barracks in a few days, either. It’s time for me to visit with Phonal.”

“I thought your sword master came to you.” They passed a bakery with a line of people stretching past it. Sophie shook her head. “Don’t they know Olin’s is better?”

“Phonal does come... Who’s Olin?”

“Olin’s bakery,” she said. “It’s a little farther into the city and harder to get to, but the bread is much fluffier.”

She lowered her voice at the end, not wanting to anger the people who were waiting in line. Still, a woman near the end of the line looked in her direction, and Sophie hurried to get away before she drew too much attention.

“What is it with you and food?” Nevarn asked.

“Not food. Pastries.”

She looked at the bakery. It wasn’t even that Unan’s bakery was bad. It just wasn’t as good as it could be. It thrived on its proximity to the tower, keeping busy because of all the workers who came through here.

“What’s your favorite pastry?”

She looked over at him. “Why are you asking?”

“You live in the tower. I think I know someone who could prepare whatever you like.”

Sophie shook her head. “It’s not the same.”

None rivaled Oleda, but then Sophie didn’t expect anyone to cook quite as well as she could. There had been something special about Oleda’s baking. Olin’s was the closest she’d found.

When they reached the next street, she looked over at Nevarn. “Canila.”

“What was that?” Nevarn frowned as he looked around before finally turning his attention back to her.

“You asked about my favorite pastry. Canila. Only when the crust is fluffy and it’s filled with fruit. I prefer rhubarb, but I’d be fine with blueberry or even blackberry.”

Nevarn shook his head. “That’s... specific.”

“You asked.”

In the distance, Sophie could see the outline of the barracks.

She hurried along, and Nevarn raced to keep up with her. He didn’t have to be so poky when he followed.

“If you’re going to come with me, you could at least try to keep up.”

“You’re walking too fast!”

“This isn’t fast.”

Sophie clutched her dress, keeping it from dragging along the street. When she reached the barracks, she started to slow.

It was active today.

Not that the barracks weren’t usually active. They were often busy when she came to see Lan, so this wasn’t that unusual.

“What are you doing?” Nevarn asked as she reached for the door. “You can’t just go in there.”

“Why not? My brother lives here.”

“It’s just not the way things are done.”

Sophie wrinkled her brow. “What do you do when you come to meet with your sword master?”

“I meet him in the training yard.” Nevarn nodded to a section of the barracks barely visible from the street. A tall wall surrounded it, but it did little to buffer the noise coming from inside.

“They don’t let me train,” Sophie said.

She stepped into the barracks.

The hallway was narrow, but she knew how to navigate it now. The ceiling was only about two feet over her head, so she could only imagine how somebody taller, like Lan, had to negotiate their passage. A few portraits hung on the walls, though the building was generally unremarkable. For a place that trained the Taihg, soldiers that supposedly used some form of magic—though Sophie had never seen it herself—she had anticipated much more decoration when she had first come. She hurried toward her brother's room and knocked. Nevarn stayed behind her, and she shot him a look.

“You were going to meet with your sword master,” she said.

“I will. I just want to make sure you find your brother.”

“He might not be here.” She looked along the hall. There were a dozen more doors on this hall, and this was just one such hall. The passages snaked through the barracks, and she could lose herself trying to keep track of every room here. She wasn't sure that she'd know how to find Lan if she had to travel deeper into the barracks. If he was not in his room, the only other place she'd ever found him was in the training yard.

After knocking again, she waited a moment before deciding that he wasn't there.

She made her way through the barracks, ignoring Nevarn looking at her with an expression of concern. Why shouldn't she be allowed to come through here? Her brother was here, after all. Not that he cared. He never made his way up to the tower to meet with her, but that was just Lan.

When she stepped out into the training yard, she marveled at the activity. Men—and a few women, she noted with a satisfied smile—worked with swords, sparring as they honed their movements. In one section of the yard, she noticed a pair of people battling with long staffs. Some groups worked through what seemed to be a formation fighting style, with all the fighters working together, almost as if it were some sort of dance.

The patterns here were ones she could follow. Why was it that when she tried to hold the poses, she couldn't adopt the positions as exactly as she needed?

"Do you see him?" Nevarn asked.

"No. But..."

Sophie hurried across the training yard toward a large man working through his forms on his own. She'd seen Magnus a few times before with Lan, so she figured that he might know how to find her brother.

When she stopped in front of him, he finished his moves with a flurry and slipped his sword into a sheath before turning to her and bowing to Nevarn.

"Your Highness," he said.

Nevarn smiled as the man continued to bow.

"That's quite enough," Sophie said. "I'm looking for my brother, Lannerdon Varison. I know you've worked with him before."

"Lan went for a ride this morning," Magnus said.

"A ride?"

Magnus glanced at the prince before answering. This was why she didn't want Nevarn with her. It annoyed her when everyone deferred to him when he followed her around like a puppy. She didn't need him to protect her, and she certainly didn't like it when he disrupted her getting the information she wanted.

"As in on patrol?" Sophie asked.

"Not patrol. He went for a ride."

"When do you expect him back?"

"Lan has often ridden to the border, and the journey there and back can take the better part of the day."

So much for her finding her brother and asking him a few questions. She would have liked the chance to at least visit with him so that she could take her mind off everything else.

A commotion near the front of the yard caught Magnus's attention. "Forgive me, your Highness."

When Magnus disappeared, Sophie only shook her head.

"Why does he ask *you* to forgive him, but not me?"

"It is sort of expected," Nevarn said, chuckling.

"You don't have to be so smug about it," Sophie said.

"I'm not smug," he said.

"You aren't disappointed," she said.

"Why should I be?"

"I don't know. People are serving you because you are you."

"That is sort of how royalty works," Nevarn said.

"I don't like it."

"Is that the issue you have with me?"

"I don't have an issue with you."

"You have some issue," he said.

Sophie looked over at him, and finally she shook her head.

She turned her attention to Magnus, who was talking with the Taihg involved in the commotion. Sophie wasn't able to tell what it was about.

"What do you think they're going on about?" she asked.

"We can go and see," Nevarn said.

"Right. Because the Taihg are just going to tell us what we want to hear."

"They'll tell me."

He laughed as he headed over, and irritation filled Sophie for a moment before she chased after him. When she caught up to Nevarn, she waited behind him, listening as he interrupted.

"Your Highness." Magnus bowed again.

“What is it?” Nevarn asked.

“Probably nothing,” Magnus said.

Sophie leaned forward. She realized that they had the reins of a horse, and one of the men was brushing the horse down, feeling along its flank.

He was testing for injury. There was something about the horse that was familiar to Sophie.

“Well?” Sophie said, elbowing her way closer to Nevarn.

“They said it’s nothing,” Nevarn said, glancing over at her.

“No. He said it’s probably nothing. Which means it might be something.” She looked at Magnus. “What is it?”

She glanced at the horse and realized why it was familiar to her.

This was Lan’s horse.

“Where is he?”

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# CHAPTER 13

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## SOPHIE

Sophie looked over at Jalyn. She was speaking quietly to Magnus, and Nevarn stayed near them, listening. Every so often, Jalyn would glance toward Sophie, but she didn't say anything. That irritated Sophie, but not so much as not knowing what had happened to Lan.

*The horse returned on his own.*

This troubled Sophie, but it didn't seem to trouble Magnus or Jalyn as much as Sophie thought it should. When Jalyn turned to her, her brow was furrowed, though she said nothing.

"Well?" Sophie asked.

"It's probably nothing, as Magnus said," Jalyn said.

"You don't know that."

"I don't know it, but your brother has been trying to train this animal for quite some time. He has struggled with him."

"Just because he's struggled training the horse doesn't mean that he got thrown and was unable to get the horse back under control." That was basically what they were implying.

"Like I said," Jalyn started, "he has been—"

"I know my brother. He wouldn't have gotten tossed by his horse." She frowned. Lan had always been good with animals, but during his time with the Taihg, he'd gotten even more skilled. "And Magnus said he went riding toward the border."

"He did," Magnus said.

“Well, if he was riding near the border, then how do you know something didn’t happen?” She was tempted to say something about the Shavln, but her experience with the Raven Queen told her that was a bad idea. Instead, she went with a more logical approach. “Who’s going after him?”

“We have quite a few patrols out, and they should be able to find your brother if he’s out there,” Jalyn said.

“*If* he’s out there?”

“That’s not what I meant,” Jalyn said.

“It may not be what you meant, but it’s what you said.”

“Regardless, we have patrols out there, and *when* we come across your brother, we will bring him back to the city. He’s going to be fine.”

Magnus glanced past Sophie, his gaze lingering on the horse.

Sophie didn’t know him all that well, but she didn’t need to know him to recognize the concern in his eyes. She’d seen that expression on others before. He wasn’t convinced.

Sophie backed away, and she headed over to the tall gray stallion to rub her hand along his flank. “What happened to Lan?” she whispered.

The horse let her pet him. There were no injuries. As she studied him, she found the bridle in place, the saddle unmoved, and even the saddlebags intact.

*This isn’t the kind of animal that would toss him and run.*

“He’s going to be fine,” Nevarn said, coming up behind her.

Sophie continued to pet the horse. “You don’t know that,” she said.

“Your brother is skilled. He’s one of the fastest-advancing Taihg soldiers we have. He’s going to be fine.”

How well did Nevarn know Lan? She hadn’t realized that they’d had much interaction, but the way that he spoke

suggested that he knew something. “I know what I felt,” she said.

“What exactly did you feel?”

“You wouldn’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

“Why? So that you can tell me that I was imagining something as well?”

Sophie looked at Jalyn, who continued to talk to Magnus.

“Is that what she said?” Nevarn asked.

“She didn’t say that I was imagining it. She just reassured me that the Karell haven’t detected anything.”

“They haven’t,” Nevarn said.

“Well, *I* did.”

Nevarn took a deep breath, then nodded. “Come on.”

“Come on?”

“You’re going to talk to my mother.”

“What?”

“Well, if you detected something, we’re going to tell her. If anyone knows whether there’s anything out there that we need to be concerned about, it is her.”

“She won’t be concerned about my brother.”

“One Taihg soldier?” Nevarn shrugged. “Possibly not. She will be concerned about what you detected, though.” He grabbed the reins of Lan’s horse and waited for Sophie. “Are you coming?”

Jalyn was watching her. Sophie considered saying something more to her, then decided against it. Jalyn had made her position clear. Sophie followed Nevarn.

They started through the barracks, and she was surprised when Nevarn brought the horse with them, but they continued all the way up toward the tower. He didn’t speak as they went.

There was only the steady clopping of the horse's hooves on the cobblestones.

When they neared the tower, Sophie looked over at him. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet."

"At least you're taking this seriously."

"Listen, Sophie. I know you don't necessarily enjoy my company all the time, but I believe that you felt something."

"What? I didn't feel anything."

Nevarn grinned at her. "Thanks for making me feel good about that," he said. He shook his head. "And that wasn't quite what I meant. I know that you felt something when you were holding your most recent pose. I don't know what it was, but if you believe it's something to be concerned about, then I believe it."

Sophie sighed. There were times when Nevarn frustrated her, but he shouldn't. And he was the Raven Queen's son, so maybe he could get through to his mother on Sophie's behalf.

He guided the horse up toward the tower, then handed the reins off to one of the tower's stable hands. Nevarn motioned for Sophie to follow, and they hurried into the tower. The entrance to the tower was simple, and not at all what stories had made her think about a queen's home. The only thing about it that struck Sophie as impressive was the iron doors etched with symbols for the gods. Sophie paused in front of them, as she often did, looking at the symbol for Darish, that of a tall tree with massive branches, though also noting several others. She had never spent much time worshipping the gods, like some did, but there was something about heading into the tower that made her more mindful of them.

Sophie followed Nevarn up the stairs. She glanced at the kitchen at one point as they neared the landing, wondering if Lira might have a few treats that she could sneak, before she had to hurry after Nevarn.

"What if your mother won't see me?" Especially given what Thea had said the last time she had been to the queen's

apartment.

“She’ll see me,” Nevarn said.

“What if she doesn’t believe me?”

Nevarn paused on the stairs. He looked down at her. “Were you telling the truth?”

“About what I detected?”

Nevarn nodded.

Sophie closed her eyes, thinking about the way she had released her pose, and the power that she had unleashed with it. “I know what I felt,” she said.

“Then she will believe you.”

“It’s not as if I have acquitted myself all that well in my time here,” she said.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I realize that I’m not the most outstanding magical user your mother has within the tower. I’m not a Karell.”

“Why do you think she keeps you here?”

Sophie shook her head and looked past him.

She knew why she was allowed to stay within the tower. It had little to do with her slowly developing magical ability. She could reach for power, but when she did, it didn’t come nearly as rapidly as she wanted—or needed. Had she been any other magic user, she would probably have been sent from the tower to continue her studies elsewhere long ago.

“I know why I’m allowed here,” she said.

“Why?”

She met Nevarn’s gaze. “Because I was there when Darius released the Shavln. Because I studied with Ridaln. She wants me close so that she can see if there’s anything I can tell her about them.” There was another thing that she wondered about, though she wasn’t sure whether the Raven Queen was that cunning.

Sophie had been ignorant. That ignorance was dangerous. She was aware of that.

Taking a deep breath, she turned her attention to the stairs and started back up them.

Nevarn let her go past, saying nothing.

Eventually, he caught up to her and headed past her, leading toward the upper reaches of the tower. Once on the queen's landing, he headed off and paused in front of the double doors to her apartment. They were nearly as ornately decorated as the doors into the tower, with more depictions of the gods, a series of symbols that reflected their various powers. Sophie found her gaze drawn to Darish before she squeezed her eyes shut and readied for whatever irritation she might receive from Thea.

There were no guards stationed here. Sophie had found that incredible the first time that she had come here, but then she'd remembered that the Raven Queen was incredibly powerful with her magic, and she wouldn't necessarily need to have guards. What would guards be able to do to protect her that she couldn't do for herself?

This reminded Sophie of the way that Jalyn had been instructing her. She had been trying to convince Sophie that she needed to continue to master her connection to magic, if only to use it were she to encounter something more dangerous. A sword might benefit her, but only if she ran out of magic. Until then, her magic was her best weapon.

Nevarn knocked on the doors, though he had barely started when they opened. He glanced over at Sophie. "Come on."

She hesitated. Sophie wasn't accustomed to feeling such nervousness, but there was something about the Raven Queen that left her unsettled.

The antechamber was decorated quite formally. Marble tiles covered the floor, gleaming brightly as Sophie took a few steps inside. Lanterns glowed with a soft orange light, though not firelight. Magic light. There was also a velvet chair and a table stacked with papers.

Nevarn hurried past, heading toward the second set of doors.

Once there, he started to knock, but the doors opened again.

“I never get used to that,” he muttered, glancing briefly at Sophie.

She’d only ever been in the antechamber before, never the queen’s private quarters. These weren’t her sleeping quarters. Sophie had no idea where those were. Probably behind some hidden door off these rooms.

In some ways, this room reminded her of Ridaln and the way that he had decorated his tower room in Neylash. There were strange artifacts set on shelves lining the walls. A table occupied much of the center of the room, and while there were books and papers stacked on top of it, it was the sculptures and metallic artifacts and bowls and other items that drew Sophie’s attention.

The queen leaned over the table, staring down into one of the bowls.

“What is it, Nevarn?” she asked.

“Hello, Mother,” he said.

The queen looked up, turning toward him and crossing her arms. “I am a little bit busy, as you can imagine. So I apologize for being forthright.”

“I brought Sophie Varison with me.”

The queen flicked her gaze past Nevarn and held Sophie for a moment with her eyes. “I don’t know where he is,” she said. “And we can’t risk Jalyn or Magnus going after him. They have another assignment.”

Sophie’s breath caught. “You know that he’s missing?”

*Why can’t Jalyn go after Lan?*

“I saw the horse return. I realize that it’s the one Lannerdon departed with. Unfortunately, my Sight is not strong enough to show me where he is.”

Sophie hadn't even considered that the queen might have enough magic to be able to track Lan. She should have thought about that before now.

"It's not about her brother," Nevarn said, "though I'm sure that if you do see anything, Sophie would be pleased to know what has happened to him."

The Raven Queen looked over at her son. She was a beautiful woman. Breathtaking. Her black cloak matched her hair, which hung down and gave her a truly regal appearance. A gold chain hung from her neck, a pendant in the shape of a massive raven attached to it.

"As I said, I am preoccupied. If that is all you came for—"

"Sophie saw something," Nevarn said quickly. "Perhaps *felt* something might be more accurate."

The Raven Queen looked over at Sophie. "What did you feel?"

Sophie took a deep breath and steadied her nerves. Now wasn't the time to allow nerves to get the better of her. "I was practicing the huran pose, and when I released it, I detected something far from the city. It made me think of the Shavln."

"The Shavln hasn't been seen or felt since you released it."

Sophie resisted the urge to argue with the Raven Queen, as arguing wouldn't accomplish anything. *She* hadn't been the one to release the Shavln, though she had been there, and she was at least partially responsible, as much as she hated to admit that.

"I don't know what it is, but it's nothing that I've ever detected before."

"Show me."

Sophie blinked. "What? I'm not sure that I can—"

The Raven Queen came around the table to grab Sophie by the arm and guide her toward a window that looked down upon the city. The view was familiar to Sophie, as she had often spent time atop the tower. From here, everything seemed smaller and somehow more distant. "Show me."



Sophie could feel her heart racing. She glanced behind her, noting Nevarn watching.

He had been watching her when she had done the huran pose before. She could do it again, couldn't she? At least she'd had enough rest now.

"Are you sure?" Sophie asked.

"If you came to bother me with something you detected, then you need to have the confidence to prove it."

A surge of irritation flared within Sophie.

She started to form the huran pose.

It was complicated, and almost immediately her thighs began to burn. She had used it too many times already today, and her body rebelled, not wanting her to maintain the same posture.

Sophie ignored it.

She ignored the sense of Nevarn watching her. She ignored the sense of the Raven Queen watching her. She focused only on the power that she was calling upon through the pose.

If she did this, and if she was able to detect whatever it was out there, then maybe the Raven Queen would help her find Lan.

She moved her arms, twisting in such a way that the power started to flow from her.

From there, she twisted again, and the energy around her shifted.

Power was building up within her.

It was a familiar sensation from when she had done the pose this morning, and she shifted her posture slightly to draw upon even more power. When it built to the point where it needed to be released, she lifted her foot and sent it out the window.

There was something missing, though.

Sophie had done something differently this morning, though she wasn't sure what it was.

She started to turn toward the Raven Queen when she felt resistance against the released energy.

Sophie turned her attention back to the window, feeling for it.

It was faint. A trace of something unpleasant.

"There," she whispered.

She didn't dare move. Holding this pose allowed her to maintain that trickle of a connection, but the moment that she released some of the energy, she would lose it. Until she had proven she had detected something to the Raven Queen, Sophie didn't want to release anything.

"Where?" The Raven Queen stood next to her, practically leaning on her shoulder.

Sophie didn't dare move. "To the west. I can feel it, though I can't see anything."

Power built from the Raven Queen. It resembled what Sophie did, though she didn't see the Raven Queen moving into any sort of pose or posture. Instead, she simply summoned power and then released it out the window in the same way that Sophie had. When it stretched away, it added to what Sophie was holding. The Raven Queen's magic was far more controlled. It was far more exquisite.

When it met the same resistance Sophie had detected, the Raven Queen stiffened.

"Did you detect it?" Sophie asked.

"How did you sense that?" the Raven Queen asked.

"I had been trying to maintain this pose for the better part of the morning." Truth be told, it had been the better part of several days, though she didn't want the Raven Queen to know that. Given what she suspected of the Raven Queen, it was possible that she already knew just how much Sophie had been struggling. "I released it earlier in the morning, when I was distracted." She shot Nevarn a look that he ignored. "Then I

attempted it again, trying to be as controlled as I could be with that power. Something changed that time.”

“What did you feel had changed?”

“There was a connection. A stream of power that lingered.” Sophie shrugged. She wasn’t sure how to describe it in any other way. “When it reached that distant resistance...” Sophie sighed, leaning on the windowsill as she looked into the distance, but there was nothing out there. Even now, the memory of that strange resistance was there, though she had no idea what it meant or why she had detected it so clearly.

“You believe this is Darius?”

Sophie hesitated to answer. “I don’t know. I know what Darius was trying to do, and I know there hasn’t been any sign of him using the Shavln, but this is something new. And if it’s not the Shavln, then what is it?”

“I don’t know,” the Raven Queen said.

Sophie detected the note of frustration in the Raven Queen’s voice. It was a familiar note to Sophie, a tone that she knew all too well.

“Should we go and investigate?”

The Raven Queen looked at her. “We?”

“I’m happy to go. If there’s anything out there that we should be concerned about—”

“Others will look into this. You should be focused on your studies, Sophie Varison. That is the way that you can help.”

“But what I detected—”

“Is nothing to be concerned about.” The Raven Queen nodded to Nevarn. “Now, if the two of you don’t mind, I need to return to my work.” She headed over to the table and looked down into the bowl. “If I find anything about your brother, I will be sure to send word. I’m certain the Taihg will come upon him.”

Sophie sighed, waiting for another moment, but the Raven Queen ignored them.

Nevarn touched her elbow, guiding her away. Once they were past the antechamber, the doors closed behind them. Sophie looked back.

“I’m sorry, Sophie. I thought she might be more accommodating.”

“She was accommodating. She wanted to know if I really had detected something. And at least I know that I wasn’t imagining it.”

“You thought you were?”

“I don’t even know. My brother is missing. There’s some strange power out there. And your mother—the Raven Queen—doesn’t know what it is.”

“She said it wasn’t the Shavln.” Nevarn motioned for her to follow, and she started down the stairs. “That was what you were concerned about, wasn’t it?”

Sophie *had* been concerned about the Shavln, and she knew that she should be reassured by the idea that it wasn’t that power, but whatever it was remained out there. And her brother was missing.

She’d been looking for a purpose.

She could stay in the tower, but Sophie knew that she would not be able to focus knowing what she had felt, especially knowing that Lan was missing.

The Taihg weren’t going to help. The Raven Queen wasn’t going to help.

Sophie would have to do it.

She knew it was foolish to consider, but what choice did she have?

Nearing the level where her room was, she glanced at Nevarn.

“Thanks for your help,” she said.

“That’s it?”

“What more do you think I need to do or say?”

“I don’t know. How about telling me that you aren’t going to go after your brother? How about telling me that you aren’t going to go after this strange power that you detected? How about—”

“I’m not going to do either of those things,” she said.

“I wish I could believe you.”

He waited at her door, and Sophie pushed it open. Once inside, she smiled at Nevarn. “You don’t have to just stand there. I’m going to be fine,” she said.

“Oh, that’s a relief. Then I don’t have to worry about you doing something a little foolish?”

She flashed a smile. “I’d never do anything foolish.”

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# CHAPTER 14

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Lan paused beside a stream.

He crouched down next to the gently burbling water to take a drink, but something made him hesitate. Maybe it was instinct, or perhaps it was the way the grass next to the stream looked wrong. He ran his fingers along the stalks, and they felt almost oily.

There was something wrong here.

He couldn't drink the water, but maybe he could follow it and find his way out.

During his walk, he'd seen no sign of the Hunter—or the Mistress of the Woods.

That should reassure him, but so far, nothing had reassured him.

He was thirsty. Hungry. And he was tired.

All of that put him in danger.

As he followed the stream, it seemed as if the trees had given it a wide berth, as if they were afraid of growing too close to the water. *Or they have moved away from it.*

That was the kind of story that Sophie liked. A story where trees could move, but that was the kind of story that was impossible.

But was it?

Lan had seen magic, and he understood that there were powers in the world that he did not truly comprehend. Maybe

gods still walked the earth, and who would ever put it past the gods to give trees the ability to move?

Lan moved quickly.

As he did, his mind wandered. He thought back to the attack, the strangeness of it, and every so often, the soft rumbling would echo through the forest and make him think of it again.

The forest seemed to be empty, though he already knew that it was not. His time in the forest had shown him that not only was there the Mistress of the Woods and the Hunter, but there were whoever had whispered. The voices of the trees that the Hunter had mentioned. Lan had heard nothing more from them—certainly nothing that would suggest that they trailed him.

The rumbling persisted, picking up intensity, and Lan looked into the distance, trying to make sense of what he was hearing. The steady rumbling came over and again. Lan worried that he might find himself caught in a storm. Of course, had he not undergone the attack before, he might have thought the same thing then. This time, he believed he understood just what it was.

Lan trailed the stream. Darkness began to fall, and he knew he wasn't going to be able to escape from the forest before night came. Lan moved away from the stream and situated himself near a tree, resting his back up against it.

He wanted to rest, but he didn't want to rest so deeply that he wouldn't be awake if anything were to happen near him. He had no idea whether there was anything to be concerned about, but he did question whether there might be something else in the forest. If the Mistress of the Woods came for him again, Lan didn't think he could count on the Hunter to save him.

Every so often, the rumbling came. It seemed to be distant, but when he felt it, Lan recognized there was danger within it. That had to be the thisten, but it didn't seem to be close to him.

He drifted.



Dreams came to him. They were unpleasant dreams. He went back to his first days as a soldier. Lan had such dreams often, dreams of pain and suffering, nothing at all like what he had once envisioned his days of serving as a soldier to be. It wasn't until he reached the Taihg and was able to train with them that Lan had felt as if he truly belonged.

But did he?

He was still an outsider. So was his sister. Could they ever truly belong with these people?

When he woke, he did so with a start.

Darkness had fallen in full.

It matched the dream he had been having. In the dream, Lan had seen the inside of the cell where he'd been imprisoned, forced to fight his way to freedom. That he had survived seemed to be more dumb luck than anything else.

Lan started to drift again.

More dreams came to him. Fighting. Violence.

When he came awake, he trembled. Faces of people he'd lost drifted across his mind.

Mostly they were family, but there were others. Soldiers he'd fought alongside. Men whose names stayed with him. There had been Kragen, one of his first Taihg instructors. He had been slaughtered, leaving Lan to realize that anyone could die when it came to fighting Neylash.

That was what he wanted to do. Lan wanted nothing more than to ensure his own safety, but at the same time, he felt as if he needed to do more.

He needed to fight more.

Drifting again, he fell into a fitful slumber. No more did those torturous dreams come to him, though every so often, when he jerked awake, he remembered snippets of what he had seen. Nothing clear—at least, not clear enough that he could make it out.

When he leaned his head back, staring out into the night, he noticed a faint glow. Lan sat up, fear coursing through him.

The last time that he'd seen a glowing like that had been when the Mistress of the Woods had come. He didn't know whether the glowing was her again or whether it represented something else. When the Mistress of the Woods had come to him, she had used the glowing to draw him in, making it seem as if she were some benevolent creature of the forest.

Lan didn't believe that about her now. He didn't know anything about the Mistress of the Woods. He only knew that the voices he'd heard feared her. That was reason enough for *him* to fear her.

Lan tested his arm. It throbbed a little, though not nearly as much as it had before. It suggested to him that he had recovered, at least as much as he could recover.

Lan started off, heading toward the source of the light. It might be a mistake to go in that direction, but he needed to know if he had anything to fear out here. He needed to know if the Mistress of the Woods followed him. If it was the Hunter, then Lan needed to know that as well.

Thunder came again, though this time the ground trembled.

That troubled him. If the rumbling came from all around, then the thisten might surprise him, spring up on him. He didn't know if the rumbling represented the thisten, though it seemed similar enough to what he had experienced when the thisten had come.

It was different from the rumbling of thunder. Somehow Lan could feel the difference. He didn't know how else to describe it. He only knew that he detected a distinctness to it, something that called to him.

He hesitated. Was it really calling to him?

That seemed to be dangerous. The light that he'd seen from the Mistress of the Woods had called to him as well. In that light, he had known there was danger, and there hadn't

been anything that he could do about it. She had incapacitated him so quickly that Lan had been as helpless as a child to her.

The glowing seemed closer.

Lan had to know.

Maybe it was the Mistress of the Woods, and if so, he needed to be ready.

He unsheathed his sword, his arm no longer throbbing.

He stalked forward, moving toward the pale light.

It brought him away from the stream. Lan wondered if that was potentially a mistake. He'd been following the stream for the better part of the last day, and by doing so, he thought the stream was guiding him—if nothing else, giving him a sense of purpose and direction.

Staying near the stream would be the wiser choice, though Lan didn't know if anything was wise at this point. He moved on, holding his sword at the ready.

Wind picked up.

A soft and steady murmuring called to him, drawing his attention.

That seemed significant to Lan, though he wasn't sure if it was something he needed to be concerned about. Maybe it was nothing more than the same whispering he'd heard when he had encountered the Mistress of the Woods. That whispering had been a warning, though would it be a similar one now?

“If there's anything I need to fear, please let me know,” he uttered.

Lan felt a little bit foolish doing so. He was talking to the forest around him, talking to the trees, but he thought there was a response. However, that might have only been his imagination.

The trees cast strange shadows as they moved.

Every so often, the branches swung, the wind gusting briefly, and Lan learned quickly to twist out of the way. It was as if the forest itself were attacking him. Rumbling punctuated

some of the attacks. Lan had to believe he was not being chased by the thisten.

“Is there anything out there?” he whispered to the trees again.

There was no answer.

Lan moved deeper into the forest. He glanced behind him and wondered if he would be able to find the stream again. Perhaps it didn't matter. Lan had been unwilling to tempt danger drinking from the stream.

Something glistened on the ground in front of him. It was another stream. Lan didn't think that he had circled around, which meant that this was a different stream. How far had he walked, then?

He followed the faint light in the distance, thinking that he might find something up ahead.

He didn't go very far before he found another stream.

This was odd.

Lan was no tracker, but even he recognized that streams were not so frequent as this in a forest. Maybe in a swamp, but he wouldn't have expected so many here. He crouched next to this one, leaning close and breathing in. The very first stream had made him think it was oily and wrong, but there was something here that also smelled oily.

And as he looked down, he saw that the stream ran through grass.

That was even more odd.

This was a new stream.

Something had redirected the flow of water.

And the grass surrounding the stream was just as sickly as the grass that he had seen at the first stream. He stood, wiping his hands on his pants.

What happened here?

Maybe this was tied to the Hunter and the Mistress of the Woods.

Whatever it was, Lan wanted nothing to do with it.

Thunder rumbled, echoing through his boots, as if trembling the ground.

He moved on and found another stream, and then another. He started paying more attention to them and realized that each of the streams he came across had to be new. Maybe even the first one had been. As he stood looking, he realized the soft white light he saw in the distance was not reflected in the streams. Instead, they carried streaks of darkness that reminded him of the Mistress of the Woods when she had revealed herself.

He jumped across the latest stream, moving more quickly now.

Lan started to cover ground with bounding leaps, racing toward the glowing light in the distance.

He didn't know if he was getting any closer to it, but he felt he needed to keep moving. When he came across another stream, he glanced down, realizing that it had the same darkness streaking through it.

The thunder became much more rhythmic, regular, and as Lan moved, it seemed to him that the thunder was chasing him, driving him toward the glowing light in the distance.

The glowing intensified even more.

Lan started to slow.

He stepped in a stream that he hadn't seen.

He jerked his foot, and it seemed as if the mud and muck at the bottom of the stream tried to hold on to him, clinging to him. When he managed to get his foot free, he realized that he needed to be more careful. If the streams were touched by the power of the Mistress of the Woods, then he needed to be cautious.

He continued forward, heading toward the light.

Rain started to slip through the treetops. Lan tipped his head back, opening his mouth to let the rainwater drip into his throat. He didn't know whether the streams were safe—and given what he'd seen in his time in the forest, he doubted that they were—but he believed the rainwater would be.

The storm intensified. Wind whipped around him, tearing at his cloak, tearing at his hair, and it made even holding his sword with any sort of steady grip difficult. Lan had to keep moving, and with the ongoing, relentless storm, he believed that he had to move more quickly.

He nearly overlooked another stream, and he skittered to a stop beside it.

This one was wider than the others. It was more of a river, though it was surprising that it would be here in the middle of the forest. It cut through the trees, heading in a curve, and it was wide enough that Lan wasn't going to be able to simply jump over it.

The glowing came from the other side of the river. It was bright enough that Lan wanted to see what it was, but far enough away that he couldn't. Shadows moved in the river, swirling along with the water.

Lan stood there for a moment, studying it, trying to decide whether he even wanted to venture across the river, as the thunder continued to crash. He listened to it and felt the rain and the wind and the energy all around him, and he knew that he wanted to cross.

He needed to cross.

The trees on the other side stayed away from the river's edge, much like the trees on this side did. They weren't close enough to use to swing across.

That was if Lan would even be able to get up one to attempt something like that. He had no idea if he had the strength, or if his arm had recovered enough to allow him to do so.

There was no way to cross other than swimming the river.

There was a whisper, but within that whisper was something else.

Fear.

He recognized that fear, and he had heard it before. It came from the voices all around him, the voices of the tress that the Hunter claimed.

*She comes.*

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# CHAPTER 15

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Lan didn't dare linger too long. With the thunder and the rain and the gusting wind, he needed shelter, but it was more than that which drove him now. If the Mistress of the Woods came, he doubted the Hunter would be there to protect him again. Lan was going to have to find his way to safety on his own. The steady whispering came behind him, warning him.

*She comes. She comes. She comes.*

It came with an increased urgency, driving him forward.

Lan knew that he needed to follow where the voices were guiding him.

He would have to risk the water.

He started down the riverbank. It became increasingly rocky the farther he descended. The sound of the river rushing past him intensified. It was gushing through here, carving out its path. The farther he went, the more slippery the rocks became.

He used his sword to keep his balance. At one point, Lan teetered on one of the rocks and almost fell forward, but he succeeded in standing back upright. He hurried on, making his way as carefully as he could. The pale light on the other side of the river had a hard time penetrating the shadows. The steep banks shielded the river from the light.

He reached the rocks just above the surface of the water. Lan stood for a moment, waiting, trying to gauge just how far

he would have to jump. He didn't want to linger too long, especially with the whispering behind him persisting.

*She comes. She comes. She comes.*

He was going to have to jump.

No section of the river looked any narrower than others, but he had an idea.

He began to grab some of the rocks stacked on the shore of the river. He started throwing them in. The first few splashed and then sank. He kept grabbing more rocks. The sound behind him, the urgency in the voices from the trees, persisted, and he hurriedly threw as many of the rocks into the water as he could, hoping to form some sort of bridge.

Lan continued grabbing rocks, tossing them into the river, one after another. His back throbbed, and his injured arm ached, but he ignored the pain and just put all his effort into the task.

Every time he took a break, the murmuring picked up.

*She comes. She comes. She comes.*

He threw the rocks as quickly as he could.

Thunder rumbled. Rain poured down. His hands burned where the stones had scraped him.

With another loud crash of thunder, the murmuring fell silent.

There was the wind behind him, a steady rumble, but nothing else.

She was here. A soft and terrifying growl began to fill the forest.

This wasn't the Mistress of the Woods.

Whatever he heard now came from something else.

Lan grabbed for some boulders, pushing them, trying to roll them forward. The sound of the river was louder now that he had stacked up rocks within it, damming it.

Lan didn't dare turn to look.

It had to be the thisten.

Fear coursed through him. It was a primal fear, the same terror he had felt when the creature had attacked him before. He remembered how difficult it had been to inflict any damage.

If the thisten scrambled down the bank, Lan wouldn't be able to do anything.

He looked down at the water and made a decision. He was going to have to cross, to risk the water, regardless of how much of a bridge he had made.

He took a step.

As he stood on the rock, water rushed past him. It was cold, and the rain streaked down, mixing with it, running down his face, down his back. Lan tried to ignore the sensation, focusing only on the steadiness of the rock, trying to make sure that he didn't slip and fall.

The rock held.

The growling came again, this time closer.

Lan hazarded a glance behind him and saw the thisten—at least, the shadowy form of the thisten—heading down the slope. In the darkness, Lan could only make out the enormity of the creature scrambling toward him. He wouldn't be able to do anything against a creature like that.

Lan took another step. The rock held.

Another step.

The thisten growled behind him, a deep and rumbling sound. He moved forward again, and this time he stood teetering on the edge of a rock. The next rock held, as did the next, but he started to slide.

Lan jumped.

He was close enough to the other side that he thought that he might be able to make it. When he landed, his feet slipped for a moment. He teetered at the edge of the river. Lan remained motionless, afraid to move.

The thisten rumbled behind him.

Lan hazarded a glance over his shoulder. The thisten stood beside the water.

His feet slipped again, so he threw himself forward onto the riverbank. When he landed, he rolled over to look back at the far shore. The thisten stepped into the water.

“Darish curse you,” Lan whispered.

He scrambled up the rock.

His hands burned as he gripped the stones, and at one point, he slipped, but Lan kept moving, knowing that if he didn't, the thisten would get to him.

Another step, and Lan started to slip again.

He unsheathed his sword and used that to secure his footing. After jamming the sword down into the rock, Lan remained in place for a few moments and then teetered again.

He started to fall but held on.

Lan could hear the thisten behind him, but he didn't dare look back, not trusting himself to stay on his feet. As he scrambled forward, he could feel movement near him.

The thisten was almost silent as it waded through the water.

The ground trembled again. It sounded like thunder, but he knew it was caused by the thisten, somehow.

Lan grabbed for the nearest rock, and he started to climb.

He reached the top of the bank. Once there, Lan spun, holding his sword out. The thisten loomed in front of him.

Lan swung his sword a few times, testing whether his injured arm would hold up. If it didn't, he had to be ready for other techniques. He might not be able to sweep through the standard movements that he trained with, but he might be able to stab. If he could do that much, he thought that he could at least deter the thisten.

The creature poked its head above the bank.

Lan jammed his sword forward. It struck something, and the thisten howled.

It was nearly impossible to penetrate the creature's flesh.

It roared again.

The sound hammered in Lan's ears. He backed away, fear filling him.

He clutched the sword, and as the thisten crawled forward, heedless of the blade Lan held out, Lan backed away. Each step carried him farther from the river, and he would have thought each step would carry him closer to safety, but the thisten stalked forward.

He couldn't escape.

He had no way of even harming this creature.

Lan darted to the side, then stepped forward with the sword again.

He missed, but at least his advance forced the thisten back.

It was the first time that Lan had seen the thisten moving away from an attack.

Lan slipped forward, sweeping his blade up, and he jabbed at the thisten, but it snarled, snapping this time.

Lan jerked the sword back, preventing the thisten from getting to it, and he managed to keep the blade in hand.

The thisten snarled at him, lunging toward the sword.

Lan dropped low, bringing his sword up and around.

When the thisten grabbed at it as it had the last time, Lan drove the blade up toward the thisten's mouth, into its throat. The thisten roared, but the blade carved through flesh.

Lan tried to force his blade as deep into the thisten as he could, without success. It prowled along the riverbank, giving Lan one possibility—he might be able to force it over the edge and into the river.

Lan didn't believe that the fall would be fatal. He'd seen just how difficult it was to even harm the thisten. What he had

to hope for was that he might be able to catch the creature in a way that the water would sweep it downstream.

Lan feinted in one direction, then darted the other way, twisting his sword around.

He connected with the creature's neck.

The thisten jerked its head back, roaring.

Lan slammed his sword toward the thisten's mouth.

His blade slipped deeper than it had.

The creature jerked back, roaring again. He darted toward it.

This time, rather than feinting, he barreled toward the creature. It would be unexpected. The thisten had seen Lan attack and then retreat, but this time, there would be no retreat.

He slammed his sword into the thisten's side.

The blade bounced off the thick hide.

That wasn't the point of the attack, though.

He slammed his shoulder into the creature and then darted back.

The momentum carried the thisten over the ledge.

The creature landed in the water on its back. It looked like a turtle lying there, legs kicking, thrashing. The force of the current carried the thisten away from him, and Lan could finally relax.

# CHAPTER 16

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The stable was dark and smelled of hay and dung. Sophie was tempted to light a lantern but decided against it, not wanting to draw attention. She hesitated at the doorway, a sliver of doubt creeping into her mind.

*What am I thinking?*

She knew what she was thinking. Her brother still hadn't returned. Regardless of what Jalyn had claimed earlier in the day, the Taihg still weren't sure what had happened to him. In the day since he'd been gone, there had been no sign of him.

It had taken her the rest of the day to gather everything she needed in order to go after him. She figured she would need food and water, and acquiring them without drawing attention had required some work on her part. She thought she'd been discreet, but she wouldn't know until she got away—and was able to stay away without anyone noticing.

The other thing that she needed to bring with her was a book of poses. It was a complicated book, but she believed that she'd be able to practice with it enough that she could master some of the more dangerous positions. Away from the tower, there wouldn't be any reason for her *not* to practice her poses.

Stepping into the stables, she committed herself to this.

The stallion would still be here. As far as she knew, Nevarn hadn't moved him back to the barracks, and seeing as Nevarn was the one who had brought the horse here, she doubted that anyone would be willing to risk his anger by



taking him back. That was one advantage of having been followed by the prince.

Sophie crept along the stalls until she found the one she was looking for. The moonlight streaming into the stable was the only light she dared have. It was late enough that any other light would be far too noticeable. Better for her to remain in the dark.

A shadow loomed in the doorway.

She whispered a quick prayer to Darish.

Maybe it would only be the stable master noticing that the door was open and thinking that he'd left it ajar. If so, she could wait until he closed up, gather the horse, and then lead him away. The only thing she'd have to worry about then would be the sound of the horse's hooves clapping on the cobbles, but there wasn't any way to avoid that.

"I know you're in here, Sophie."

She stiffened. "Nevarn?"

He stepped into the stables and held out an orb that cast a soft white light. "What are you doing? Wait. I know the answer to that. Why do you think you need to do this?"

"Because no one else is going to find my brother."

"You don't know that. You have to give the Taihg time."

She pulled open the stall and grabbed the saddle hanging on a hook near the back. It wouldn't be a great fit for her—Lan was a much larger man—but it would work. When she *did* find Lan—and she would—then he could take the horse again.

Maybe she should bring a second horse with her for when she found him.

But two horses would be too difficult to keep control of. It would be better to stick with the single horse, and then they could ride double on the way back to the city.

"The Taihg might be looking, but they don't know that there's something dangerous out there."

“*You* don’t know that there’s something dangerous out there.”

He took a step toward her, still holding the orb up.

If he tried to stop her, Sophie might have to use a pose to prevent him from succeeding. She didn’t like that idea and thought that it would end up with her getting into trouble, but now that she’d committed to the plan, she was determined to make it work.

“I know what I detected. Your mother detected it as well.”

“She didn’t know what it was. Are you saying that you know more than the Raven Queen?”

Sophie hesitated before continuing to strap the saddle onto the stallion. He stood in place, letting her work without any complaint. This wasn’t the kind of horse that would have tossed her brother, regardless of what Jalyn had claimed about the level of training the horse had.

“I don’t know more than her, but I recognize that there’s something out there I need to better understand.” Whether that something was anything to be concerned about, it didn’t matter, as she was still going after her brother.

Nevarn reached the stall.

She waited for him to reveal his intention. She didn’t know whether he would argue with her and try to keep her from leaving or whether he would let her pass.

“If you’re going, then I’m going with you.”

“You’re *what*?”

Nevarn rested his hands on the stall door. “I’m going with you.”

“Why would you do that?”

Nevarn looked into the stall at the stallion. “If you believe your brother needs you that badly, then maybe he does. Besides, if you’re wrong, this will only take a few days, and I’ll get a chance to ride alongside you during that time.”

Sophie grabbed the bridle for the horse and started fitting it. “There are plenty of women who would love the attention from you.”

“You’re not one of them?”

She shook her head. “For your sake, I wish that I were, but I’m just not.”

Nevarn laughed. “What makes you think I’m giving you any sort of attention? It could be that I’m only willing to come along to make sure you aren’t working with the Shavln. There are rumors, you know.”

Sophie turned away, hiding her irritation, though she doubted that she did as good a job at it as she wanted. “Thanks for reminding me.”

She pushed on the stall door, using a hint of a pose to add to her strength. The combination was enough that the door snapped open, and Nevarn went flying to the side.

She ignored him lying there, and she gathered the reins and led the stallion out of the stall. She paused a moment to close the stall door, and from there she headed out into the night.

Sophie glanced up at the tower for one moment before leading the stallion away.

She was acutely aware of how loud his hooves sounded on the cobblestones, but at this point, she didn’t care. The only thing that she cared about was getting out of the city.

There came an echo, as if the sound of the horse’s hooves were bouncing off the buildings, and she glanced back to see that Nevarn was following her. He guided a large gray horse, already saddled, and he was moving quickly. When he caught up to her, he glanced over.

“That’s the way you’re going to be?” he asked.

“I didn’t say you could come with me,” she said.

“You didn’t say I couldn’t.”

“You can’t come with me.”

“Too bad. I’m your prince.”

“You’re not my prince. I’m not from here.”

“You live here. You serve within the tower. You are subject to our laws.”

Sophie sighed. “Please don’t make this difficult.”

“Then stop arguing with me.”

She glared at him for a moment before noticing the long sword sheathed at his waist. His heavy traveling cloak barely concealed it. She’d seen Nevarn sparring before, and she knew that he was incredibly gifted with the blade. The Taihg would have gladly welcomed him, though he suspected that his mother was the reason that he wasn’t permitted to join.

It might be wise of Sophie to have someone like him with her.

*Magic and steel.*

There were times when magic could be countered, and she had to believe that having somebody like him, with his swordsmanship, would be beneficial.

Sophie turned away. “I wish I knew this horse’s name,” she said.

“Joralt,” Nevarn said.

“How do you know?”

“I asked Jalyn.”

It was so simple, and yet Sophie had been so focused on Lan and his disappearance.

“Is that you?” Sophie whispered, leaning toward the horse and patting him on the neck. “Are you Joralt?”

The horse nickered and shook his head slightly.

She looked over at Nevarn, who only shrugged.

By the time they reached the edge of the city, it was well past late. The streets were quiet, and lights glowed softly within windows.

Sophie looked back, hesitating. As soon as she left, she ran the risk of angering the Raven Queen. It might be better that

Nevarn was with her. When she returned—with Lan, she was determined—having him along would at least potentially placate anyone who might be angry at her sudden departure.

She paused a moment to climb into the saddle, and Nevarn quickly climbed into his. Neither of them spoke as they started off.

“I didn’t know that you and your brother were so close,” Nevarn said as the city grew more distant.

“He’s the only one I have left,” she said.

“What happened to your parents?”

Sophie looked over before turning her attention back to the road. She didn’t have any idea if she was heading in the right direction. She only knew that this was the direction in which she had sensed the strange resistance to her magic. By following that sense, she had to think that she would at least come across what she had detected. Her other hope was that having Joralt along with her might allow her to use the horse to guide her toward Lan.

“I don’t really know what happened to my parents. There was a time when I thought that I did, but the more I consider them—and my grandparents—the more I realize that I didn’t really know them at all.”

Sophie paused. She hadn’t thought about her parents in a while. She was young when they had been lost, and Nana and Papa hadn’t spoken much about what had happened. They had mentioned the war, but only through stories. Sophie suspected there was more to it, but now she would never know.

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“We have time. If we’re riding out in the middle of the night, I’m going to need you to at least talk with me so that I can stay awake.”

“Am I disrupting your beauty sleep?”

“You think I’m beautiful?”

Sophie groaned and turned away. “If you’re so tired, then you should head back. I’m sure that you can be back in bed and sleeping before anyone knows that you’re missing.”

“They already know that I’m missing,” Nevarn said.

“What?”

“I left word that I was leaving the city for a few days.”

Sophie blinked. “You did *what?*”

“My mother would be quite irritated if I simply disappeared. It’s better for me to have left some notice.”

“Won’t they come after you?”

“I’m old enough that I’m allowed out on my own to venture through the countryside, Sophie.”

“I’m not saying that. I guess...” Sophie wasn’t entirely sure what she was saying. She knew that with the threat of attacks, it didn’t make sense for royalty to be wandering alone. It was too much of a risk to expose Nevarn—the heir—to a potential attack. “What happens if we get close to the border with Lorant?”

“If we’re going after your brother, then we need to go close to the border. That’s where he supposedly disappeared.”

“You don’t fear that?”

“Do you?”

Sophie shook her head. “I spent plenty of time in Neylash.”

“You don’t talk about it much.”

“Should I? There are too many people within the tower that question my loyalty.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Thanks,” she said.

“Seeing as you just stated moments ago that you don’t recognize my authority, it’s not altogether surprising that people would question your loyalty.”

“I think it has more to do with the fact that Ridaln was training me.”

“Ridaln was training Jalyn as well.”

“I know, but she’s served.”

“You don’t think that you serve?”

The horse moved steadily, rocking her from side to side. She wondered if she might be more comfortable with a different saddle. This one was stiff, and she could easily imagine Lan and how he rode atop the horse with this saddle. Her feet barely reached the stirrups, and that was even after she had hitched them up.

“I practice the magic that they want me to learn. I do all that I can to master it, but I don’t feel that I’m serving in any way that is beneficial to your mother.”

“You want to serve my mother?”

“It’s not that I want to serve her so much as I want to do what I need to in order to prevent the Shavln from harming anyone.”

“She has said that the Karell haven’t seen any activity.”

“The Shavln is a power, Nevarn, not a people. The Karell might miss a power.” Like they had before, she didn’t add. Sophie looked over at him, and when he met her gaze, she shook her head. “What if the Karell aren’t able to detect the Shavln? I was there. I felt the power.” She shivered as she spoke, remembering just how much power had been there that night, the way that it had been unleashed, and the terror that she had known. “I realize that I’m not necessarily someone that can be trusted after what happened, but I still recognize the danger.”

Silence fell between them.

“My mother wanted me to keep an eye on you,” Nevarn said.

Sophie looked over. “Is that why you’re with me?”

“When you first came to the city, there were questions about you, as you have already recognized. She tested you herself.”

“What do you mean, she tested me?”

“I don’t really know. When it comes to my mother and the kind of magic that she’s able to wield, I am in the dark.” Nevarn shrugged. “I’ve never really had a talent with it. I think it disappoints her that I don’t take after her in that way. She keeps trying.”

“She tested me?” Sophie said again.

She should have known that something like that had happened, but she hadn’t been aware of it. How could she have been aware of it? She barely understood magic herself, and with someone like the Raven Queen, someone who had such exquisite control over magic, testing her would have been an easy thing to have done without Sophie knowing.

“You didn’t know?”

Sophie shook her head. “When I first came here, everything was overwhelming. The people. What I’d learned. Losing Oleda.” She thought of the cook often. She thought more often of Ridaln, wondering whether he had lived or died. She thought of Darius, the power that he had released, and the strange joy it had brought him.

“You don’t have to keep an eye on me anymore,” Sophie said.

“I know. I was only supposed to watch you for the first couple of weeks. You were so intriguing.”

“Thanks.”

“I mean that as a compliment. I have never known anyone quite like you, and yet here you were, someone who was locked up in Neylash, tormented by Ridaln, attacked by Darius, and yet you remain so strong.”

“I wasn’t tormented quite as much as you may think.”

“We know what kind of person Ridaln was.”



“*I’m* not even sure what kind of person Ridaln was,” she said.

“How can you say that after being held captive by him?”

Sophie sighed. What she knew of Ridaln was that he had been used, in much the same way as she had been used. Darius had been his mentor, but Ridaln hadn’t wanted to release the Shavln. He had been grumpy, stubborn, but she believed he had been a good man.

“It’s because I was held by him that I can say it. Were it not for Ridaln, I wouldn’t have known anything about magic. He recognized the power within me. He was the first one to show a willingness to teach me.”

“There are others who would’ve identified your potential,” Nevarn said.

“I don’t know if they would have or not. I like to think that they would have, but I don’t know. In Neylash, at least, the only one who was capable of detecting my ties to magic was Ridaln.”

“And Darius.”

“I suppose.”

“What was he like?”

“I don’t really know Darius. I knew of him. And I knew Ridaln, so I suppose in some ways, I know him.”

“You knew the king.”

“Know the king,” Sophie corrected.

Nevarn shrugged.

“He was kind to me. I know what you feel about Lorant, but I don’t think they are a bad people. Just different.”

“Because you don’t know the stories of the war,” he said, his voice dropping.

And here Sophie had been focused on the people she had lost, and had forgotten that Nevarn had lost his father during

the war. Nevarn didn't talk about it, but then, he had tried to keep things relaxed between the two of them.

They rode on in silence. It was late, and Sophie drifted, finding herself too tired to stay alert, though she tried. The steady rocking of the horse soothed her, and she was surprised that she was able to sleep sitting upright, though even more surprising was that when she jerked awake, she felt as if she had gotten some rest.

Nevarn didn't look as if he had slept at all. When she woke, he looked over at her.

She glanced around, noting the landscape had changed considerably in the time she'd been out. The moon had shifted in the sky, making her question how long it had been. As far as she knew, they still traveled away from the city and toward the border, but she wasn't entirely certain.

“Feeling better?”

“I felt fine,” she snapped, and immediately regretted it. “I do feel better. Thanks.”

Nevarn turned away, and Sophie wished that she hadn't been so harsh with him. It was difficult not to be, though. In the time she'd been in the city, she'd been viewed the same as Nevarn suggested most of the time. She might have the ability to form the poses and perform magic, but that ability had only raised more questions for those around her.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“You don't know?”

“I haven't traveled much beyond the city since I came here.”

Nevarn looked over at her. “Do you want to?”

Sophie hadn't really thought about it. It wasn't so much that she wasn't allowed. As far as she knew, they would allow her to leave and travel. Rather, it was more about the perception her leaving would present. She wanted to train and learn how to control the magic she'd been learning with Ridaln, and working with people like Parvella and the others

who understood the poses, even if they didn't have the same control over the magic, had been useful.

It wasn't even so much that she wanted to be out on the road. There were parts of tower life she enjoyed. It was much the same as in Neylash. While there, she'd come to enjoy the trappings of a palace. The baths had been amazing, but there had been the food, the people, and generally the *life* within the palace.

All of that was different in Valan, but it was all still familiar to her. If she left the tower, she abandoned those privileges. Perhaps now she had.

All for her brother.

Lan would have wanted her to stay in the tower. Of course, Lan believed he could protect himself. Given his training and how far he'd progressed, Sophie couldn't even argue against that. He probably could protect himself in ways Sophie couldn't even understand.

"I don't know," she said.

"My mother wants me to know all about Reyash, which involves traveling the countryside. She *prefers* that I don't spend too much time near Lorant, but I'm not sure I can learn what I need to without better understanding the people there."

"The people of Lorant are no different than the people of Reyash."

"Other than they want to kill us."

Sophie looked over at him. "The people of Lorant don't want to kill the people of Reyash. They want peace, the same as anyone. It's the leaders who like the fighting and the bloodshed."

Nevarn watched her before turning his attention away. "I wasn't a part of the war, but I've spoken to enough people who were. They all speak about what happens in Lorant. Torture. Maiming. The joy their people get in the attack."

"Do you think your soldiers are so different?"

"I hope they are," Nevarn said.

Sophie laughed a little too loudly for the darkness around her. “You hope, but you don’t know. You probably *can’t* know without traveling with them. War makes people do strange things.”

“You know so much about war?”

“Not really, but I’ve seen the fools who do.”

Sophie waited for Nevarn to say something more, but he didn’t. She began to focus on her poses, trying to pull on power. If she was determined to stay awake, it might be best that she try to engage her mind in a taxing process.

Sitting in the saddle forced her to modify several poses, but she found ways to compensate for that. For the most part, the modifications involved the way she shifted in the saddle, nothing more, but she was able to alter several of the more basic poses. Not anything significant. Sophie didn’t think she’d be able to modify any of the more complicated poses to compensate for the saddle, but the prayer pose and the flag pose were both basic enough that she could try. Power built slowly before she sent it flowing away.

“What are you doing?” Nevarn asked, breaking the silence between them.

“I’m trying to see if I can work magic while riding.”

He nodded. “That’s good.”

“It is?”

“I know you’re still learning. My mother can create magic while running, though she’s been working with magic for her entire life.”

“What’s it like?”

“I wouldn’t know. I told you that I don’t have the same magic she does. It upsets her, but...”

“But what?”

“I don’t necessarily mind. I don’t want to have the same magic. Especially now that I see what you have to go through to learn it.”

“I don’t think everyone in Reyash has to go through what I do in order to learn.”

“The Karell are different,” Nevarn said.

They passed a copse of trees. An enormous forest stretched out in front of them, but the road skirted it rather than heading in. With as dense as the forest looked, Sophie couldn’t imagine her brother riding through it.

“I didn’t know there were so many kinds of magic when I was young,” she said, shrugging slightly. Nevarn glanced at her, though Sophie kept her gaze fixed ahead. “I knew about the Karell and had heard stories of the Pale Princess and the Raven Queen, but I thought they were all the same.”

Nevarn said nothing for little while. “My mother doesn’t speak of power very often, but when she does, she has said there are as many kinds of power as there are gods.”

Sophie frowned. “Are you saying that power comes from the gods?”

“I’m not saying anything. That’s just what my mother has suggested. But it makes sense.”

Sophie considered this for a moment. “What god do the Karell serve?”

Nevarn shrugged. “I figured you would have learned that when you were in Neylash. Didn’t you say there was a Karell there who helped you?”

Sophie smiled at the thought of Oleda. “She was a palace cook. A good one, too, not like some of them in Valan.”

“You haven’t tried all of the cooks in Valan. There’s bound to be one you like.”

“I told you how I found one.” She breathed out. The air was cooler here, and a soft mist flowed out from the forest, giving it something of an otherworldly appearance. “Oleda had been working in the palace for years, from what I was able to tell. She had been there so long that she had become a part of the palace in a way that I think enabled her to be overlooked by everyone.”

“How did you find out that she was a Karell?”

“She revealed it to me,” Sophie said.

“If she was trying to hide in the palace, why would she have revealed that she was a Karell?”

Sophie shook her head, looking over at the forest as they neared it. The mist thickened, and she shivered in the cool air. Sophie wished that she had warmer clothing. She hadn't anticipated this drop in temperature. Within the tower, even on some of the windiest nights, it never got cold, not like this.

Nevarn didn't seem to be bothered by the chill.

That irritated Sophie even more.

“It was after I had been working with Ridaln for a little while. She knew how he had been training me, and I think she was concerned about what that implied for me.”

“What would that have implied for you?”

“He wanted me to keep working with him so that I could learn his magic. At the time, I think Oleda was more concerned about Ridaln than the risk of Darius's return.”

She sighed, squeezing the reins as she stared at the forest. The trees were dark, looming overhead, and she shifted on the horse so that they rode on the far side of the road, away from the trees.

“You did care about him,” Nevarn said.

“Who?”

“Ridaln.”

Sophie shook her head. “It's complicated. I don't know how to feel about Ridaln. He trained me. And he worked with me. I didn't have a sense from him that he was evil, but I also didn't have the sense that anyone from Lorant was evil. They were just people.”

Sophie started to work on one of her poses again, but sitting in the saddle made it difficult to concentrate as well as she needed to. She attempted to turn, holding the pose in a way that would allow her to draw the magic out, but every

time she neared success, the horse would jostle her, and she would lose her focus.

Sophie could imagine her instructors over the years, including Ridaln, chastising her for her lack of focus. It wasn't so much that she had to maintain her focus now. It was more about needing to hold on to the intent. When it came to working with magic, especially the kind of magic that she was working with, intention mattered almost as much as anything else.

“What are you doing?” Nevarn asked.

“Nothing,” she said.

“You keep riding farther and farther away from me. I know there's not much traffic on it these days, but the road is back there,” he said.

Sophie glanced down, realizing that she had guided Joralt away from the road. It had been unintentional, but now that she was farther from the forest, she felt a little bit more comfortable. They hadn't passed many others on their journey. A pair of merchants with an ox cart had skirted around them. A family seated in a wagon had waved at one point. That was it. Sophie wondered as to the reasons, but decided it didn't matter all that much to her.

*Find Lan.*

That was the thought that stayed with her.

“You keep where you are, and I will stay over here,” she said.

“Do you find me so distasteful that you don't even want to ride alongside me?”

“This has nothing to do with you,” she said.

Her gaze was drawn to the forest and to the wisps of mist trailing out of it. The thin moonlight shining down wasn't enough to penetrate the darkness beneath the canopy, and as Sophie studied the trees, she couldn't shake an uneasy sensation.

She found herself holding a pose, trying to call upon power, but there was a strange pressure against her. It was more than just the pressure that would come from attempting to create a modified pose while in the saddle. This was something else. It seemed to come from a resistance to her magic.

That had to be her imagination, but Sophie couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't.

Nevarn shifted his horse, riding closer to her.

"What are you doing?" he whispered.

"I don't like the trees," Sophie said.

"The trees?" He glanced over at the forest, frowning. "What is it about the trees that you don't like?"

"I don't really know. It's just..."

Sophie didn't know how to phrase it. It had to do with the pressure against her, but it also had to do with the darkness within the forest, and the way the trees arched overhead, looming over her.

"If it makes you uncomfortable, we can stay off the road."

Sophie looked over, unable to shake the relief. "I would like that."

They veered away from the road but still used it to guide them. The outskirts of the forest meandered, almost as if trying to push up against the road before failing and retreating. With the mist pressing out from it, Sophie had the sense that the forest was somehow alive, as if it were some malevolent force that wanted to come after her, to ensnare her, to drag her into its depths. It was foolish. She knew that it was foolish, but she couldn't shake the strange sense that she had.

"Have you always been afraid of trees?" Nevarn asked.

"Stop," she said.

"I've never known anyone to be quite so concerned by things like that. I mean, I understand that the forest is dark and terrifying, but—"



“Stop,” she said again.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Sophie shifted in the saddle, positioning herself so that she could look at the forest. As she did, she realized that it wasn’t so much the forest that she needed to pay attention to; it was the mist that drifted out from between the branches. Perhaps that was what troubled her.

“Have you ever traveled in there?” she asked.

“That is the Devlar Forest.”

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

“I guess that since you are not from Reyash, it wouldn’t. It’s a strange place. Powerful, supposedly. My mother has warned the people not to spend much time in there.”

“Why?”

“Partly because it sits on the border with Lorant, but partly because she claims there is an element of power within the forest that even she doesn’t fully understand.”

“The Raven Queen doesn’t understand something about it?”

“I know. Can you believe it?”

“Why doesn’t she want you to try to better understand it?”

Nevarn shrugged. “To be honest, I don’t really know. I think some of it has to do with her concern that we could get lost in the forest. People who have traveled through the Devlar Forest have been lost. It’s almost as if the trees claim them.”

Sophie looked over and realized that Nevarn was grinning at her.

“You’re just saying that because I’m nervous,” she said.

“Maybe a little bit,” he said. “Mostly it’s because the forest is too dense to move through very easily. People who have attempted to hunt there have not found the game to be worth the hassle.”

The forest stretched far in front of her, and Sophie wasn't sure that she wanted to travel alongside it.

"Have people really been lost in there?"

"People have been lost in all places," Nevarn said. "You can't get too caught up in the mysticism of places like that. A single story often evolves into something very different."

"You don't believe that people have been sucked into the forest and prevented from leaving?"

"I suppose I don't," he said.

"What about some of the rumors about such forests?"

"What rumors?"

"When I was young, there were stories of water sprites that would trap soldiers who tried to cross their stream or river," Sophie said.

"I suspect those stories came from men who tried to cross a river that was too fast-flowing and drowned."

"And stories of men who were marching along only to have the ground open up and swallow them?"

"An earthquake. Probably nothing more than that."

"What about stories of swarms of insects chasing men away from dangerous places?" Sophie pressed.

"You've seen our summers," Nevarn said. "Swarms of insects aren't altogether rare."

They rode for a little while longer before Sophie looked over at him. "You don't believe any of the stories."

"I think there is value in stories, but little truth. Too often people get trapped by what they've heard in stories, and it doesn't mean anything."

Sophie shook her head, turning away. "You are much like my brother in that."

"In that I don't believe stories?"

"When I was young, my nana loved to tell us stories. And I loved to listen to them." She glanced over. "Some of her

stories were fantastical tales, stories of love and loss, war and heroes. It was the stories about the Pale Princess that I loved the most.”

“Those are just stories,” Nevarn said.

Sophie was quiet. Learning that the Pale Princess was just a story had been harder than it had probably needed to be. She’d had time to come to terms with that. Still, anytime she saw Jalyn, she was reminded of the legend.

“Why do you like stories so much?” he asked.

“Stories give us hope,” she said.

“Even the scary ones?” He glanced over at the forest, and a gleam shone in his eyes.

“The scary ones most of all.”

“How do you figure?”

Sophie shrugged. “The scary stories are the ones that help us realize what we’re capable of overcoming.”

“And you don’t think you can overcome your fear of this forest?”

“Just because scary stories help us know what we can overcome doesn’t mean that I want to take the opportunity to learn what that is,” she said.

“You are an interesting woman, Sophie Varison.”

Sophie turned to watch the forest. Perhaps Nevarn was right. Perhaps she did need to face her fear, live the story and embrace it. Still, she wasn’t at all sure that was what she wanted to do—at least, not in the darkness.

Besides, she didn’t think that was where she was going to find her brother. Wherever he was, he wouldn’t have gone into the forest. What purpose would there have been for him to do so? Without his horse, he would have stayed on the road, traveling the easier path.

A loud rumble echoed in the night.

Nevarn groaned.

“What is it?”

“Thunder.” He glanced at Sophie. “It’s not close—yet. If the storm moves toward us, we’re going to get wet. At least, we are unless we’re willing to go in there,” he said, nodding toward the trees.

Sophie clenched her jaw. “Only if we have to.”

“You’d go into the forest?”

“I said only if we have to.”

“Look at you. Now you want to be the hero of your story.”

“Aren’t we all?”

“What?”

“The heroes. Every person is the hero of their own story.”

“Even Darius?”

Sophie thought about it. She hadn’t considered that before, but how could he not be?

“Even Darius,” she said.

Nevarn watched her for a moment before shaking his head and looking away. “I don’t think so, Sophie. We can’t all be heroes.”

# CHAPTER 17

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Thunder rumbled again, moving toward them more rapidly than Sophie would have liked.

Nevarn was right. They were going to get wet.

They'd been riding for the better part of an hour in silence. Every so often, the thunder would rumble toward them, a loud roaring sound that shook the ground beneath them. It was a tremor of power. They had storms in Reyash, but none of the storms had been nearly this powerful. This was something else.

Sophie focused on the rumbling. It was a distant thunder, leaving her thinking that they were bound to get drenched. When rain came, Sophie wasn't sure what they would do. The Devlar Forest was enormous. The mist continued to creep outward, but she couldn't see it nearly as well as she had earlier. She didn't like the idea of heading into the forest, but it might be necessary to keep relatively dry.

Nevarn continuously looked all around, his gaze focused. In that way, he reminded Sophie of the Taihg soldiers she had been around. There was always something on edge about them. It was the way that her brother had become, so different from the man he had once been.

Of course, Lan hadn't been a man when they had left their home. He had been a boy, just as she had been a girl. Both of them had changed. Both of them had grown.

Sophie found herself thinking of her nana's stories as she rode. Maybe it was nothing more than Nevarn claiming that

the stories were useless, but she didn't feel that way. She had always loved the stories. They seemed to be something more, a way for her to understand where she had come from, and the people that she had been around. Because of those stories, she had felt she was better able to understand truths about the world. How could Nevarn not see that?

Perhaps he didn't care.

She looked over at him and found him watching her.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I was just trying to get a sense of how you're going to react when we have to go into the forest."

"I'm going to be fine," she said.

"I'm sure you are."

"I'm going to be fine," she repeated.

"And I am sure that you are."

"I heard that tone in your voice."

"There wasn't any tone, Sophie."

She glared at him for a moment before turning away. "I heard it," she said.

He shook his head. "You can be quite difficult."

"Like you have any room to talk."

"I thought I was being helpful."

"If you were being helpful, you wouldn't be looking at me like that."

Thunder rumbled again, echoing through the night and tearing her attention away. She turned toward the sound, listening, but couldn't tell how far away it was. When she was younger, she had learned a trick of counting after lightning to gauge just how far away a storm was, but there had been no lightning. Only the thunder.

"Don't you think it's a little bit strange that there's only thunder?" Sophie asked.

“You haven’t been in the country long enough to know some of the storms we have.”

“The storms here aren’t all that different from storms elsewhere,” she said.

“Thunder and lightning aren’t uncommon.”

“But this is thunder without lightning.”

“Look at the sky,” Nevarn said, nodding toward the darkness. “It’s incredibly dark, and I’m not sure that we will see any lightning.”

Sophie had to acknowledge that Nevarn might be right. It was possible that there was lightning behind the clouds, and she wasn’t even able to see it.

When the thunder came again, closer this time, by the intensity of its rattling, Sophie looked over at the trees. The wind picked up, pulling at her cloak. It was colder than it had been. She tried to pull her cloak around her to keep warm but knew that she wasn’t dressed for this weather.

“The horses aren’t going to be able to keep going like this,” Nevarn said. “Listen, Sophie. I know you want to stay away from the forest, but if we just go under the outer edge, we might be able to escape some of the brunt of the storm.”

“The storm hasn’t reached us yet,” she said.

“The storm is here!” Nevarn had to yell against the howling of the wind.

Sophie realized that she was being foolish. The forest would offer protection, regardless of how she felt about it. She leaned forward, wrapping her arms around Joralt’s neck.

“It’s going to be all right,” she whispered to the horse.

He pranced, throwing his head from side to side. Sophie could barely hang on with him moving so violently. Maybe this was how Lan had been thrown from Joralt.

Even that didn’t make much sense to her. Lan was strong, and though the horse was agitated, she had a hard time thinking that Lan hadn’t been able to stay atop him.



She continued to murmur to Joralt, patting his neck, trying to soothe him. After a while, the horse settled.

When they headed under the trees, the air seemed to change. There was a dense mist rising from the ground. The wind died a little bit, despite them staying on the periphery of the forest. Thunder still rumbled, to the point where she could feel it beneath her.

“I think we need to go deeper into the forest,” Nevarn said.

“I think we should stay where we are,” Sophie countered.

Nevarn looked up. “The wind is picking up. We aren’t going to avoid the brunt of the storm here. We can go deeper, and it’s going to be safe, Sophie.”

The deeper they went into the forest, the closer the trees grew, making it difficult to see much of anything. Sophie had an unreasonable fear of the forest, she knew, but she couldn’t shake it.

“I’m going to be right here with you,” Nevarn said.

She sighed. It *was* better that Nevarn was here.

As they started off, Nevarn guiding them deeper into the forest, still heading in the same general direction of the road, Sophie couldn’t help but think of all the stories she had heard about dark and dangerous forests over the years. Nana had loved to tell such stories. Sophie didn’t think there had been any about this particular forest, though what if she had called it by another name?

“There was one story I heard about a forest in which the vines would reach out and wrap around your legs as you walked,” she whispered.

Nevarn glanced at her. “The vines aren’t grabbing at the horses’ legs.”

“There was another where the trees themselves would move. They would keep you from leaving.”

“The trees aren’t moving,” Nevarn said.

Sophie sighed, knowing that was true, and knowing that everything that she was thinking was unreasonable. “There was still another where the forest crawled to life, ensnaring those who weren’t quick enough to move before the forest came for them.”

“Those are all stories, Sophie,” Nevarn whispered.

Stories that could guide her, though.

Wasn’t that the purpose of stories? At least, the kinds of stories her nana had liked to tell. Sophie stayed low on Joralt, letting him navigate through the trees. The thunder continued to rumble, and Nevarn glanced toward her periodically, as if to make sure that she followed. Some of the branches scratched at her face, forcing Sophie to put her hand up to protect herself, but even that wasn’t always enough.

A pose would work.

She shifted in the saddle. It would be difficult to maintain a pose while riding and pushing against the pressure of the storm, but she thought she should be able to do it. The gilán pose would be relatively simple, and she thought she could modify it in a way that would allow her to hold power within the pose so that she could keep herself protected.

The lashing continued, making it difficult to maintain her connection.

Sophie had to focus.

Parvella would be disappointed in her lack of focus, though Parvella was often disappointed in Sophie and her inability to maintain the necessary composure as she held her poses.

“It’s getting worse!” She tried to cry out against the storm, but it was difficult. The storm ripped at her clothing, and she struggled to keep branches from slashing at her face.

Nevarn looked over and seemed to want to say something, but he only nodded.

They veered deeper into the forest.

What stories had Nana told her about storms?

None had been like this. The trees should have been enough to protect them. They shouldn't be lashed by this much power from the storm this deep into the forest, but somehow they were. She tried to pull her cloak around her shoulders, but even as she did, another branch slapped her across the face.

"Darish take you!" she yelled at the tree.

It was probably a mistake to curse with the woodsman god's name in the middle of the forest, but it wasn't the forest she swore at. At least, it wasn't *only* the forest she swore at.

Sophie cursed the winds and the rain and everything that was coming toward them.

Nevarn looked back, and she couldn't tell whether he knew what she was doing and disapproved or whether he was only trying to make certain she was still with him.

Trying to hold her pose again, she focused on the power she could feel around her. That power seemed to matter. If she could ignore the energy of the storm and the way the branches assaulted her, she should be able to ignore anything.

When she succeeded in holding the pose, pushing power out to prevent the branches from lashing at her clothes and her face, she smiled. Parvella would have been proud.

Once she held the pose, it was easy to maintain it. The power flowed out from her in a sphere that surrounded not only her but also Joralt. The horse seemed to realize what she had done and began to move more confidently through the forest.

When she caught up to Nevarn, he looked over at her. The howling of the wind ripped through the trees. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"I figured out a way to protect myself from the wind."

A branch slapped at him, and he shoved his arm up, blocking it from ripping across his face. "Can you use it for me?"

She shrugged. "I didn't think you liked magic."

“I like it well enough when it keeps me from getting attacked.”

Sophie didn't know if she'd be able to manipulate the pose well enough to encompass him, but she was willing to try. Shifting a little, she thought about how other poses allowed her to expand the magic. In the case of the gilán pose, it should be a relatively simple thing, to expand the pose so she could draw on more power. All it would take was stretching herself slightly. Moving deliberately, she had to be careful that she didn't lose control altogether.

The stallion stumbled on something, and Sophie bounced in the saddle.

The pose failed.

A branch slapped her in the face, almost knocking her off Joralt.

Swearing softly, Sophie quickly got back to work, only this time she made a point of holding the pose with a slightly wider posture. Power surged out from her, wrapping around not only her but also Nevarn.

The branches bounced off the protection she had placed.

He sighed. “Thanks. I wasn't expecting the wind to be this bad in here.”

“It's the forest. I think it wants to hurt us.”

Nevarn grinned. A massive branch came swinging toward him, and he reached his hands up to block it, but the branch bounced harmlessly off the barrier Sophie held. “That's going to take some getting used to.”

“You should be ready for the possibility that I'll lose control, too.”

“Why would you? My mother always said poses became easier the longer you held them.”

“They are, but any misstep by the horses makes it more difficult to maintain it. I *think* I can hold it, but I don't really know.”

They continued moving deeper into the forest. With the gilan pose around them, the wind was no longer a problem, but the sound of it persisted, sweeping through the barrier. The branches swaying toward them drew Sophie's eyes, and it was hard to ignore the power that slammed against her barrier. She couldn't tell whether there was something to the power that she had to be careful of. It might be that she had to protect them from more than rogue branches.

"There still hasn't been any rain," she said.

"Maybe there has been, but we've been protected by the trees."

Sophie looked up. It was too dark to see much of anything. For now, the horses were able to pick their way through the forest, but if one of them were to trip and fall, they would have to leave the horse behind. She didn't like the idea of riding double with Nevarn, but if that happened, they wouldn't have any way of taking Lan back to Valan were they to find him.

At this point, Sophie wasn't even sure this was about finding her brother. It seemed to be more about surviving the night and the storm.

The wind slammed into them again. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself, but another branch swung at her. Sophie forced herself to ignore the movement. It would do nothing other than startle her, and she didn't think she could handle that sort of fear. There was no point in it, anyway. She would be safe. The branches weren't going to reach through the gilan pose. They couldn't.

A howling drifted through the night. The howling came from the wind, but it also seemed to be matched by something beyond the wind, as if it were coming from the forest itself.

"What is that?" Nevarn whispered. He sounded nervous.

She would have smiled had she not been so nervous herself. "I don't know. Sounds like it might be the wind whipping through the trees."

"It shouldn't be able to do that so deep into the forest."

"How far in are we?"

Nevarn looked over. “We’ve been heading straight into the forest.”

“Not following the road?”

“When the wind started, we had to move beyond the edge as quickly as we could. I didn’t know you’d be able to use your magic to protect us.”

Another branch swung toward them, and Sophie braced, trying to hold the pose to withstand the brunt of the attack. It crashed into the barrier, and she was startled by the force of it.

Sophie started to move before catching herself.

She had shifted the pose enough that it lost some strength. She repositioned it, trying to ensure the next attack wouldn’t strike her, though Nevarn wasn’t so lucky. A branch scratched at his face.

“Sorry,” she muttered as she shifted, trying to regain her pose.

Nevarn looked over at her. “I almost think that was intentional.”

“If that had been intentional, I wouldn’t have attempted to hold the pose around you.”

“You’re not holding the pose around me. You’re holding the magic around me.”

“And you are some sort of magical expert?”

“Well, my mother *is* the Raven Queen,” he said.

Sophie sighed. “I don’t know how much longer I’m going to be able to hold this with the jostling underneath us. I think we need to rest awhile.”

“Are you sure? I had the sense that you didn’t want to spend the night in the forest.”

“I suppose we could try to ride back out to the road. I might be able to hold the pose while we’re resting.”

However, Sophie didn’t know if she could hold the power while sleeping. If it was raining and windy, as it most likely

was, she might not be able to maintain it. It would be better to stay within the protection of the forest, such as it was. It didn't feel as if they were altogether protected. The wind was only a little bit lighter than it had been on the road.

Nevarn slowed the horses. "That's good. We're going to have to wait, anyway."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know how far into the forest we've gone, and..."

Sophie cocked a brow at him. "And what?"

"And I don't really know where we are. It might take me some time to figure out how to get us out of here."

She stared at him for a moment. "What do you mean you don't know where we are?"

"In the urgency of getting deeper into the forest, I lost my sense of direction."

"You've been the one leading us!"

"I have, and I think that I'm heading in the right direction, only..."

Sophie could only shake her head. Here she had been following him, but she'd been following him blindly. That had been a mistake. She swore under her breath and signaled for Joralt to stop.

When he did, she climbed down from the saddle, knowing that the sudden movement would release the protection the pose had offered, but at this point, it didn't even matter. They were near a small opening in the trees, though it was not large enough that it would completely prevent branches from reaching toward them and slapping at them.

Sophie looked all around her. A pair of trees stood nearby, close enough together that they should provide some shelter. The branches were higher overhead.

"Here," she said.

"You want to rest here?"

She glowered at him. “Do you have a better idea?”

“Not really. I’m just surprised this is where you want to stop.”

“This isn’t where I *want* to stop. If it had been up to me, we would have stayed out of the forest, but seeing as I don’t think any of this is going to be up to me, and the stupid storm blasted at us, forcing us in here, I figure this is the best chance we have of resting without the rain and the wind battering us.”

At least here the wind didn’t seem to be quite as prominent as it had been in other places. She stayed low so the branches that swayed overhead didn’t strike her, and she was thankful that she was able to withstand most of the force of the storm.

“I haven’t heard of anything quite like this storm before,” Sophie said.

“This isn’t like your stories. Besides, you were more concerned about the forest than the storm.”

“I’m sure I could come up with a story about a storm like this.”

“Really?”

“Are you questioning me now?”

Nevarn looked over at her, and he had a look of concern in his eyes. “I’m not questioning you,” he said, raising his hands.

Nevarn led the horses toward a tree to tie them up. Sophie took a seat on the ground, resting against a nearby tree trunk.

“At least we haven’t been rained on,” Nevarn said, settling down next to her.

Thunder rumbled, and there was a flash in the sky. Lightning.

With it, the wind picked up, but not only that. Rain started to drizzle down through the canopy, dripping between the leaves and saturating them.

“You were saying?” Sophie asked.



# CHAPTER 18

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SOPHIE

They huddled together during the storm. The wind whistled and howled around them, and again it seemed that something within the forest echoed within the howling, as if it were crying back against the storm. Thunder rumbled almost constantly now, and there came more flashes of lightning. Sophie had a hard time tracking how far away the storm was. She tried to count between the lightning and thunder, though there didn't seem to be any real pattern to them.

"Why don't you tell me one of those stories about storms?" Nevarn said.

"What?" She tore her gaze away from the upper branches of the trees.

"The storm stories. You might as well."

"I thought you wanted to rest."

"I'm not so sure that I'm going to be able to rest with this storm raging around us. Besides, as soon as the rain and the wind ease, we ought to get out of the forest."

"Now you're the one who's nervous about it," she said.

"It's not nerves. It's just... Fine. Maybe it's nerves. I feel like the forest doesn't like us here."

"Maybe it just doesn't like *us*," she said.

"We haven't done anything to it," Nevarn said.

“Other than cross its border. Maybe there are some forests who don’t like people.”

“Is that a story that you have?”

Sophie shrugged. “Maybe,” she said.

“Well, go on, then.”

She took a deep breath and sighed. Could she come up with a story?

It had been a while since she’d told any stories. For the most part, Sophie enjoyed listening to them, though listening to a story would naturally turn her into a storyteller. That was something that Nana had always told her. All she had to do was pay attention to the tales, and she would learn how to spin them herself, weaving the stories the way that Nana had often woven yarn.

Maybe it was simply being on the road, away from the tower, and heading toward adventure, such as it was. Maybe it was merely her fear that brought her back to her childhood, a time when fear was understood. Within the tower, there wasn’t time to think about stories. She spent so much of her time training, working on controlling magic, learning poses, that when she was done, she was tired enough that she didn’t want to think about stories or anything else.

It was also possible that Sophie had intentionally pushed those memories out of her mind. It did no good to linger on the past. That was something Lan had told her on the journey to Neylash.

“I can tell you a story about Edgar,” she said.

“Who’s Edgar?” Nevarn asked.

He slid over closer to her. Sophie glanced at him, but he was shivering, and she understood that he was only moving closer for warmth. For that matter, *she* was cold. Her cloak had protected her from the worst of the rain, but some of it still drizzled through, and it ran down her back.

She allowed Nevarn to get closer.

“I don’t know if it matters who Edgar is. All I know is the story about him.”

“Don’t stories need to be about somebody who matters?”

“Didn’t I tell you that everybody is the hero of their own story?”

“You did,” he said.

“Well, in this story, Edgar is the hero.”

“Fine,” Nevarn said. “Tell me all about this Edgar and why I should care about him.”

“You don’t have to care about him.”

“Isn’t that the point of a story?”

“Now you’re an expert?”

“If you’re going to tell a story, there should be a reason behind it. There should be something I will be able to take away from it.”

“Edgar was the leader of a troupe of acrobats. They traveled from town to town, village to village, demonstrating their skills.”

“We had acrobats come through the city a few years ago. They had one, a man who was able to contort his body—”

“Do you want me to tell you a story, or are *you* going to tell *me* a story?”

Nevarn shrugged. “I figured that I might be able to add something to yours.”

“My story doesn’t need any embellishments.”

“I don’t know. I already don’t care about Edgar, so...”

She glared at him, and Nevarn only smiled.

A particularly strong gust of wind swirled around them.

Sophie decided to see if she could create a pose to protect them. She shifted her position just a little bit and managed to create the gilan pose. It was a fairly easy pose to maintain,

especially now that she wasn't riding. As it formed, it protected them from some of the rain.

"How long do you think you can hold that?" Nevarn asked.

"I don't know. Maybe long enough to ride out the storm." Sophie closed her eyes, thinking about the story. Like most of the stories, Sophie remembered the night that Nana had told her about Edgar. She wondered if the reason that she was thinking about it now was that it had been a stormy night much like this. Well, maybe not *quite* like this. The storms they'd had in Halith were not nearly as powerful, and they weren't nearly as dangerous as this storm seemed to be.

They'd been sitting near the fire, and Nana had been brushing her hair, as she often did. Papa had sat on a chair near the fire, whittling. For some reason, Sophie couldn't remember what Lan had been doing. That surprised her. Most of the time, Sophie remembered everything when it came to stories.

"Edgar was with a troupe of acrobats. He was the leader, a gymnast who was unafraid of flying through the air. They would set up these enormous stands with swings—"

"Trapezes," Nevarn said.

"What?"

"It's what they're called. Acrobats call them trapezes."

"Didn't I tell you not to interrupt?"

"I know you did. I'm just trying to help you with your story."

"What makes you think I *need* any help with my story?"

"You need to call things by the right terms."

"Why does that even matter?"

"It gives your story an element of authenticity."

"Do you need it to be authentic?" She frowned at him. "You're the one I'm telling the story to."

"I was just trying to help," Nevarn said.

Sophie shook her head and turned away from him. “Maybe it doesn’t make any sense to try to tell you the story. You can tell it to yourself.”

As Sophie fell silent, the wind continued to howl. She was tired from the long night and wanted nothing more than to rest, but she worried that she wouldn’t be able to hold the gilan pose while she slept.

“I’m sorry,” Nevarn said. “I shouldn’t presume to know how to tell your story better than you know how to tell it. Please go on. I want to know more about Edgar.”

Sophie twisted so that she could look at him. She didn’t know if he was taunting her. With him, it was difficult to know.

“What if I don’t want to tell the story anymore?”

“Then you don’t have to,” he said.

Sophie took a deep breath as another round of thunder rumbled in the distance. The ground even shook with it. A night like tonight would be better spent inside, sitting by a fire, much like the night when she had been with Nana, listening to this story.

“Edgar was the leader of the troupe. He was a fearless acrobat. He would soar through the air on his trapeze,” she said, glancing at Nevarn, “and flip to another one. In every town they visited, they drew a crowd. Everyone wanted to see them. Word of their skills preceded them as they traveled, and the crowds grew larger and larger.” Sophie closed her eyes and thought back to how Nana had told the story. She hadn’t heard the story of Edgar that often, though for some reason it had stuck with her. Maybe it was only because of the situation, or maybe it was because it was different from so many other stories that Nana had told. “Edgar decided that he needed to travel ahead of the troupe so that he could make preparations for their next stop. They were traveling toward Golan, and with a city that size, they had to ensure that they had a square ready for them so they could build up the excitement in the city. It was on the way to Golan where Edgar was waylaid.”

The storm rumbled, and the ground shook, sending a shiver through Sophie. This wasn't a good story for a night like this. Maybe a more upbeat story would be more appropriate.

“Thieves met Edgar along the road. You see, word of the acrobats had spread, but so too had word of their growing wealth. Too many people had learned that the acrobats carried significant coin with them, though few knew that Edgar was the one who carried most of it. And he did this time as well, though he had another reason for traveling to Golan. He wanted to reach the Silver Bank, deposit their wealth, and stay ahead of the danger. He thought that by traveling alone, none would know that he had ventured out with everything the acrobats had earned.”

Another round of thunder rumbled, and the sky burst with light as another streak of lightning came toward them. Sophie shifted the gilan pose, ensuring that she had enough strength within it to protect them. As she did, the energy of the sky continued to build. Rain drizzled down the invisible magical barrier, creating a small stream that trickled away from them.

She hadn't even known that they had chosen this higher ground, but now that she was here, she was thankful that they had managed to do so accidentally.

“Rather than abandoning his wealth, Edgar ran into the forest along the road.”

“I thought you didn't know any stories about this forest,” Nevarn said. “This one is about Golan. There aren't too many forests on the way to Golan.”

Sophie shook her head. “Didn't I warn you about interrupting my story?”

“I'm sorry,” Nevarn said, raising his hand and smiling. “Please go on.”

She sighed. “Edgar went into the forest, searching for safety. His pack was heavy with gold, but he was loath to leave it. He knew that he could earn much more in Golan, but they had worked hard over the years to earn what they had.

Edgar ran through the forest, away from the thieves. He felt he could stay ahead of them, if only he kept moving quickly enough. But the thieves were lighter than him, and they were fearless. They knew how much wealth he carried and were determined to take it for themselves, so they chased Edgar deep into the forest. He used his skill as an acrobat to climb into the trees and swing from branch to branch, but the thieves pursued him. Edgar was a spiritual man, so he prayed as he ran. Some later said that the forest was an old forest, and it was powered by the old gods, who were angry that Edgar prayed to the new gods.”

Sophie wrapped her arms around her legs, drawing her knees up to her chest.

“Near the heart of the forest, the thieves caught up to Edgar. They had him surrounded. He cried out to his gods again, begging for help, but there was no answer. The thieves converged on Edgar. They wanted his money. He fought. His training as an acrobat served him well, and he was able to bring down two of the thieves, but the third one pulled a sword on Edgar and stabbed him in the belly. As he lay dying, the gold stripped from his pack, all of his wealth gone, Edgar cried out to his gods again. The gods never answered.”

Sophie glanced at Nevarn, curious about his reaction. It was a strange story, she knew, but it was one that Nana had felt important for her to know. At the time, she hadn’t known the reason behind it.

“That’s it?” Nevarn asked.

“That’s the story of Edgar.”

“But I thought you said that all people are the heroes of their own stories.”

“They are the heroes of their own stories,” she said.

“He wasn’t heroic. He ran.”

“He ran and swung through the trees,” she said, motioning to the branches. “Can you imagine trying to swing through the branches the way that Edgar did?”



“But the thieves still caught up to him. There wasn’t anything heroic about that.”

“Really? He wanted to protect the wealth of his people. He wanted to stay ahead so that he could keep the thieves from taking what the troupe had earned. That seems heroic to me.”

“I kept thinking that you might have some great twist. I thought that maybe the gods would somehow answer. I thought that maybe you would tell me that the forest came alive and swallowed the thieves.”

“Why would I tell a story like that?”

“Because it has a better ending than what happened to Edgar.”

“Edgar’s story is his own,” Sophie said.

“I don’t really like it.”

“What’s not to like? It’s the story.”

“I guess I prefer stories with a sense of optimism.”

Thunder rumbled, and Sophie twisted her hands on her lap, reminded of questions that she had asked Nana. Sophie had shared some of Nevarn’s confusion.

“All stories have meaning to the listener,” Nana had said. “Telling a story is but one part. You are only one part.” She always looked at Sophie with affection that brimmed in her eyes. It was the one feature of Nana that Sophie missed the most.

“What’s the other part?” Sophie had asked.

“Hearing the story. You can only tell your tale. It’s up to the listener to decide what it means to them. Some stories will be entertaining. Some stories will be thought-provoking. Some stories will elicit emotion. All have value.”

“What about Edgar’s story?” Sophie had asked.

“What do you think Edgar’s story means?”

Sophie had sat silent for much of the night, and she had even slept on the question, not coming to terms with it. It had

been a difficult night, a restless night. When she had finally awoken, she had gone into Nana's room, only to find that she was already up. When Sophie had gone to the kitchen to watch Nana for a little while, she had asked about the meaning of the story.

"Have you come up with what you think it means?" Nana had asked.

"What about what *you* think it means?"

"Does it matter what I think? As I said, the telling is but one part of the tale. The other part is what the person who listens takes from it."

"But you have to have something you intend for me to take from it."

"Why must I have anything for you to take from it? You can take what you feel is necessary, and you don't need me to provide you with that."

Sophie took a seat at the counter, and she watched Nana roll out bread dough, her gnarled hands working quickly.

"His gods didn't answer him," Sophie said.

"You think that they should have?"

"He was a faithful man. You even said that."

"He *was* a faithful man," Nana agreed.

"If he was a faithful man, then why didn't his gods answer him?"

"What do you think his gods would've done for him?"

Sophie felt confused by the question. "I don't know. Couldn't they have saved him?"

"Why should his gods have worked on his behalf more than the thieves' gods worked on their behalf?"

"But the thieves were stealing."

"Were they?"

"You called them thieves."

“And they were, but are you sure they were stealing from Edgar?”

Sophie could only shake her head. “It feels like you didn’t tell me the complete story.”

“The answers are all there, Sophie. You have to find your own meaning.”

She remembered sitting at the counter while trying to process what her nana had said, knowing that there had to be something more to every story. Otherwise, what was the point in telling them?

“Sophie?” Nevarn asked.

She smiled at him. “What do you think the point of the story is?”

“I don’t think there is any point to the story. Is that what you’re trying to get out of me?”

“No. There is a point.”

“Well?”

“My nana always wanted me to find the answer for myself.”

“It seems to me that your nana just liked to tell pointless stories.”

“They aren’t pointless,” she said, snapping at him.

“Fine. Maybe not all of them are pointless. This one most certainly is.”

“If you think so,” Sophie said. “I think this is one of the more important ones my nana taught me.”

“Why?” Nevarn shifted, and he pressed closer to her, heat from his body pushing up against Sophie. “If Edgar was so foolish to run into the forest rather than leave his gold behind, why is it so important? He could have given the thieves what they wanted at any point, and he would have survived. From what you told me about Edgar, the thieves only wanted the gold.”

“When my nana told me the story, I felt like that, but then I started to wonder if there was more to it than she had let on.” Sophie smiled slightly. “I decided the thieves were the other acrobats from the troupe. They were mad at Edgar, and they chased him because they thought he was stealing from them.”

“I thought Edgar was taking the money to deposit it in the Silver Bank.”

“That’s what he told them.”

“If he was stealing from them, why didn’t you share that detail?”

“Because it wasn’t shared with me,” she said. “And I don’t even know if that’s the case or not. It might be just that he wasn’t willing to give up his gold.”

“Which is stupid,” Nevarn said.

“Maybe, but that’s still not the point of the story.”

Nevarn frowned at her. “Well?”

“You want me to do everything for you?”

Nevarn glared at her. “You haven’t done *anything*. First you tell your silly story without much point. Then you need me to fill in the details. And now you won’t tell me what point you think there is to the story.”

Sophie leaned her head back. Without meaning to, she shifted the gilani pose, and it no longer protected Nevarn. Water dripped down his hair, and he shook his head.

“I was going to tell you, but with that attitude, you’d be better served by coming up with your own answer.”

“What attitude is that?”

She smiled at him. “The same one I had when I listened to the story.”

Thunder rumbled again, and Sophie watched Nevarn, waiting for him to say something, to glare at her, or to rage at her, but he didn’t. She supposed that she should be thankful for that.

Instead, she rested her head, thoughts of Nana coming to her as sleep drifted toward her. Every so often, thunder would rumble, jolting her awake, before Sophie drifted back to sleep again. Somehow she managed to maintain her hold on the gilán pose while she slept.

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# CHAPTER 19

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Another steady rumbling echoed through the forest, and Sophie jolted awake. She looked over to see Nevarn with his legs crossed in front of him, his face screwed up in concentration. He had been watching her.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Seeing as you have the ability to sleep anywhere, I thought I would try to figure out what point you wanted to make with your story.”

The rumbling persisted, shaking the ground. Sophie waited for lightning, but there was nothing.

The rain had stopped. The wind wasn't nearly as forceful as it had been before, either. She released the gilán pose and leaned back against the tree trunk, looking at Nevarn.

“Did you figure it out?”

Nevarn shifted. “You wanted me to know that the story depends upon the point of view.” He smiled as if he had accomplished a great feat in divining some truth. “I figured it out after what you told me last night. You said that your nana never told you much about the thieves, and that you had decided that the thieves must have been working with Edgar. That means that you wanted me to know that Edgar isn't the hero of the story. The thieves are. I wasn't sure what you were trying to get at, but I think I understand it now. You've been warning me about this all along, telling me that the hero is always the hero of their own story.”

This was a different perspective from Sophie's when she'd been muddling through the meaning of the story.

"If that's your truth, then it's the meaning of the story," Sophie said.

She got to her feet and went over to Joralt to untie his reins from the tree.

"What do you mean? That is the truth of the story. It has nothing to do with *my* truth."

"That's what I was telling you. Everyone hears what they need to hear from a story. In your case, you needed to hear that each person is always the hero of their own story."

That wasn't even a terrible message to take from this tale. She thought about what Nana might have thought had she come to her with that answer to this puzzle, but in the case of this story, Sophie had already learned that everyone was the hero in their own tale. That was something that Nana had made a point of getting her to understand very early on in her stories.

"Well?" Nevarn asked, hurrying over to her. "If that's not the point of the story, or at least, the point of the story you wanted me to know, then what is the point?"

"The point of the story is what I told you. You need to take from it what you need."

"You're not going to get away with not telling me."

"What is there to tell you?" Sophie turned toward him. "That's not what matters. The only thing that really matters is knowing that the story means something different to you than it does to me. Even better, your truth is no less true than mine."

Nevarn grabbed the reins of his horse, and he followed Sophie through the forest. She had no idea where she was going and didn't even know if this direction would lead her to Lan. At this point, they could be heading deeper into the forest, though that was where Nevarn had been taking her last night.



“What else do you know about the thieves?” he asked.

She smiled at him. “That’s what you want to know about?”

“That’s the whole point of this story, isn’t it?”

“To you, maybe.”

“But…”

She shook her head. “But nothing. I told you that the story will mean something different to you than it does to me.”

“Why won’t you tell me what it means to you?”

“Because it doesn’t matter,” Sophie said. “Besides, why are you spending so much time thinking about this?”

“You were sleeping. That’s all I had to do to occupy myself.”

“I’ve been using quite a bit of magic,” Sophie said.

“Then it’s good you got your rest, but I sat there, watching to make sure that you were safe. I think that has earned me the answer to this.”

“Now you say I owe you something?”

He frowned at her. “No. Not like that. I’m just saying—”

“I know what you’re just saying,” Sophie said. “And I’m telling you that I have given you everything that you need.”

She headed off into the forest, leaving him behind.

Nevarn raced after her, leading his horse. “You know that isn’t what I’m getting at.”

“I don’t really know what you’re getting at. All I know is that you said that I owed you something.”

“An explanation. Gods, Sophie. Sometimes you can be so difficult.”

She turned toward him, planting her hands on her hips. She started to pull upon the power of one of her poses in her irritation before releasing it. That would do no good, and it would only alienate Nevarn more. She was irritated with him, but she didn’t want to chase him away.

“You know, you didn’t have to come with me. You’re the one who chased after me to follow me into the night.”

“Because it was dangerous for you to go on your own.”

“Really? Has it been so dangerous?”

“Dangerous enough. What would you have done in that storm had I not been here?”

“Probably the same as I did with you here. I took my rest in the forest. I used magic to protect myself. I probably would’ve done those same things had you not been here.”

“Fine. If you don’t want me along, then once we get out of the forest, I will return to the city. Is that what you want?”

“I want you to do whatever you think you need to do,” she said.

Nevarn glared at her for a long moment before turning away and falling silent.

Sophie cursed herself. She didn’t need to do this to Nevarn. He really *had* been trying to help her, and all he wanted was the answer to the story—at least, the answer as she saw it. She questioned whether she should say something as they made their way through the forest, not wanting to antagonize him, but Nevarn did not look in her direction.

Everything looked a little different in the daylight. The forest was still dark, though the darkness wasn’t quite as absolute as it had been the night before. There was not as much thunder, though still some. The air carried with it a hint of energy, likely the residue of the storm. Sophie attempted to form some of her poses, but it was difficult to do so while walking. That was a more advanced type of magic, and something that she had not yet come close to accomplishing.

After walking for a while, she realized that Joralt seemed to be guiding her.

“The horse is pulling on the reins,” she said.

“What was that?” Nevarn asked, looking back at her. He’d been quiet for the entire walk, and now he frowned at her.

“It feels like Joralt is pulling on the reins.”

“He’s probably just sensing your unease.”

“That’s the thing, though. I don’t feel quite as uneasy as I did last night.”

She was still uncomfortable, though her discomfort had lessened. It had more to do with simply being in the forest, rather than the storm rumbling around her and the dark energy that she had felt. Joralt had sensed her unease the night before, and he hadn’t pulled the way that he was pulling now.

“What if he knows how to find Lan?” Sophie asked.

“I doubt your brother would be in here,” Nevarn said.

“I doubt it, too, but what if Joralt can sense something?”

Nevarn seemed to want to say something, but he shook his head. “If you want to follow the horse, then be my guest.”

“You aren’t going to come with me?”

“Didn’t you want me to leave, anyway?”

Sophie suppressed a sigh. “You’re here, so I’m not going to chase you away. Maybe Joralt can lead us out of the forest, or maybe he knows how to find Lan.”

She gave Joralt a little bit more slack on the reins and followed him. He veered off, away from the direction they’d been heading in.

Perhaps they’d been going in the wrong direction all this time. Nevarn had admitted that he had gotten disoriented walking through the forest at night. Maybe the horse was able to detect something that they weren’t.

Sophie had not tried to probe with magic, either. There was still that sense of something out in the distance, though she didn’t know if she would be able to uncover it until she left the forest.

Joralt meandered through the trees. He didn’t struggle as much as he had the night before, stepping over protruding roots, leaping over small shrubs, and weaving around the massive trees rising high overhead. At least without the

branches slapping at them, they were all able to move more easily, Joralt included.

Nevarn stayed with Sophie, and they walked in silence. After a while, Sophie reached into her saddlebag to grab her waterskin. She hadn't eaten or drunk anything since they had set off. She started with the bread, knowing that it would go stale soon.

Nevarn pulled something from his pack as well and handed it over to her.

She frowned at it. "What is this?"

"I thought I would share," he said.

She looked down to realize that he had a pastry. A canilas.

"Why did you bring this?"

"Generally, people say thanks when they are offered kindness."

"I'm sorry. Thank you," she said quickly, "but why did you bring this?"

"Because I knew you were going to come out here, and I doubted you would bring yourself any sort of treat."

"You did this... for me?"

"Is that so difficult to believe?"

"I guess not, but..." Sophie took a bite. It was rhubarb. Sweet. The crust was fluffy with a hint of crispness to it. Delicious. "I don't have anything for you."

"You don't have to reciprocate." He took a bite of his own pastry, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. "I suppose I wouldn't be opposed to you telling me the purpose of your story."

"That defeats the purpose."

Sophie took another bite of the pastry, savoring the flavor. Surprisingly, it reminded her of the ones that Oleda had made. Nana had always been quite the cook, and an even better baker, but when Sophie had lived in Neylash, she had come to

truly appreciate Oleda's baking skill. There were plenty of good cooks within Neylash, but it was Oleda's pastries that had always satisfied her.

"Where did you find these? They aren't from Olin's." His were delicious, but they weren't quite this flaky. That, and he was rarely able to acquire boysenberries. It was a difficult berry to source, something that she had never known about before Oleda had told her.

"Why? Do you like it?"

Sophie finished chewing another bite, rubbing her arm over her mouth. "Very much."

"See?"

"What am I supposed to see now?"

"There are other good bakers in Valan."

Sophie laughed softly. "I never said there weren't."

"No, but you believed you knew the good ones and that there were no other skilled bakers. I told you that you just had to give me the opportunity, and I would find other bakers that had just-as-tasty pastries."

Sophie finished hers before speaking again. "Thank you for bringing those with you."

"I figure we will eat the rest to celebrate our victory when we find your brother, but given what we went through last night, I thought it might be best to enjoy some now. Who knows what we might have to go through today?"

"I doubt it'll be anything like last night."

"You never know," he said.

Nevarn buttoned his saddlebag up, pausing a moment to take a drink from his waterskin, and turned toward her. He flashed a smile. Sophie smiled back.

"There," he said. "You don't have to be quite as angry with me as you have been."

"I'm not angry with you."

“You don’t have to be so angry with everyone, then.”

Sophie shook her head. “It’s not that I’m angry with everyone, either.”

“Then why are you so difficult all the time?”

She planted her hands on her hips. “First you do something nice by bringing pastries. Then you ruin it by opening your mouth.”

“How did I ruin it now?”

Sophie sighed. “If you don’t know, I’m not so sure that I can tell you.”

She grabbed Joralt’s reins and let him lead her.

The horse started off, sensing her irritation, and moved quickly over the ground. Every so often, he nudged her slightly one way or another, and Sophie quickly learned to follow his guidance. He directed her through the softest of touches, little more than that.

Nevarn stayed with Sophie, though he remained silent as he trailed behind her. Perhaps that was for the best. It seemed to Sophie that anytime Nevarn opened his mouth, stupidity fell out.

The morning passed quickly. Sophie lost track of how long they’d been walking, but they took a few more breaks to take a drink and a few bites of bread. After the last stop, she looked into her saddlebags and realized she didn’t have much in the way of food remaining. A little dried meat, but nothing more than that. An empty belly would make for a long journey.

Nevarn didn’t eat as often as she did. Either he didn’t need to, or he had already figured out they needed to conserve their food. He did drink. That was good. They could survive a long time on empty stomachs, but they needed to stay hydrated. Nana had always made that clear to her through her stories.

As the day progressed, Nevarn fell into even more silence. Sophie looked over, half expecting him to say something to her at one point or another, but he never did. By the time darkness fell, Nevarn still hadn’t spoken much.

A small stream wound through this part of the forest, and Joralt leaned down to sniff for a moment before drinking. Sophie was leaning over, cupping her hands together to take a drink, when Nevarn grabbed her and pulled her back.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

“Getting water. Since we’ve found a stream, we should take advantage of it.”

“We don’t know if that water is safe to drink.”

“Joralt seems to think it is.”

“You’re going to trust a horse?” Nevarn shook his head. “Of course you are. You’ve been letting the damn horse lead you throughout the day.”

“It’s not like you had a better idea. We got lost in the forest. Someone needs to lead us.”

“You’d rather it be a horse than someone trained to track?”

“I presume that’s you.”

Nevarn nodded at her, and Sophie shrugged.

“If you’re trained to track, then why don’t you tell me if we’re heading in the wrong direction? That’s right. You don’t know any better than I do. The rain will have washed away anything that could have led us through here. You’re just as lost as I am. At least the horse *seems* to know where he’s going.”

She pulled away from Nevarn and bent down to take a drink of the water. It was cold and had a sharp mineral taste to it, but there didn’t seem to be anything necessarily wrong with it—not that Sophie had expected anything. It *was* only water, after all.

When she’d quenched her thirst, she filled her waterskin back up. She had a backup, so she wasn’t in any danger of running out of water, but it was a good opportunity to replenish this one.

“What now?” Nevarn asked.

“I get the feeling it’s getting late,” Sophie answered. “Maybe we need to stop for the night and rest. I don’t want a repeat of last night, when we were stumbling through the trees, trying to find our way.”

“That was only when we ran from the storm.”

“There’s no storm,” she said.

“Only the occasional thunder.”

Sophie frowned. There had been that, though neither of them knew what it came from or why it should persist. The sky was clear—at least, as far as either of them could tell through the canopy. There hadn’t been any wind like there had the night before, and thankfully, none of the howling. The trees were still.

“I don’t think the thunder means we’ve got another storm coming,” Nevarn said hurriedly. “It sounds distant, anyway.”

Sophie took a seat, holding on to Joralt’s reins. “If you’d prefer we keep going, we can. Let me rest a bit.”

“You’re tired?”

“Not like I was last night.” She’d tried to use her poses while walking but hadn’t been able to do anything consistent with them. Now that they’d stopped to take a break, she quickly tested whether she could use one, and relief swept through her when power filled her. The strangeness of the forest was such that she didn’t know if it might somehow prevent her from reaching for her magic. Thankfully, it didn’t. “I just want to rest. I feel...”

Sophie wasn’t able to express how she felt.

Just tired.

“Sophie?”

She looked up. It was difficult to keep her eyes open. “What is it?”

“Are you feeling well?”

“Fine. I told you, I’m just—”



Nevarn touched her on the shoulder. “I need you to use the piasa pose. Turn the power inward.”

Sophie blinked as she smiled at him. “What do you know about the poses? I told you, I’m just tired.”

“Sophie!” There was an edge to his voice that plunged through the sleepiness.

She blinked open her heavy lids. “What is it?”

“The piasa pose. Please. Do it now, and turn the power inward.”

She shifted where she sat. Making that pose seemed like too much work. “I could do the gilán pose, if you like. That one would be easier, anyway. Plus I might be able to create enough protection around us that you wouldn’t have to worry about anything hurting us in the forest.”

“Not the gilán pose. Piasa.”

She looked up at him. He didn’t smile, and she couldn’t tell if he was joking with her or if he really was as agitated as he seemed. Why would he be, though?

“Just let me rest, Nevarn. I don’t want to do that pose for you.”

“It’s not for me. It’s for you. Something’s not right. You feel sleepy, but I think you’re more than just sleepy.”

“Using a pose like that will only make it worse.” The piasa wasn’t necessarily a difficult pose, but it would take quite a bit of energy out of her. She’d used that pose often enough in practice, though she had never found it all that useful. It created a strange ring of magic that she wasn’t able to control all that well.

“Do it for me. If you do this, you don’t have to tell me the purpose of your story.”

“I wasn’t going to. You need to figure that out on your own.”

“Fine. But do this, and it will repay me for bringing the pastries.”

“Can I have another? They were so delicious...”

Sophie was tired. So tired.

There was something about the fatigue that felt off. Why should she be this tired now? She tried to stir herself awake, but her eyes didn't open the way that she wanted them to. Her body didn't react the way that she wanted it to.

Forming that pose would be too much effort for her.

“You can, but you have to do this for me before you can have it. Do you think you can?”

“I don't know. Why don't I eat the pastry first? And then I can show you this pose. I'm sure your mother would be able to demonstrate it for you if you want to see it.”

If only Sophie were able to use magic the same way as the Raven Queen. That was what she aspired to do, but when she tried to draw upon power, it was something so different. It took so much effort.

Now wasn't the time to expend that much effort. She didn't know if she would even be able to.

“I can only give you more pastries if you do this for me,” he said.

“Fine,” Sophie said. She stirred enough that she could shift in place. The piasa pose didn't require her to even stand, so she wasn't sure why Nevarn was so excited about it, but she moved so that she could create the position and the posture.

It required her to set her arms at strange angles, bringing her elbows up and twisting her hands so that her palms were facing up. It was an uncomfortable position, and even as she held it, she wasn't sure that she had the energy to maintain it.

“I can't keep my arms out,” she muttered.

“Let me hold them.”

“You don't know the pose,” she said, smiling at him.

“I know it well enough from watching you.”

“You’ve been watching me? I knew you were supposed to keep an eye on me...”

“Not for the reason that you think,” he muttered. He took her elbows, propping them up. “You’re going to have to twist your hands up. I won’t be able to hold them.”

Sophie turned her palms, looking up at Nevarn. He looked so worried.

It was enough to make her smile at him. Why would he be so concerned about her now? Was it because she was tired?

Sophie held the pose, and she continued to form the twists in her wrists. It involved shifting her legs, but she wasn’t sure if she would be able to do that. She tried stretching out, but Nevarn was there, blocking her.

“You’re making this difficult,” she mumbled.

“It’s not me that’s making this difficult,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m doing all that I can.”

Nevarn leaned toward her. “It’s not you, either.”

Sophie grinned. “Let me sleep.”

“Can’t you tell that there’s something wrong?” he asked her.

Sophie shook her head.

*Tired. So tired.*

“The only thing that’s wrong is the way that you’re keeping me awake.”

“I have to keep you awake. Otherwise...”

He held her elbows, and Sophie turned them out, trying to complete the pose. It was hard to hold it, but she was determined to do it for him. No. That wasn’t quite right. It wasn’t for Nevarn. She wanted a pastry.

“I still think that I would be able to do this better if you were willing to let me have a bite of pastry now,” she said.

“I don’t know how much longer we have for this,” he said.

“You don’t know how much longer?”

*What does that mean?*

Sophie grinned up at him.

“You need to hold the pose,” he said.

Sophie continued to grin at him, but he didn’t give her the reaction that she expected. He looked so serious.

It wasn’t as if she hadn’t seen him looking serious before. He often wore that expression when he came to observe her. His mother had wanted him to watch, and now she really understood why. The Raven Queen didn’t trust Sophie.

Sophie couldn’t blame her. How could she be trusted? She’d been in Neylash, learning from Ridaln. She suspected Ridaln would be able to hold the pose that Nevarn wanted now. He probably wouldn’t even have any difficulty with it.

She smiled to herself with the thought.

“Sophie?”

She looked up at Nevarn, continuing to grin.

“I need you to concentrate. You have to hold this pose.”

“If it’s so important to you, why don’t *you* hold the pose?”

“Because I don’t have that kind of magic,” he said.

She blinked. She couldn’t focus, but she knew that she needed to. As she stared at him, that amusement lingering in her mind, she couldn’t help but feel as if all she had to do was find some way of holding his gaze.

“What kind of magic do you have?” she asked.

“Please, Sophie.”

“I’m not the one making this difficult.”

The fatigue continued to wash through her, and as she struggled to hold her pose, Sophie didn’t have strength enough to maintain the position. She could feel Nevarn holding her arms, propping them up and out to her sides, as she wasn’t able to hold them on her own.

“You need to let me move my legs,” she said, frustration bubbling up within her.

“Move them. I’m not trying to prevent you from doing anything.”

“You’re sitting on them,” she said.

“I’m not. I don’t know what you’re feeling, but it’s not me sitting on your legs.”

Sophie rolled her head forward. This was something beyond simple fatigue. It was almost as if she were drunk. She didn’t drink ale. She didn’t like the taste. In the tower, there were some who preferred wine, and though Sophie had tasted it, she had never really developed a palate for it.

“The pose, Sophie.”

She shuffled her legs, sliding them along the ground.

Somewhere near her, she heard Joralt whinnying.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked.

“You first. Don’t worry about the horse.”

“I have to worry about him,” she mumbled. “That’s Lan’s horse. He would be mad if anything happened to him.”

“He’d be mad if anything happened to you, too. That’s why I need you to do this for me, Sophie.”

Her legs were positioned in such a way that she could stretch them out, but even as she did, she wasn’t sure if she was going to be able to hold the pose. Sophie needed to keep her elbows out, her wrists twisted, and she needed to ensure that her legs were stretched in a specific manner. Even that might not be everything that she needed to do.

She tried to maintain the pose.

There was one other aspect of holding magic that was more than just maintaining a pose. There was something within a pose that connected to power deep within her. The pose itself allowed her to focus energy in a specific manner, to connect to it and use it.

That was what she needed to do now, though she didn't know whether that was even going to be effective. As she struggled with the pose, she could feel something pushing against her. It was as if Nevarn was trying to keep her from forming the pose that he wanted.

“You're going to have to let go of my arms if you want me to do it.”

“I'm not holding them,” he said.

“Something is.”

“Please,” he said.

Sophie took a deep breath, focusing on the pose, but there was something about it that seemed to be too much of a struggle for her. She strained against it, strained to connect to that deep energy within her, and didn't feel as if she was going to be able to.

She smiled at Nevarn, but the overwhelming fatigue washed over her. She started to sag, and a connection to the pose surged through her.

“Are you happy?” she whispered.

Then she fell asleep.

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# CHAPTER 20

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## SOPHIE

Sophie looked up at the sky. Darkness was all around her, but through that darkness, she felt something else. It was as if there were a message written in the sky. It moved, swirling overhead, bands of dark energy that twisted all around, twining toward her. She reacted and held a prayer pose, the easiest one to do. She had no idea if she actually formed the pose, or if it was simply her imagination that created it, but at this point, Sophie didn't know if that mattered.

She took a deep breath. The air stank, reminding her of somewhere she had been, though even as she held on to that memory, she struggled to determine just what she had experienced.

Fatigue.

That was what she remembered. She had been tired. So incredibly tired.

Something had been wrong.

Now that she was awake, Sophie recognized that the fatigue hadn't been natural. She'd been poisoned.

Could it have been the rhubarb pastries? She didn't think that Nevarn would have poisoned her, but what if the person who had baked the pastries had?

She rolled over, blinking, and the darkness didn't fully clear. She was able to see something within it, but as she tried to peer through, she wasn't able to make out anything other than shadows.



“Sophie?”

Nevarn’s voice seemed to come from a great distance.

“I’m awake,” she said. Her mouth felt thick, as if she’d been sucking on a towel.

Hands pressed on her shoulders, propping her up.

Sophie tried to fight it, but she didn’t have much strength. Nevarn managed to lift her, and he rolled her toward him so that she looked at him.

“You don’t have to do that,” she muttered.

“I’m afraid that I do,” he said.

“What happened?”

“I told you not to drink from the stream.”

“The stream?” Sophie frowned, blinking as she tried to look around. Her mind was still working through everything but finding it far more difficult than it should have been. “What was wrong with the stream?”

“I don’t know. As soon as you drank from it, something happened to you. You were acting strangely.”

“Is that why you had me do the piasa pose?”

“You had to do the pose because you needed to heal yourself.”

Sophie frowned. “What do you mean, heal myself?”

“When you use the piasa pose in the right way, you can restore yourself when injured or poisoned or in any number of undesirable states,” he said.

Sophie frowned at him. “That’s not the purpose of the pose. It allows you to focus, and from there you can move on to another.”

“Perhaps, but my mother always told me that if something harmful happened to her, she would use that pose to restore herself. She said it was an easy one to hold and maintain, and she would be able to do it even if she wasn’t fully coherent.”

Sophie couldn't remember everything that she'd gone through, but she did remember the way that her mind had been wandering, racing, but even that wasn't quite right. It was almost as if her mind hadn't been fully there. She had been confused. Worse, she was aware that she had been confused. The confusion had left her unable to respond the way that she would have otherwise.

"How is it that you knew the pose?" she asked.

"What was that?"

Sophie took a deep breath. She tried to look through the darkness, but it was too dense. "How did you know how to hold the pose? You knew where my arms needed to go."

"You have demonstrated it often enough when I was with you during your training sessions," he said. "Plus my mother made sure that I was fully aware of what was involved in that pose."

She shook. "Am I better?"

"You're alive. I suppose that means you're better."

"I didn't feel as if I was sick," she said.

"I know. You were tired. You kept saying that over and over again, which was how I knew that something was wrong."

"If it was from the water, then Joralt..."

"Joralt is fine. You exploded your power when you started to pass out."

"What do you mean, I *exploded* it?"

"I think that I had been pushing you so hard to demonstrate the pose and call upon your power that when you finally did, you unleashed everything all at once. It washed over Joralt. It washed over me as well."

Sophie cocked her head at him, frowning. "What happened when it washed over you?"

"I don't think anything really happened, but I felt refreshed." He smiled and helped her to stand. Sophie wobbled for a moment as she got her feet under her. "I suppose I should

thank you for that. I didn't realize that I needed much help, but your power helped to restore me."

"How long was I out?"

"You slept for a while," he said.

"How long?"

"Two nights," he told her.

Sophie squeezed her eyes shut. "Two nights? A poisoning shouldn't have taken that much out of me."

"A poisoning would have taken that much out of you, Sophie. But it wasn't just the poisoning. You used considerable power when you turned that pose in upon yourself and then outward."

Sophie supposed that was true. If she had restored not only herself but also Joralt—and even Nevarn—then she must have used quite a bit of power.

"Two nights means that we've left Lan alone for another two nights," she said.

"Your brother is a skilled and powerful Taihg soldier," Nevarn said. "He's fully equipped to handle anything that comes his way."

Sophie had come out to help Lan, but she felt as if she had done nothing for him. Now she was the one who needed help. Now she was the one trapped in the forest.

Sophie felt useless. She felt she was disappointing her brother. She felt...

Nevarn patted her on the hand, and she looked at him.

"We're going to get to him," he said.

"I just feel—"

"I know what you feel," he said.

Sophie sighed, trying to pull herself together.

Lan needed that from her. He needed her to have focus. He needed her to be prepared for whatever might come their way.

If the forest was this dangerous, what else might they encounter?

“We should get moving,” she said.

“Only when you’re ready.”

“I have to be ready,” she said. “If I’ve been sleeping for the better part of two days, then I have to get up and get moving.”

“Like I said, only if you’re ready.”

Nevarn handed her something, and Sophie took it, realizing that it was a pastry. She unfolded the wrapping around it and took a tentative bite. The crust was still flaky and delicious. The boysenberries inside sent tingles across her tongue.

“I thought you were supposed to save these.”

“I was supposed to save them for when we rescued your brother, but I think you need this one. Besides, you were arguing pretty firmly for me to give you one while you were poisoned.”

“Was I?”

“You don’t remember?”

Sophie shook her head. That sent everything spinning, leaving her mind swimming. “I don’t really remember anything from that time,” she said.

“That might be for the best.”

“Why? What else did I do?”

“Well...”

She pushed away from him and crossed her arms. “What?”

Sophie could easily imagine the kinds of things that she might have said or done, just as she could easily imagine the way that Nevarn would use them against her.

“Nothing,” he said, smiling. “You didn’t do anything other than beg me for the pastry. You really love them.”

“I do. I really do.”

She took another bite, this one larger than the last, and she savored the taste as the boysenberries worked their way down her throat.

“I need water,” she said.

“Don’t drink from the stream.”

“I won’t, but now I don’t know which of my waterskins is safe to drink from.”

Nevarn nodded. “I kind of figured that. I dumped them both out.”

Her heart dropped. “You did?”

Nevarn leaned forward. “The water was contaminated, so I had to act as if neither of them was safe.”

“We won’t have enough water.”

“I’ve got an extra waterskin. We’ll be fine.”

Fine. That was presuming that they’d get out of the forest and find a stream where they’d be able to refill the bottles. That assumed they would survive all of this. Sophie wasn’t convinced they would. How could she be?

“Here,” he said, handing her one of his waterskins.

She took it feeling a hint of guilt. “I shouldn’t drink your water.”

“Why not? You’ve already eaten my canila, so what’s the difference with this?”

He smiled as he spoke, but Sophie didn’t feel the humor in the situation. She wasn’t sure she could. She held the waterskin. As dry as her mouth felt, she didn’t know if she could take his water. It didn’t feel quite right.

As she looked at Nevarn, she found him waiting. Watching. There was nothing but encouragement in his eyes.

Sophie tipped up the waterskin and took a drink. “What about Joralt?”

“The horse will be fine. He’s already been up and eating, so I don’t think we need to be worried about him. Besides, he

seems smart enough. He hasn't gone back to the water, as if he knows it was responsible for what happened to him."

Sophie found Joralt chewing on some grass near the base of a tree. She patted his flank, running her hands along his gray coat, then paused. "What makes the grass any safer than the water? It has to be watered somehow."

"I'm sure it does, but I suspect rains like the one we had a few nights back are enough to dilute whatever is in the stream that knocked you out."

A few nights back. That part stuck with her. How could it have been a few nights?

"Can we go?" she asked.

Nevarn joined her. "Whenever you're ready."

She tapped on Joralt's neck. The horse was already saddled, though she didn't know if Nevarn had ever removed his saddle. She suspected that Nevarn had been taking care of him during the time she'd been out, and because of that, she felt as if she owed him, though knowing Nevarn as she did—which it seemed wasn't nearly as well as she once would have claimed—he probably didn't feel the same.

They started walking. When Joralt pulled, she let him lead. Nevarn didn't say anything. Sophie's strength gradually returned. It took a long time, long enough that she wasn't entirely sure it would fully return, though with each step through the forest, she felt some part of her beginning to recover.

"Where do you think the horse is leading us?" Nevarn asked.

Sophie realized that he no longer objected to the idea that Joralt was the one leading.

"I don't know where he's leading us, but we should follow him."

Sophie looked at the horse. Maybe Lan had formed some magical connection to him.

“There are some Taihg who have a connection to their animals,” Nevarn said. “Usually they’ve been working with them for years, so that they can find each other even when separated. Everything I’ve heard about Joralt suggests that he isn’t fully trained yet.”

Sophie patted Joralt on the neck again. “You’re trained well enough, aren’t you?” she whispered. Joralt whinnied. She smiled. It was almost as if he understood her, though she doubted that was anything more than his interest in her talking to him.

They headed through the forest for a while, Joralt guiding them by brushing up against Sophie when he wanted her to change direction.

It was the middle of the day when a deep rumble echoed from somewhere within the forest.

Sophie looked at Nevarn. “What do you think that is?”

He shook his head. “I don’t really know. We’ve been hearing it for the last couple of days. Well, *I’ve* been hearing it for the last couple of days. It’s not regular at all, but when it comes, it’s just like that.”

“That’s not thunder.”

“No.”

The sound reminded her of what they’d heard during the storm, and even during the day after the storm. It was similar enough that Sophie would almost have believed that it was thunder, but there wasn’t the same energy to the air, and certainly nothing that would suggest there was a storm coming in.

“What is it, then?”

Nevarn shook his head. “The forest is strange. I’m starting to think your stories about forests are real.”

“I didn’t tell you any stories about forests,” she said.

“I guess not. The one you did tell me wasn’t really *about* a forest, was it?”

She smiled at him. “Edgar would say that it was.”

“Edgar still owes me his secret.”

“I doubt you’re going to get that out of him.”

He started to laugh. “Probably not.”

They paused after walking for a while longer. Nevarn handed her a hunk of bread, and she chewed it slowly, savoring the flavor. It had as light and crisp a crust as the pastries. Probably the same baker, though not from the tower. She’d eaten the tower pastries, and they were nothing like the ones Nevarn had.

“Where did you get those canila?” she asked.

“That’s a secret I’ve got to keep from you for now.”

“Why is that?”

“Because you want to know. If I tell you, then you won’t need me to help you find the pastries you love to eat.”

She laughed but broke off when a rumble came again. It was closer this time. Sophie tried to think about how long it had been between the sounds, but she couldn’t tell. It seemed like it had been several hours. Long enough, but at the same time, *not* long enough.

“I don’t like that,” she said.

Nevarn reached for his sword as he stared out into the forest. “I don’t, either. It hasn’t been that close before. I wonder if we’re heading toward it.”

“Why would Joralt lead us *toward* that?”

Nevarn looked at the horse. “What if that’s where you’ll find your brother?”

Sophie shivered at the thought. If that was where she’d find Lan, then maybe it wasn’t safe for her to find him.

“We should keep moving,” she said.

Nevarn took a deep breath. “I think that’s a good idea. I don’t want to spend another night in the forest.”



They moved more quickly. Neither of them spoke, and they both let Joralt lead. The horse seemed to sense the solemn nature of what they were doing, and he walked briskly. Nevarn's horse stayed with them, moving just as swiftly.

When the rumbling came again, it was much closer.

Sophie had the sense that they were deeper into the forest than they had been before, though she didn't know how much deeper. The forest here was incredibly vast.

"You said this runs along the border with Lorant?"

Nevarn nodded. "It does. We don't even patrol through it. There's no need. We've never seen anyone come through here. There was a time when we sent Taihg into the forest, but they never found anything, so they advised us to stop the patrols. Now I understand why."

"What if Lorant has figured out some way through the forest?"

"I don't know. Then we'll have to be as ready as we can be."

Sophie thought about what she'd felt. It didn't remind her of the power that she'd felt when Darius had attacked. That had been something else. Dark. Deadly. Terrifying.

"I don't know what this is," Sophie said, "but it's not the Shavln. When Darius released that power, it was something else altogether. I don't really know how to describe it."

There had been no deep rumbling. There had been nothing like this. Just the sense of power. Of course, she hadn't been able to determine what that power was when Darius had released it. She had been so focused on surviving—and on seeing her brother again after so long apart from him.

The rumbling came again.

Sophie focused on Joralt.

The horse had been nervous during the storm and during the run through the forest, but during this rumbling, he didn't seem to have the same nerves.

That might mean there was nothing to fear.

Or it might mean Joralt wasn't aware of anything to fear.

Sophie watched Nevarn. He was certainly aware of the potential danger.

"We could turn around," she whispered.

It felt right to whisper, though she wasn't sure it was necessary. There was no one else around.

"We could turn around, but then you'd never know if you were right about Lan."

"We're following a horse," she said.

"Your brother's horse."

Sophie sighed. He was Lan's horse. And he seemed to know something that she didn't.

They continued onward.

Darkness started to fall around them, making it difficult to see, but there was a sense of something here.

Light.

Sophie was sure of it.

"Do you see that?" she whispered.

"What am I supposed to see now?"

"There's a pale light."

It seemed to come from all around.

Sophie studied the light, trying to better understand just what it was and what it meant. The light came up from the ground, drifting everywhere around them. There was a sense of... warmth, she thought, though that might be her imagination. Whatever it was seemed comforting.

Joralt followed the light.

"He senses it, too," Sophie said.

"I don't know if that's a good thing or not," Nevarn said.

"Maybe not. It's the first different thing that we've seen."

“Everything that we’ve seen has been different. This entire forest is different.”

“Not like that. It’s *different*.”

Nevarn glanced over and then shrugged.

They continued onward in silence. Every so often, the wind would pick up and drift through the treetops. It was a sigh, as if the forest were breathing. Sophie could have sworn she heard something within that sighing, though she knew that was only her imagination.

Joralt nudged them farther. Then he started to pull.

Sophie pulled back. “Not so fast,” she said.

He pulled even harder on the reins. She tried to resist, but he pulled too hard. She lost her grip.

Joralt bolted.

Sophie started after him, but the horse disappeared between the trees.

She stood there, staring after him. “What just happened?”

“He was strange while you were out. Maybe he was sick as well.” Nevarn looked at her. “How do you feel?”

“I’m getting better the longer we go on. Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s possible you haven’t fully recovered.”

Sophie studied the faint white light before her. It glowed softly, and the farther they went, the brighter the light became. “It feels comforting.”

“That’s what worries me,” Nevarn said.

“Why?” She smiled. “Are you afraid of magic?”

“Yes.”

They went a little farther, and Sophie watched Nevarn, curiosity filling her. “Your mother is the most powerful magical user in this part of the world. Why are you afraid of magic?”

“She’s not the most powerful, Sophie. I think if you were to ask her, she would tell you that the kind of magic she uses is one of experience and training, but there are others who are even more powerful than her. And like I told you, there are different kinds of power in the world. Her kind is but one.”

They continued toward the light. With each step, the light filled the space between the trees even more. It reminded Sophie of the mist that had drifted from the forest the first night they’d entered it, only there wasn’t the same disconcerting feeling coming off the light.

“Who would she say is the most powerful?”

Nevarn shrugged, still holding the reins of his horse. She noticed that he gripped them more tightly than he had before. “I don’t really know. That’s not the kind of thing we talk about. Magic isn’t always what it seems. That’s something my mother said when I was younger. I didn’t know what she meant when I was little, but the more I’ve been around those who can use magic, the more I’ve seen what it was.”

The pale light was strange. Sophie wasn’t sure if it was sorcery or something else. And if it was something else, she knew that they needed to be careful. What if it represented another of these powers that the Raven Queen had mentioned to Nevarn?

Slowly the light began to shift, sliding toward them.

“I think we need to move.” Nevarn looked at her. “I’m not sure I can protect us, and I don’t think we want that light to envelop us.”

# CHAPTER 21

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The light swirled around Lan, and with it came a sense of warmth.

It was the first sign that things were not the same as they had been when the Mistress of the Woods had attacked him. Her power had been cold, working through him like the grip of death. This was like balmy sunlight shining down upon him. Lan felt the warmth rolling through him, along with a sense of relief.

He breathed in that sense and let it out slowly.

He couldn't see what was above him, other than the glowing of light.

As he walked, the soft whispering that he'd heard on the other side of the river came back. Lan paused to listen to it.

*She comes.*

Did that mean the Mistress of the Woods?

He had to be careful. At the same time, he didn't want to be surprised, so he headed toward the light.

The rumbling persisted, but it seemed distant, as if the thisten came no closer. He was still holding his sword, and he squeezed the hilt, feeling a bit ridiculous heading into the forest like this, chasing a glowing, which was probably nothing more than a patch of sunlight.

It began to intensify.

*Not sunlight.*

*Magic.*

Warmth washed over him again.

It felt so different from what he had felt in the presence of the Mistress of the Woods. Maybe it was the Hunter.

*Or maybe it's some other god.*

Lan was not normally so caught up in thoughts of the gods, but coming into a forest like this, facing the thisten as he had, seeing entities that were so powerful that he could only conceive of them as gods, left him thinking such thoughts.

He took another few steps and saw a figure bathed in light.

She was slender, tall—easily taller than him. She wore a forest-green cloak with dappled colors that looked like leaves flowing down it, reminding him of the Hunter's cloak.

“Hello?” His voice cracked, and it sounded strange to his ears. “Show yourself.”

This was dangerous, especially if it was the Mistress of the Woods.

But warmth continued to wash over him.

The figure stepped toward him. She had golden hair, unlike the Mistress of the Woods.

Lan raised his sword.

“There is no need for that,” she said.

It was the same thing the Mistress of the Woods had said to him.

He kept his grip tight on his sword, ready for whatever might come his way.

“Who are you?”

“Why have you come here?” she said.

“I came here looking for safety.”

Lan spoke before he even realized what he was doing. But as he said these words, he realized they were true. Given what

he'd experienced, Lan didn't know if there was any safety for him here.

"What did you find?"

"Danger," Lan said.

The figure laughed softly, her voice carrying across the distance to him. It was soft and musical, and it reminded him of the voice of the Mistress of the Woods. It put Lan on edge.

"You aren't going to need that," she said.

Lan continued to hold out his blade. "The Mistress of the Woods claimed the same."

"She would make such a claim."

"Who is she?"

"Dangerous," the figure said.

"And who are you?"

"Dangerous."

"Are you with her?"

"No."

"Are you with the thisten?"

Somebody had to be responsible for it, from what the Hunter had said.

"No," she said. "I oppose the darkness."

"And what of the Mistress of the Woods?"

"She is a herald of darkness."

The figure watched him for a long moment, and the glowing light swirled away from her, seeming alive. It reminded him of water rippling, though it flowed through the air in a strange manner. When it struck him, sweeping over him, he trembled. There was warmth within it, but also something more.

"You have been marked," she said.

"I keep hearing that."



“From who?”

“From the Mistress of the Woods. From the Hunter.” When he said the last, he tried to gauge her reaction. Lan had to know if she would reveal any familiarity with the Hunter. He suspected that she knew him.

“You were marked by Odian. Interesting. Then you were touched, but you survived.”

“I’ve heard that as well,” he said.

“You aren’t surprised?”

“Considering that I don’t really know what it means that I was marked or touched or anything, I don’t know whether or not I should be impressed.”

“Most who are touched perish. They serve in a different way then.”

“How can they serve if they perish?”

“Pray you don’t find out.” Her singsong voice was musical.

Lan took a step toward her, curiosity overwhelming his trepidation. She had pale skin, but it glowed with the same light that he saw everywhere around him. Her hair took on some of the glowing as well, but it was her crystalline blue eyes that seemed to call to him. There was something about her that reminded him of all the stories that his nana had told him.

She struck him as power. Magic.

“Darkness has its hand upon you, though I sense something else within you. A struggle.”

Lan shook his head. “There is no touch of darkness upon me.”

“Perhaps you don’t yet see it.”

He took a step toward her again, and he got close enough that he was able to feel the magic coming off her. “What is the herald?”

“You have seen her.”

“And the thisten?”

“Another forced to serve as welcome to the darkness.”

“The Shavln,” he said. Lan wasn’t sure whether that was right, but it felt right.

The figure was quiet, light shimmering from her, making Lan wonder if she was even real.

But she didn’t do anything. He was in no danger.

Finally he sheathed his sword. Energy shifted, as if that was what it had been waiting for.

“Who is the Hunter?”

“One who serves,” she said.

Not Darish, then. What if this figure was a god? Lan’s mind worked through the various gods that he knew, but none he’d heard of would look like this. “Serves what?”

“Serves life,” she said.

Lan chuckled. “Serves life? It sounds strange to me that a Hunter would serve life.”

“It sounds strange that a soldier would as well,” she said.

“Are you saying that I serve life?”

“I’m saying that you could.”

“Why have you come to me?”

For some reason, Lan felt that answer was important. She had come to him, but more than that, it had seemed she had called to him. He believed she had wanted him to reach her, and now that he had, Lan felt he needed answers.

“I did not come to you. You came to me.”

“You revealed yourself, though.”

“Because I wondered whether you could serve.”

Lan shifted his feet, uncertainty growing. “Serve what?”

“Life, of course.”

The strange warmth washed over him again.

“What are you doing?”

“Testing,” she said softly. “I did not expect one such as you. Perhaps Odian knows better than I ever could.”

Lan could no more escape from what she did than he had been able to escape from the Mistress of the Woods. There wasn't the same discomfort, though there was the same helplessness. When it eased, he staggered back and reached for his sword.

She waved her hand, and his sword plunged back into its sheath. “As I said, there is no need for that,” she said, smiling at him.

“What are you doing with me?”

“I have done nothing with you.”

“What are you doing *to* me?”

“I am helping you find your purpose, Lannerdon Varison.”

She knew his name. She had to be one of the gods, didn't she?

“Why did you call me here?”

“Was it me, or did you come because you needed to find your truth?”

She stepped toward him, and there came a sweeping sort of power that rolled through him. She raised her hand faster than a striking snake and tapped him on the forehead. Warmth flowed out of her. It slammed into Lan. The warmth continued to work through him, and his head throbbed, burning with it.

“What did you do?” he asked.

“Open your mind, Lannerdon.”

“What do you mean?”

“Open your mind so that you may see.”

“What do I need to see?”

“What all men must see. The truth.”

A wave of warmth rolled away from her and into Lan.

The sensation started in his head, throbbing as it worked down his neck and then into his chest, where it sat with his heart. From there it went into his arms, spreading toward his injury, the pain fading. It worked down into his stomach, taking away the twisting knot of hunger, and from there down into his thighs and calves. It was like water flowing over him, like a gentle rain, a healing touch.

He could do nothing.

The warmth lingered for a long time, then began to fade.

“What did you do?” Lan asked.

“What needed to be done. You are marked, and now you must be touched by more. You are called, Lannerdon Varison. It is time for you to serve.”

“Serve what?”

“Light and life.”

There was a deep rumble followed by a crackle of lightning.

When it faded, the woman was gone.

But her light wasn't gone. It was all around. It radiated from some source.

It took Lan a moment to realize where it came from.

Him.

He stood in the darkness, glowing with the strange power that the woman had pushed into him. Magic.

The Taihg needed him to connect to power—though Lan had failed before now.

Why here? And why now?

And more than anything, he was left wondering what the gods had done to him.

# CHAPTER 22

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Lan made his way through the clearing, though he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do. The rumbling of the thisten continued to make its way toward him, but there wasn't the same glow all around him. There was still some light, but it was moonlight, nothing magical.

It was the first time since coming to the forest that he had seen moonlight. It trickled down, poking free from clouds, and spread silver beams across the ground.

He had to have seen a god. What other explanation was there?

And considering Sophie chased the dangerous Shavln power, maybe the gods had decided to intervene.

Maybe they needed to.

Lan had been around Sophie when she was using her magic, and he recognized that she had considerable power, but even the power that Sophie possessed was nothing like what he had detected from this woman. That had been a pure kind of power, something even greater than what he had sensed from the Mistress of the Woods.

Perhaps only the gods would be strong enough to stop the Shavln.

Lan took a seat next to a boulder to rest. Dark thoughts plagued him. The thisten. The Mistress of the Woods. The comment about the herald. These were things that the Taihg needed to know about. There may be nothing the Taihg would

be able to do about them. These were the kinds of things that required the Karell—and the Raven Queen.

Even she might not be enough.

Lan reached the top of the steep riverbank. He started down carefully. Surprisingly, the glowing that he had seen persisted, lingering on him. It illuminated everything around him.

What had the woman—goddess?—done to him?

There were dozens of gods, though he didn't know this one. The power that had touched him had certainly felt like some touch of a god.

*But she—and the Hunter—said I'd been marked by Odian.*

That was a god he'd never heard of.

It had compelled her in some way to give him power.

*Now I have to use it.*

That would be what the gods would expect.

Lan reached the edge of the river.

He wandered along the shoreline until he found the section with the rocks that he'd thrown in. He stepped out onto the first one, wobbling for a moment, and then jumped from rock to rock across the river. Something strange happened when he did. The soft glowing light on him faded a little as he stepped in the water. When he reached the other side, the glowing intensified, as did the warmth, as if both were pushing out the cold and darkness that had come from the river.

He lingered for a moment.

The rumbling persisted, but it was far enough away that he didn't feel danger from it, though he knew that assumption was probably a mistake. Lan hurried on until he reached a stream, and he didn't dare take a drink from it any more than he had the others that he'd come upon. He could use it to guide him, if nothing else. It was easy enough to follow, especially glowing as he did.

What did his glowing mean?

The warmth stayed with him, as if it was some deep energy that bubbled within him. He believed the woman had given it to him, but maybe she had just awoken something inside him.

When the ground rumbled again, it was more intense.

He hurried along the stream. If it was the thisten, he wanted nothing more than to stay clear of it.

He couldn't see the moonlight any longer. The longer he was out here, the more the trees arched overhead. They didn't cover the stream, though. There was open sky above it, but he still didn't see any moonlight. The clouds had concealed the night sky from him.

The darkness was a constant companion. Lan wasn't sure that he would be able to see anything were it not for the glowing light emanating from him. As it was, he was at least able to see a few steps in front of him. Not much more than that.

Another stream joined the one he was following. Together they formed a wider stream. This one reminded him of the river that had surrounded the clearing where he had met the woman. He stepped up to the edge of the stream, looking down. The glowing energy coming off him glistened on the surface of the water, but it didn't penetrate very deeply.

The ground rumbled even more intensely. Lan wasn't sure what would happen if he had to face the thisten again. Maybe he could outrun it, but there would be no river to knock it into this time. It was better to run.

He followed the stream and started jogging.

Every so often, he would pause to look behind him, but he didn't have a sense that anything was there. His stomach rumbled, almost as if it were trying to compete with the rumbling coming from the sky and from the thisten.

He tried to ignore it, but not only was he hungry; he was thirsty. The rainwater hadn't been enough to truly quench his thirst, and it did nothing to sate his hunger. Lan needed to find something to eat. He had to find his way out of the forest first.



Another rumbling, this time even louder.

It was becoming clear that he would have to face the thisten. How could he do so better?

He glanced up into the trees. He might be able to use them to escape, but he didn't know if the thisten could climb. It might be better to stay on the ground and remain prepared.

As he ran, he tried to control his breathing. He tried to control every aspect of his reaction, including his pounding heart. But trying to slow that wasn't effective.

The rumbling thundered beneath him now. The ground was shaking.

He needed to find a good place to make a stand.

There was a small ring of trees just to the right of the massive stream. Lan paused in the center of the trees, deciding how he might best position himself. One of the trees was enormous, nearly as wide around as Lan was tall. He put that tree to his back and faced outward. His whole body continued to glow with a soft white light, and it reflected off the surface of his blade.

He thought about what technique had worked before. Jabbing at the thisten's throat had seemed to work, but he had to get his sword into the creature's mouth. There had to be a soft spot there he could take advantage of.

He took a deep breath, feeling the warmth filling him, making even his sword glow a little. When the ground rumbled again as the thisten approached, he was as ready as he could be.

The thisten prowled toward him.

It approached more slowly than before, and it regarded him differently, as if it recognized something had changed in Lan. He swung his sword, and the blade left a glowing trail in the air.

"Come on, then!" he yelled at the creature. "If you think to attack, then attack!"

The thisten prowled back and forth, as if trying to decide how to approach Lan.

He focused his breathing. He focused his heart. He steadied both of them as he prepared for the attack.

Then he took one moment to squeeze his eyes shut. It was only the briefest of moments, but in it, he thought about the strange energy he'd felt coming off the woman. That energy flowed away from him, and with it came an increase in the glowing.

Lan pushed power through his body, and he burst into a bright white light.

Strangely enough, it seemed as if the woman had given him some access to her power.

It swept along his blade.

The thisten paused.

Lan darted forward. The blade glanced off the thisten's paw, but it sliced through the hide in a way that it hadn't before. Maybe the glowing allowed him to actually harm the thisten.

The thisten growled.

Lan darted forward, stabbing. Now when his blade reached the creature's shoulder, blood sprayed.

But the wound was already starting to knit itself back together.

How was he supposed to stop a creature that could heal itself so quickly?

*Fight faster.*

Light bloomed in the growing night. The creature howled at him, and Lan held back, holding his glowing sword out.

The sword wasn't glowing. *He* was.

The thisten backed away from the blade.

Lan darted forward again.

This time, when he brought his sword around, the thisten swiped at it, but Lan didn't bother to duck. The creature's claws ripped through Lan's arm.

The glowing sputtered, but then heat washed over him.

The thisten reached for him again, and Lan swept the blade out, cleaving through the creature's arm. The thisten roared, the ground trembling.

Lan darted forward. He would drive his blade into the creature's brain. He would end this. Lan lunged, and the thisten swatted at him with its other arm.

Lan rolled to the side, trying to avoid the attack.

The thisten pounced.

The creature put all its weight on top of Lan, and he tried to wrestle himself free, but the enormous beast pressed down on him. There was heat and a foul odor, but worse than that was the sense of some dark energy that pushed down upon him.

Lan needed to get his sword arm free—and he couldn't.

The thisten snapped at him.

Lan jerked his head back, avoiding the terrible snout gnashing at his flesh. Drool dripped onto Lan's face. He cried out, and he tried to force the thisten off him, only he couldn't.

The power the goddess had given him wasn't enough.

The thisten was going to crush him.

# CHAPTER 23

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The light flickered for a moment as Sophie neared.

There was something strange about it. The warmth within the light triggered a feeling within her. Comfort. Home. Something that she had been missing. As she headed toward the light, she ignored Nevarn and his warning glances.

The light illuminated the forest all around her. The trees were enormous in this part, though they had been enormous in all parts of the forest. Some of the trees had massive root systems that arched out of the ground, as if the tree were walking on stilts. She had to climb up and over them, and Nevarn followed, leading his horse.

She still hadn't seen Joralt.

*Where has that Darish-cursed horse gone?*

Nevarn raised a hand to caution her. Sophie appreciated it, but he didn't have any power, so there was unlikely to be anything that he could do here. It would have to be her. Sophie headed forward, tentatively making her way toward the light. Nevarn trailed after her.

"Where do you think Joralt ran off to?" she whispered.

"I don't know. I didn't expect him to get spooked like that."

"No? Considering what happened with Lan, I thought that him getting spooked was sort of expected."

When she had seen the horse within the city, she hadn't believed that Joralt would be spooked by anything, though if

he was scared of something magical, then perhaps that would make sense.

As they paused, another trembling came through the forest. This one was deep and rumbled through the ground, not like a storm at all. When Sophie looked at Nevarn, the worried expression on his face had deepened.

“We are going to be fine,” she said.

Nevarn nodded. “I know.”

“I was saying that mostly for myself,” she said with a smile.

She took a deep breath and then focused for a moment on one of her poses. This time, she used the prayer pose. It seemed to be the most fitting, not only because the prayer pose would allow her to access a bit more power, but also because she thought she could pay homage to Darish with the prayer pose, and she needed the woodsman god to lend her strength while here in the forest.

His forest.

She felt she was an outsider, as if she was somehow intruding upon Darish’s home, and that was something she very much knew she needed to be careful of.

Nevarn hesitated as he caught up to her. “Something doesn’t feel right,” he said.

“Something’s not felt right since we first entered the forest,” she said.

“I understand that. It’s just—”

There came another rumbling. It trembled in the ground, working up through the trees, and Sophie staggered. For a moment, she lost control over the prayer pose. Then she managed to secure it once again. Sophie felt considerable power all around her.

She braced herself, readying the prayer pose to connect to her own source of power.

Could she do it while walking?

Nevarn watched her. “What are you doing?”

“There’s something out here, and I’m testing if I can detect anything about it,” she said softly.

“Can you?”

She shook her head. “I can tell there is something, but...”

The rumbling didn’t return, and Sophie was thankful. When Nevarn started forward, she followed him. There was a glowing light in the distance, but then she heard a cry in the forest.

“You heard that, right?” Sophie asked.

Nevarn nodded.

They hurried forward. Neither said anything, but Nevarn had his sword at the ready. Sophie would need time to prepare her poses, unfortunately. But she needed to know what was up ahead.

The light started to flicker.

She raced forward and burst into a clearing.

Trees surrounded her. An enormous bear growled, the ground rumbling and rippling underneath it, and she realized with a start that someone struggled beneath the bear.

The glowing seemed to emanate from that person.

*They have magic.*

Sophie did not understand the kind of magic, but she could feel it strongly.

She had to do something.

Pausing at the edge of the clearing, she started to form the ithalar pose.

It was a complicated bit of magic, and it involved concentration, but when formed in the right way, it would allow her to use her magic in something akin to an explosion. At least, that was the way it had always seemed to her.

The person cried out. Sophie didn’t have much time.

Distantly she was aware of Nevarn shouting at her.

He grabbed her arm, pulling on her.

She shook him off. “They need my help!”

“You don’t know that. If you draw that *thing’s* attention, we’re going to need—”

“We’re going to help!”

At least, *she* intended to help.

The ground trembled again. Sophie nearly lost her footing.

She struggled to hold the pose and shifted to a wider stance. It wasn’t the way the ithalar pose was supposed to be formed, but at this point, Sophie didn’t care.

“What if the creature is the one you’re supposed to help?” Nevarn asked.

Sophie glanced over at him. Nevarn looked scared. She understood. As soon as she’d seen the bear, there had been something of the same fear coursing within her. Something was wrong, though she wasn’t entirely sure what that something was. But what she detected from the bear left her trembling.

It was a dark power. Cold. Malevolent. She *knew* it was.

She felt the opposite about whoever lay beneath the bear, needing her help. That was a warmth, a comforting sort of power. Familiar.

She *had* to help.

Sophie took a deep breath and formed the pose.

As it took hold, she felt the energy flowing within her. It started deep within her body, from somewhere near her feet, and then worked up along her legs, into her chest, and finally, through her head.

What she needed to do next was release the power, but releasing it would be tricky. She had to shift her stance.

When she’d worked with this pose before, there hadn’t been anything controlled about her release. This time, she felt



the need to hold a tight control over what she did.

“Get down,” she warned.

She couldn't see Nevarn, but she didn't want to hurt him. Releasing the energy this way would be a danger to him if he didn't get down.

The bear must have detected what she was doing.

It turned toward her.

*Not* a bear.

Sophie didn't know what it was, but the long snout covered in blood made it look like no bear she'd ever seen. Dark eyes glittered within its head, as if it summoned the power of the night. It roared. The ground trembled with it.

Sophie shifted her stance. Power surged from her.

She tried to direct it. When it came to some of the more basic stances, she had an easier time controlling the flow of magic. When it came to some of the more complicated stances, she struggled, much like she struggled now. Still, she held on to the direction that she wanted, and tried to push the power toward the creature.

It slammed into it.

The bear roared.

It was easier for her to think of it as a bear. If she let herself think of it as anything else, she didn't know if she would be able to continue to face it. At least by thinking of it as a bear, she knew she wouldn't be overwhelmed by thoughts about what it was.

The power had done nothing.

The ground rumbled again.

“I think you've upset it,” Nevarn said.

He got to his feet, and now he had his sword unsheathed—not that a sword would do much against a creature like this. Whatever this thing was, it had the ability to withstand the power she had turned on it.

That suggested *real* magic.

Sophie needed to use a different pose, but which one?

So many of the poses she knew were meant for protection, not for attack. Using one for protection may not even be of much help at this point, not with the creature focused on her. She could feel the rumbling through the ground. Whatever this bear was trying to do, it involved the power it had over the ground.

She had to separate it from that—somehow.

Sophie didn't know any poses that would work like that.

Could she *wrap* the bear in some power?

Maybe she could lift it and hold it in the air. Doing so would sever its connection to the ground. A pose Ridaln had taught her might work, but she hadn't practiced it in quite some time.

Sophie started to make the solant pose.

It was a strange posture, one where she went low, legs spread out to either side, her arms held high overhead. Normally, she'd concentrate as she made the pose—any pose—but in this case, speed was essential.

If only she could use magic the way Ridaln had been able to.

However, if she was wishing for magical control, she should wish for it to be more like what the Raven Queen could do. That power was incredible. As far as Sophie had been able to tell, she barely moved anything.

But Sophie had to walk before she could run.

She felt like she had been walking for a long time. She wanted to jog.

It was difficult for her to figure out how to form the pose, but as she stretched her legs out to either side, raising her arms, the energy started to build within her. Sophie focused on that energy, and she barely paused as it began to pour out of her. She let it flow straight from her and toward the bear.

It was as simple as tipping her arms a little bit.

As she aimed the power at the bear, it circled the creature. The bear struggled within the energy Sophie held, but she focused on the pose. Sophie had to hold the pose as exactly as possible so she might be able to trap the bear.

Once it was trapped, she had to hope she could lift it.

The bear ripped at her power. As it struggled, she realized it was missing an arm.

Whoever lay beneath the bear had harmed it.

Sophie shifted her hands, sliding them slowly upward to raise the creature. When she had worked on this pose with Ridaln, it had been a matter of testing whether she could transfer energy from one side of the room to another, using her control to demonstrate success.

At the time, he had made her practice on something as simple as an apple. Sophie had failed time and again, only now she couldn't fail. However, now this wasn't a case of lifting an apple from one side of the room to another. This was a matter of raising an oversized bear up into the air.

As she raised the creature, the figure underneath rolled to the side. The sword he carried gleamed, and there was a coating of blood on it. The man got to his feet, turning toward her.

Sophie's breath caught.

"Lan?"

She almost lost control of the pose, but as the bear struggled against her, she solidified it. She wrapped the power more tightly.

A dozen questions raced through her mind. How had Lan made an enemy of this bear?

*How is he glowing?*

"Sophie?" Even his voice sounded different. It was as if it exuded the same glowing light that his body did. He took a

step toward her, but the bear continued to snarl, snapping at the cage she held.

Sophie struggled with it, trying to keep the bear trapped within.

Her arms trembled. Her legs started to burn.

Nevarn came up behind her, resting a hand on her shoulder. "What can I do, Sophie?"

His slight touch was too much.

It disrupted her control over the cage.

The bear dropped, the pose collapsing. The creature lunged at her, and Sophie reacted as quickly as she could, forming the gilán pose, holding it around both herself and Nevarn.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"You were fading. I was trying to help you," he said.

"I had it," she said.

Only now she didn't.

Now the bear was outside the gilán pose barrier, but so too was Lan.

The bear slammed into the barrier, and though she was holding her gilán pose steady, she wasn't sure if it would protect her. This creature was somehow resistant to her magic.

Lan swung his sword at the bear.

It roared, swinging its arm at Lan, and he danced out of the way, his movements fast and fluid, deadly graceful.

Still, he was almost not fast enough.

The bear swept its massive claws at him, and Lan jumped, flipping over the paw, and landed behind the bear, sweeping his sword toward it again.

Was Lan glowing, or was it the sword?

Sophie had to push that thought out of her mind as well.

The bear hadn't been able to overwhelm her poses, at least not until Nevarn had nudged her.

“I need you to distract it,” she called out to Lan.

“I’m trying,” he said.

“Try harder.”

He grunted, and then his movements intensified.

She wasn’t sure what she expected of him, but she certainly hadn’t anticipated that he would suddenly begin to move even more rapidly. The way he danced and spun, his blade a blur, was more than she could follow.

The Taihg had made him that skilled?

He exuded the powerful bright light.

It was strange, and Sophie had no idea as to the source of it. She only knew that whatever light he held was powerful, a sign of magic that she didn’t fully understand.

Lan stabbed at the bear. Each time he attempted to stab it, the creature roared and spun toward him. Sophie was going to have to time her attack and probably use a different kind of power. She had to turn the gilán pose into something else. For her brother, she could not fail.

When Lan stabbed at the bear, it stood up and roared.

This was her chance.

Sophie slid toward the ground.

Her legs split to either side.

As she raised her arms, the power of the gilán pose parted, sliding away from her. She would be vulnerable from the time she released the gilán pose to when she managed to summon the energy of the solant pose.

“Don’t touch me,” she said to Nevarn.

She could tell that he had come close, as if he intended to help her, the way he had when she had been poisoned. That had been necessary. This time it was not.

“I just wanted to help,” he muttered.

“I know. And I thank you, but I don’t need it.”

The energy started to flow up through her. It worked from the ground, up through her legs, and then poured out of her arms. She worked as quickly as she could, trying to draw out the power before the bear could react.

It seemed to sense what she was doing. The bear turned toward her, roaring.

Lan stabbed at it.

The bear roared again, though it kept its focus on Sophie. It stalked toward her.

She turned the power of the solant upon the bear. It flowed from her hands and toward the bear. When it washed over the bear, it held. She lifted.

The bear roared again.

She ignored it.

Holding the power of the pose, she lifted the bear even higher.

As before, the bear ripped at the power. She had never felt anything like that before. It was a struggle to hold it.

“Do what you need to,” Sophie said to Lan through gritted teeth.

He swept his sword through a pattern, then struck the bear’s leg, slicing it off. The bear roared.

“You’re going to dismember it?” Nevarn asked.

“I can’t reach its head.”

“I might be able to help.” Sophie shifted the pose, and the bear started to twist within her power. When she twisted the bear completely around, it roared at her, its mouth frothing. Rage gleamed in its dark eyes, and it was mixed with something else—magic.

She could *see* it.

It was a kind of magic she’d never seen before—different even from the Shavln. Was this what she’d detected from the tower?

Sophie considered the energy that she'd detected when holding the human pose. There had been the surge of power in the distance. *This* was a distance from the tower. Maybe *this* was what she'd picked up on.

If so, why would she have been attuned to finding a bear?

It didn't make sense, but then, neither did facing a creature like this. Lan lined up behind the bear, and he lifted his sword overhead before swinging it down.

The bear rumbled again. Power exploded, slamming into the human pose.

Sophie trembled under the force of it, struggling to hold it. The bear looked up at her, the darkness in its eyes meeting her, and she trembled.

She was going to lose control of the pose.

The bear snarled again, louder. The energy shook her.

Sophie braced herself for the moment the pose collapsed.

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# CHAPTER 24

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## SOPHIE

Lan completed the arc, and his blade decapitated the bear. The head rolled away from them, leaving Lan holding his blade with the tip resting on the ground. He breathed out heavily, staring at the rest of the bear's body. The blood that poured from the wound was trapped by the power of Sophie's pose.

Sophie held the magic for a moment, leaving the body floating in the air. Finally she started to move, but her brother shook his head.

"Don't," he said, poking at the bear. There was no movement.

"I think it's dead," Nevarn said.

Lan flicked his gaze to Nevarn, his eyes widening slightly, before looking back at the bear. "I've been dealing with this Darish-cursed thing for the last few days. I want to make sure."

Sophie held the pose. Her arms and legs were burning, but for her brother she would hold on as long as she could. "Do whatever else you need to do."

Lan stepped toward the bear, and *through* the cage the solant pose created.

He shouldn't have been able to do that so easily.

He prodded at the bear with his sword, jabbing a few more times before sinking the blade almost all the way into the

center of the bear's chest. The creature trembled again, the remaining limbs flailing, before falling still.

Then Lan stepped back.

"I think it's safe now," he whispered.

Sophie could only stare at the bear. It hadn't been safe before he'd stabbed it?

The creature had trembled even after it should have been dead. How was something like that even possible? She tried not to think of it.

Sophie dragged her legs back together while lowering her arms.

When she did, the cage formed by the solant pose collapsed. The bear's body dropped to the ground the way it had when she'd lost control over it, only this time it fell harmlessly.

"Lan? How did you..." She didn't even know what questions she wanted to ask.

Instead of asking any, she raced over to him and threw her arms around his neck. Lan looked over her shoulder, seemingly watching Nevarn, before hugging her back.

"It's a good thing you arrived," he said, stepping away from her. "I'm not sure how much longer I would have been able to hold him off."

"You didn't seem to be holding anything off," Nevarn said.

Sophie glowered at Nevarn for a moment before turning her attention back to her brother. "What is that thing?"

"It's called a thisten. I'm not exactly sure what it is, but it's powerful. I didn't think it could even be killed."

"Everything can be killed," Sophie said.

"I stabbed it a few times before, and each time I did, it healed itself. It was only when I cut off an arm that I thought I had a chance. Then it jumped on me."

Lan rubbed his chest and held out his arm, glancing down at it.

It looked unharmed. For that matter, *Lan* looked unharmed, despite everything that he had obviously gone through.

“What happened to you?” Sophie asked.

She took a step back to look at him, paying attention to the way that he glowed, but she couldn’t understand what the glow was. She only knew that power was emanating from him.

She didn’t think she imagined that power. It seemed real enough. However, her brother had never had any magic. She was the one who had magic. How could *he* now have it?

“I was out riding. I wanted to get away from the city for a while and thought that I could explore along the border. I realize that was a mistake.”

“What happened to you?”

“This thing attacked,” he said, nudging the thisten with his boot. “Broke my arm. Slashed my chest. Damaged my mail.”

Sophie studied him. He didn’t seem to have the injuries he described.

“How long have you been in this forest?” she asked.

“I don’t know. A few days? Maybe a little bit longer.”

“If you broke your arm, how is it that you look...”

Sophie wasn’t even sure how to finish. Whatever Lan had gone through had changed him. He claimed that he had broken his arm, but she had a hard time believing that he had. If he had truly broken his arm, then how had it recovered like this?

*How has he recovered like this?*

“I don’t really know,” Lan said. There was a troubled look on his face, and Sophie recognized it. She’d seen that look before, when they were younger, and realized that whatever he’d gone through bothered him. It seemed to her that this was about more than just this thisten.

“How did you find me?” Lan asked.

“We got lucky,” she said. “When your horse returned to the city—”

“How is Joralt?”

Sophie glanced at Nevarn. “Well, he *was* fine.”

“What do you mean, he *was* fine?”

“He was fine when he was with us, but he bolted.”

“He bolted on you?”

Sophie nodded. “I rode him out of the city. I figured your horse might know how to find you.”

“He’s not a bloodhound, Sophie,” Lan said, smiling at her. There was a hint of the boy that she remembered there, though it faded, leaving the Taihg soldier behind.

“I know that he’s not a bloodhound, but he seemed to know what I was asking of him, and I thought that he might be able to lead me to you.”

“Well, maybe he did.” Lan glanced down at his blade, wrinkling his nose in disgust, then walked over to the thisten and wiped the blade on the creature’s fur before sheathing it.

“He did, but not quite the way I was hoping he would.”

“I have a feeling that Joralt doesn’t do anything the way anyone thinks he will. Either way, I’m glad he brought you to me.”

“We have to walk out of here now,” she said.

“I was planning on that anyway.”

“We could ride,” Nevarn said.

“We can’t ride three up,” Sophie said, glancing at Lan. He was muscular and solid, and between him and Nevarn, it would be too much weight for the horse to carry.

“I will stay behind,” Nevarn said. “The two of you take my horse and get out of the forest.”

“I’m not leaving you behind,” Sophie said.

Nevarn smiled, though there was a strange glint in his eyes. “Lan was injured. And you’ve been through enough here.”

Lan glanced at her. “What did you go through?”

“It’s sort of hard to explain. This forest is...”

“Strange,” Lan said, his voice a whisper.

Sophie nodded. “Strange. That fits. I made the mistake of drinking from one of the streams.”

“I think that could happen to anyone,” Lan said.

He didn’t say anything more, which left Sophie wondering whether her brother had made the same mistake. She looked over at Nevarn. “Let him have some of your water.”

“It’s fine. Really, Sophie,” Lan said.

“It’s not fine, Lannerdon. You need to drink.”

Nevarn pulled one of the waterskins and handed it to Lan. Lan took it, tipped it back, and took a deep drink.

When he was done, he wiped his mouth, handing the waterskin back to Nevarn. “Thanks. I think we’re close to the edge of the forest, so it shouldn’t be much longer before we manage to get out of here.”

Nevarn chuckled, ignoring Sophie’s hard look. “We aren’t close to the edge of the forest. And we still have the dangers of the forest to get through.”

Sophie watched Nevarn, wondering what else he knew, but her brother caught her attention.

Lan leaned down and ripped off a strip of cloth from his cloak, and he wrapped it around the thisten’s head.

“What are you doing?”

“I need to bring this with me,” he said. “When we get back to the city, the Taihg need to know about this thing. We’ll have to decide what we’re going to do about it.”

“Why would you have to do anything?” Sophie asked.

“This isn’t the only one.”

“I thought you said you’d been dealing with this one for a while.”

“This one, but from what I understand, these thisten serve someone else. We have to be careful until we know more about who that is.” He finished lashing his strip of fabric around the thisten’s jaw, then slung it over his shoulder.

It looked horrific, the way the head bounced off his cloak. Lan nodded to Sophie, and she couldn’t help but stare. He still glowed.

“What happened to you?” she asked.

Lan paused at the stream and stared at it for a long moment before continuing on.

“I don’t think he’s well,” Nevorn whispered. “I know he must’ve gone through something out here, but...”

Sophie sighed. She raced to catch up to her brother. “Lan?”

“I don’t know what happened to me. When I got injured, I stumbled through the grasslands along the border with Lorant.” He took a deep breath. His eyes seemed haunted, leaving Sophie wondering just what he’d experienced during this time. “I wandered. For a while, I didn’t even know where I was or what I was doing. I suppose I still don’t. When I found the forest, I thought I could head through it.” He grunted, the sound a soft laughter more than anything else. “Little did I know how strange it would be and how the forest would try to hold me here.”

“The forest *is* strange.”

“I survived, though the thisten attacked me while I was here. It wasn’t even the worst thing.”

They reached a point where two streams merged. Lan looked along the length of either stream before turning to the merged stream that stretched out before him.

“What was the worst thing?” she asked.

“The Mistress of the Woods.”

He continued onward, leaving Sophie trailing him.

Nevarn caught up to her and grabbed her wrist. “I think we need to be careful with your brother. I don’t know what he’s dealt with here, but...”

“But nothing. That’s my brother, and I need to help him,” she said.

“You did. You found him. Now we have to get him back.”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing?”

“I don’t know. Where does he think he’s leading us?”

Sophie watched as Lan followed the stream. There was nothing about what he did that she could explain, but she had the sense that he had a purpose in heading this way.

“He’s been in the forest for a few days now.”

“About the same as us. That doesn’t mean he’s an expert here.”

Sophie hurried up to Lan, leaving Nevarn leading his horse behind her. If only Joralt hadn’t run off on her, they would have had an easier time getting out of the forest.

“Who is the Mistress of the Woods?” she asked. “Is she the one who gave you... whatever this is?”

He still glowed, though he didn’t seem to be quite as bright as he had been before.

“Not her. She’s dangerous. Dark.”

“Then who?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t tell me.”

“What *do* you know?”

Lan looked over at her. Despite the glowing, he remained haunted.

Ever since he’d come to Neylash and rescued her, Sophie had believed that her brother knew what he was doing. He had trained and become the soldier that he’d always wanted to be. Now he was a Taihg, and now he was incredibly skilled—only she didn’t know if what had happened to him had changed his ambition.

“Nothing clear. I don’t know if this is some magic like you have,” he started, glancing in her direction, “or if this is something of the gods. Either way, I need to get back to the Taihg for answers. Then we’ll have to go and find the Hunter.”

Sophie blinked at the mention of the gods. Lan had never been one to follow the gods. Had his time in the Taihg changed him so much? “The Hunter? Is that a member of the Taihg?”

Lan shook his head. “The Hunter was here in the forest with me. I think he saved me from the Mistress of the Woods, though I don’t know why.”

Lan sighed, looking at Sophie as if what he’d said made perfect sense.

She could only gawk at him.

There was nothing she could say in response.

*Maybe these are gods.*

Lan followed the stream, and Sophie and Nevarn followed Lan. Sophie remained quiet, though she found herself looking over at Nevarn every so often, and she saw him watching Lan with a troubled expression.

Lan remained glowing.

She hadn’t said anything about it to Nevarn, and he hadn’t said anything about it to her. It made her question whether Nevarn was even aware of it. Maybe he couldn’t see the glowing. Something about Lan had changed, which suggested magic. As far as she knew, Lan hadn’t had any magic before. And given what he had claimed about his injuries, how he had broken his arm, he should still be injured—unless magic had healed him.

What kind of magic was it?

Sophie looked around the forest, thinking about what Nevarn had said the Raven Queen had claimed about powers. Could there be something in the forest? Maybe Darish had healed Lan, though Sophie had never heard of the woodsman god doing such a thing.



It was late—or early, as she no longer knew the time—when the trees began to thin. Pale streamers of moonlight made it to the forest floor, where they hadn't before. Sophie's pace quickened, but so did Lan's.

She looked over at Nevarn. "See? He's found the way out of the forest."

"Yes, but to where?"

"What do you mean?"

"The forest stretches between Reyash and Lorant. Which side has he brought us out on?"

Sophie looked over at Lan, once again studying the glowing and the strangeness about him. Nevarn was right. The forest had changed him.

What if it had changed him for the worse?

What would Sophie do if that were the case?

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# CHAPTER 25

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By the time they reached the edge of the forest, Lan was exhausted. He didn't know how much of it was from lack of sleep and how much of it was from fighting the thisten, but he felt drained. He wanted only to sleep. It seemed as if it had been weeks since he had last rested.

As he walked, he looked down at his arm. He remembered the thisten attacking it, and he could still feel it throbbing. However, now it throbbed with a warmth and an energy that it hadn't before. That warmth worked through him, the gift from the woman in the forest, though he wondered whether it was a gift he was meant to keep.

"We could rest for a little while," Lan said.

How much had Nevarn shared with Sophie about his capture and rescue?

"We should keep heading back," Nevarn said.

"I don't know where we are," Lan admitted.

The forest was vast, and reaching the edge of it had taken luck more than judgment. He had followed the streams, but even now, as he looked at the latest stream, he wondered where it flowed from. The forest ended in rolling grassland, and though the grassland reminded him of where he had first been attacked by the thisten, he didn't know if it was the same.

Could he have journeyed through the forest only to emerge where he had entered it?

He had hoped that he would find his way free so that he could return to Valan—and to the Taihg—but Lan didn't know if that was going to be possible.

Not before he rested.

“What do you think?” he asked Sophie.

His sister watched him. “You're asking my opinion?”

“You don't think I should?”

“It's just unusual.”

Lan chuckled. “You have been working with the Karell.”

Sophie shook her head. “Not the Karell. Sorcerers.”

“Is there a difference?”

Sophie nodded slowly, and when she spoke, her voice was soft. “A considerable one.”

Lan took a seat to rest. He had to shift the thisten's head so that it could sit without the teeth pressing into his back. Every so often, the jaw would pinch his back, and he realized that the teeth were snagging his cloak. It was almost as if the thisten were trying to bite him even in death.

It was a hideous thing, enormous, almost four times the size of his own head, and it was heavy. His arms throbbed from carrying it, as did his shoulders from keeping it slung over them, but it was not nearly as terrifying as it had been before. The dark eyes didn't incite the same fear as they had when the thisten had been alive. The jaw was locked in a perpetual snarl, and given the way that the thisten had been roaring when Lan had decapitated it, he suspected it would stay that way.

Sophie took a seat next to him. “I need to know more about what happened to you.”

“I've told you everything I can.”

“Who is this Mistress of the Woods?”

Lan turned and looked behind him. Nevarn remained near his horse, one hand resting on the reins, and he scanned the

horizon, as if worried about where they were.

“I don’t know who she is. When I headed into the forest, I was drawn by a light.”

“The same kind of light that is coming off you?”

Lan looked down at himself. “At the time, I would’ve said yes. Now...”

“Why not now?”

“I don’t really know whether it’s the same. She changed form. I don’t think I saw the real Mistress of the Woods, if that makes any sense.”

“It doesn’t,” Sophie said.

“Well, she trapped me in a clearing. She used some sort of magic to hold me.”

“The same sort of magic that you’re using?”

“I don’t really know. And I don’t know if she is one of the gods or...” He shook his head. “I realize how this sounds.”

“What about this other being?” Sophie asked.

“Which one?”

“How many others did you encounter?” Sophie asked.

“Besides the Hunter? There was just one more.” Lan closed his eyes, thinking about his experience with that woman. He didn’t really know anything about her. He only knew that she had incredible power. Then she had touched him... “She wrapped me with warmth, whereas the Mistress of the Woods wrapped me with cold. I should have realized something was wrong when the Mistress of the Woods held me. Something about it felt wrong. Unsettling.” He looked up at his sister. “Do you remember when we were with Nana and Papa and we had that bad snowstorm?”

Sophie nodded.

“It was like that, only worse.”

The prince glanced at Lan. “What do you mean, it was worse?”

Lan shook his head. “It was a piercing sort of cold. It worked through my entire being.”

“Only because you were too foolish to wear the right coat,” Sophie said. “Nana warned you about dressing inappropriately.”

“And I was too stubborn to listen to her at the time. I thought I knew better.”

“You always thought you knew better,” she said.

Lan snorted. Maybe he had always thought that he knew better. Now he wasn't quite as certain. Sophie was capable in a way that he had never seen her be before. “Well, this cold was like that. Only worse. I felt as if I would never warm up again. It was as if she was stealing some part of me that kept me warm.”

“What else did you experience?”

“When I came across this other woman in the forest, she left me with a different feeling. It was like coming in out of the cold. It was like sitting by the hearth with Nana and Papa, watching as Nana brushed her hair and told you stories, and looking over at Papa as he whittled.” Lan found his sister studying him. “Do you remember how that felt?”

“Like home,” Sophie whispered.

“Right. Like home. Comfortable. Warm. That was how this felt. Then she touched me on the forehead, and...” Lan looked down at himself. “All of this happened. I don't really know what it means, but something has changed. I think she gave me a gift so I could face the thisten. I think she knew that I was going to have to battle it, and she knew that I wasn't going to be able to handle it on my own.”

“And now you think these beings are the gods?”

“I don't know what to think, Sophie. If they are the gods, why are they active now?”

No one had seen the gods in a long time.

There were some—especially among the Taihg—who claimed to have a connection to the gods. But this was

something more.

He'd *seen* the woman in the forest. And the Hunter.

*Could he be Darish?*

The idea was almost too much.

"I don't know if I can handle all of this," Lan said.

"It seemed like you were able to handle it just fine," Sophie said.

"When I fought the thisten before, my sword wouldn't even cut through its hide. The fur was too thick."

"What kind of animal has fur too thick for a sword to cut through?" Sophie asked.

"An animal that has magic," Lan said. "The Hunter said the thisten was a harbinger of destruction. And then the woman in the forest said the Mistress of the Woods is a herald of darkness. Of death. The thisten, and other creatures like it, are her servants. I'm not sure if that's what they are, or if they are gods of some sort, but had you not come..."

Lan shook his head again. He couldn't imagine what would have happened had Sophie not arrived. The thisten had been sitting on his chest, and he remembered how he had felt, the way the thisten had been pressing power into him, trying to crush him with magic. Lan had resisted as much as he could, but the pressure had been such that he could barely breathe.

"I think you would have gotten free," Sophie said.

"I don't think I would have," Lan said. "It was trying to suffocate me. It knew I was able to hurt it with magic."

"The creature knew?"

Lan shrugged. "I realize how that sounds, and I realize that it doesn't make any sense to you, only—"

"It makes complete sense," Sophie said. "I felt the power. When I was trying to hold it with that pose, the creature was tearing at my magic. I've never felt anything quite like that before. How did you stay alive when it attacked you?"

“Stupidity,” he said.

“I suppose that’s something I can believe. I’ve known you long enough and well enough to know that you certainly have your way of being stupid.” She smiled at him, and he laughed.

“Thank you,” he said.

“What for?”

“Had you not come, I’d probably be dead. No one would have known what had happened to me, as the thisten would’ve torn me apart. I would’ve just been one more soldier who had died in that forest.” Lan shifted as he sat, turning to look out into the distance. “Now that we’re out, I think it’s time for you and Prince Nevarn to return to the city.”

“What? Not without you.”

“You came looking for me. You found me. I will be fine returning now.”

“I’m staying with you,” Sophie said.

“He’s not wrong,” Nevarn said, approaching. “We should return to the city. The only reason that we came out here was to find Lan, and now that we have, it’s time for us to head back.” Nevarn looked over at Lan. “That is, if that’s all right with you.”

“I think you need to. You need to warn the Karell. I’ll get back and warn the Taihg.” He watched Nevarn. “But mostly, I think you need to warn your mother.”

Nevarn lifted the straps holding the thisten’s head. “I will let them know.”

He held out a hand, and Lan shook it.

“I’m not going,” Sophie said to Nevarn.

“You can’t stay here,” Lan said.

“Why not? You are. If you’re going to stay, then I’m going to stay.”

“It’s not safe for you to remain here,” Lan said.



“Then it’s not safe for you, either. Listen. If this has some connection to Darius or the Shavln, then we need to uncover it. I’m going to figure it out.”

“We already know they are preparing their attack,” Nevam said, looking at Lan.

“There’s more to it,” Sophie said, an edge of petulance to her voice that Lan recognized. “And we are going to go together.” She sat down, crossing her arms. “You both might as well rest. We’re going to stay here until I know that Lan is heading back.”

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# CHAPTER 26

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As the sun started to creep up over the horizon, Lan stirred awake. It had been a dreamless sleep, and for that, Lan was thankful. Too often his sleep had been restless over the last few days, and restless sleep made it difficult for his body to recover.

When he woke, there was no pain.

That surprised him.

For the last few days, when he had come around, something had hurt. It had been inevitable. Often it had been his broken arm or ripped-open chest, but as those had miraculously healed, it had been pain from endless walking.

There was none of that now. The only thing that he felt was ongoing fatigue.

Lan watched his sister. She had changed in the time since they had left their home, though he had as well. It was difficult for him to see her like this, and it sometimes left him uncertain. She was strong. She had always been strong, and yet there was still an innocence about her. He doubted she would see it that way.

Finally he got up to check the horse that Nevarn had with him, and he reached into the prince's saddlebags. There was some food, and he unwrapped the bundles to find a pastry and a lump of jerky.

Lan peeled a strip of jerky away and chewed it slowly.

Nevarn stirred and looked over at Lan.

“I hope you don’t mind, but it’s been a while since I ate anything,” Lan said. “Since my horse bolted. I still can’t believe that damn animal ran off like that.”

“He came back to the barracks.”

“I imagine that caused a bit of a stir,” Lan said.

“A little bit. Jalyn and the others were getting ready to head out on a mission.”

The look on his face had Lan thinking that Nevarn was digging for information.

“Anyway,” he went on when Lan said nothing more, “had your sister not been there—”

“Why was she there?”

“She had gone down to look for you. I think she hadn’t seen you in a while. When it comes to Sophie, I’ve stopped questioning what she does and the reasons behind it.”

Lan chuckled softly. “I learned to do the same thing, too.”

“She can be stubborn,” Nevarn said.

“She certainly can.”

“She cares about you, though.”

“We’re all we have left,” Lan said. “With the loss of our parents, and then our grandparents, we have no other family. She’s strong, but sometimes I think she tries to be stronger than she needs to be.” He looked over at Sophie, and she was curled up with her knees against her chest, in much the same way as Lan was sitting. “Of course, had she not been so strong and stubborn, I might have died fighting the thisten.”

Nevarn glanced over to where the thisten’s head lay on the ground. “Were you telling the truth about it?”

“What reason would I have to lie about it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you wanted to convince your prince that you had some reason to be wandering out this way.”

“I don’t have any reason to convince you,” Lan said.

Nevarn cocked his head to the side as he regarded Lan for a while. "You two are more alike than I would've expected," he said.

"I suppose that's a compliment," Lan said.

Nevarn shrugged. "I would think so. Something has been going on in Lorant. You know it."

Lan debated how much to share with Nevarn. As the prince, he would have access to information that Lan wouldn't. Should he tell him about the Taihg leaving with the Karell? He was tempted to, as it was possible that Nevarn would know something that he could share with Lan, but he was saved by Sophie waking.

She stirred, sighing briefly, and shifted her legs. She tipped her head up, looking up at them, and smiled. "You let me sleep?"

"You looked as if you needed it," Lan said.

"There's something out here," Sophie said. She frowned, positioning her body awkwardly. Lan had the distinct impression of a translucent wave that flowed over her and outward. "I feel it."

"That's my concern," he said. "I'm going to take a look, and then I'll return."

"We have to go together," Sophie said.

"You have to get back," he said, glancing at the prince. "Somebody has to deliver a warning. Besides, I'm a Taihg. And I have that gift the woman gave me."

"The goddess," Sophie said.

Lan wanted to argue, but he wasn't sure if he could.

"Just go back," he said.

"Come on, Sophie," Nevarn said.

She let out a sigh. "Once you do this, you are going to follow us?"

"I won't be far behind you," he said.

He had no idea what he would find, but he felt this was necessary.

“If you don’t, I’m going to drag all of your Taihg colleagues after you.”

They were probably already in Lorant. If this was connected to what the Karell had been chasing, then he needed to know. Maybe Jalyn and the others were already out here.

Nevarn strapped the thisten’s head to the back of his saddle. Lan couldn’t imagine what riding with that would be like. It would stink. In fact, it already stank. The idea of traveling with the head, hearing it as it smacked up against the horse’s flank, made him thankful that he was going to be traveling on foot.

Nevarn waited at the horse for Sophie.

She came over to Lan and held her arms out, wrapping them around him. “Please be safe.”

“I’m a Taihg,” he said.

“That isn’t any sort of reassurance.”

Lan smiled at her. “It should be.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you,” she said.

“And I don’t want anything to happen to me, either. Don’t worry.” He glanced over at Nevarn. “Get back to the city. Let them know what we face. The Taihg, the Karell, and especially the Raven Queen all need to know about this. We need to be prepared for the possibility that more of these creatures will come. And they need to be ready for the Mistress of the Woods, if she really is a herald of some dark power.”

Sophie sighed. “I do like learning magic. I just wish it were easier.”

“The things that matter never are.”

She hugged him again, throwing her arms around him, squeezing him tightly in one of her ferocious hugs, then backed away, heading over to Nevarn. He helped her into the saddle, and she slid forward.

Nevarn nodded to Lan, then climbed into the saddle behind Sophie. He reached into one of his saddlebags and tossed a couple of items to Lan. “You might need these.”

Lan caught them. Food wrapped in cloth. A waterskin. There wasn’t much water in it, but hopefully, he’d find a cleaner stream to drink from. “Thanks.”

“Safe travels, Lan. The gods will watch over you.”

The gods. Lan no longer knew which god would watch over him. He had always celebrated Darish, more than any of the others, but perhaps there were other gods that he needed to consider. The woman in the forest had to be a god. And the Hunter—possibly Darish—was out there. And what of this Odian, someone who had marked him?

Lan looked down at his birthmark. He’d had it since childhood. It was shaped like an irregular cluster of stars, and a little darker than the surrounding skin. Nothing to make it remarkable. But that was what the woman—and the Hunter—had seemed to think marked him in some way.

Maybe the gods had marked him somehow.

But if so, why hadn’t they kept his parents from dying so young. Why hadn’t they saved Nana and Papa? Why make it so that everything was so difficult for him?

As Sophie and Nevarn took off, Lan watched until they became little more than a dark spot on the horizon. He looked around him. He needed to keep moving, but he hadn’t decided what he was going to do yet.

He found the stream they’d followed out of the forest and began to follow it. He could feel something pulling on him but had no idea what it was.

Sophie had detected something as well.

After walking for the better part of an hour, Lan paused to look up at the sky and take a few bites of the jerky Nevarn had left for him. He drank from the waterskin, after checking whether there was anything unusual about the water, but it tasted fine.

The stream still ran alongside him, though Lan wasn't willing to drink from it.

He crouched next to it and looked at his reflection. Mostly he looked at the sky reflected in the water, but he saw himself there as well. The beard that had grown over the last few days wouldn't impress anyone. His hair stood on end, completely disheveled and tangled. A wild look in his eyes stared back at him.

What must Sophie have thought?

Lan realized that he still glowed.

It was strange to see the light radiating off him, though it was pale. It might be that it was only pale because the sunlight washed it out, but it might also be that the power waned. He hoped he had access to enough power for a little while longer—long enough that he would be able to use it were he to encounter anything dangerous.

He moved on, looking into the stream. He saw the darkness within it, just like he had when he had been in the forest. At that time, it had been harder to see.

Was this darkness tied to what had happened to him?

He needed more answers.

The Taihg would need more answers, especially if they were going to take some action. Otherwise, they would be acting on incomplete information. He thought that he could help, see what Lorant might be doing and how they were using the Shavlñ, though he wasn't sure if he could do that quickly enough to make a difference.

He had to find the source of the darkness. If it was the Shavlñ, he needed to know why it was targeting the water and why it was affecting the forest. There had to be a reason. Sophie hadn't known what it could be, but then, she didn't know much about this power. She only knew that it was free.

Lan raced along. Every so often, he paused. Sometimes he paused to examine his surroundings, to study how the landscape shifted and changed, and other times he paused to see if he could still see the darkness within the stream. It



wasn't nearly as wide here as it had been deeper in the forest, though he hadn't yet seen any branch points or anything that would indicate that it had a reason to have changed.

There were other times when he paused to take a few bites of jerky. He didn't have much food, only enough to get him through a day or two at most, and certainly not nearly enough water to last longer, either. He would have to find a source of fresh water, possibly food.

He ran on.

Lan marveled at how quickly he was able to move. This was clearly due to the woman's power, and not at all his own natural ability. He paused at one point on a slight rise, when he thought he had seen movement, but there was nothing out there.

He followed the stream again. Gradually the day shifted, the sun starting to sink in the sky, falling behind him.

There was no sign of the forest. He'd been running for the better part of the day, and despite that, he didn't feel nearly as tired as he would have expected.

Did he still have the same glowing power?

As he leaned over the stream, the reflected sunlight made it difficult to see whether he was using up the woman's power while running, though he didn't know if such a thing was even possible. Maybe this was how she wanted him to use her power. There had been no further sound to indicate the presence of a thisten, and no sign of anything other than the stream.

When the sunlight faded, he could finally tell that he was still glowing. How much power had she given him? And why had she given it to him?

He paused to rest by the stream. Sitting there, his heart pounding, he didn't feel as tired as he should have. He thought that he needed to sleep. When he had awoken in the morning, he had felt as if he had needed to sleep, but now that he had been on the move, running, and presumably drawing upon the

strange power the woman in the forest had gifted him, he wondered if perhaps he didn't need much rest.

That didn't change how hungry he was. Lan pulled out the jerky and started to nibble at it. Before long, he'd finished all of it. He looked down at the empty wrapping and wondered if he'd made a mistake. Other than the grass, there was nothing else edible around him.

And the stream wasn't safe for him. None of this was safe for him.

A mistake.

Lan got to his feet. He started running again.

Moonlight streamed down. It was a strange change from the darkness within the forest.

It was near midnight when he felt something. Pressure. Lan didn't know how else to describe it.

He reached for his sword, unsheathing it.

He paused, feeling for any sort of rumbling, but he didn't detect anything that suggested a thisten prowled near him.

What had he sensed? Lan moved more carefully now. The ground sloped upward, but despite that, he'd been running fairly rapidly and wasn't as winded as he should be. Of course, none of this was as it should be.

He thought he should be near Lorant. There was no sign of soldiers, nothing to suggest that he was in any danger. Lan advanced carefully, moving up the slope. A sound came to him out of the darkness.

At first Lan struggled to determine what it was. The sound of water lapping gently.

*Is it the stream?*

Crawling forward, Lan stayed low, looking everywhere around him.

He saw a sign of movement. The movement came to him, turning in his direction. It looked like shadows across the horizon. Suddenly the ground trembled.

*Thisten.*

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# CHAPTER 27

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Sophie gripped the reins tightly. Having Nevarn so close to her left her a bit unsettled, though she felt as if she had misjudged him all this time.

Had it not been for Nevarn, what would have happened?

She tried not to think about that as they rode along the forest's edge. She also tried not to look behind her, not wanting to stare back at Lan as they left him.

It was difficult for her—difficult in that she wasn't sure if she should have left her brother, and difficult in that she had come all this way to find her brother, and now that she had, she was leaving him.

It was what Lan wanted, and she understood that, but leaving her brother behind, even knowing that he wanted her to do so, was hard for her.

When they stopped late in the day, Sophie climbed down from the horse's saddle and rested her hand on the saddlebags. She glanced at Nevarn when he handed her a waterskin.

"You've been quiet," he said.

"What's there to say?"

"You did what you came for. You should be relieved that your brother is unharmed."

Sophie frowned at him. "Unharmed? Lan was not unharmed. All of this"—she turned, sweeping her hand toward the forest that still loomed nearby—"is not unharmed. I don't even know what he went through, and I don't even know what

to make of that.” She motioned toward the thisten head, dangling from the saddle, the smell of it foul.

It seemed different now. Sophie couldn’t tell if it was shriveled or if it was only her imagination. Either way, traveling with the head of a creature like that, even bound as it was, made her shiver.

“Your brother is a Taihg soldier. He’s doing what he must.”

Sophie remained uncertain.

Perhaps she should not. She didn’t know what Lan was responsible for doing—not really. He had served the Taihg in the years that they had been here, and having seen her brother with his sword, the way that he fought, she couldn’t help but feel that he truly belonged, that this was what he was meant to do.

Still, that did nothing to change her uncertainty.

At least the journey hadn’t been a complete washout. She had come to help her brother, which she had, but she had also come across proof that the Shavln was active. Darius had done exactly what she had believed, though she hadn’t really needed proof.

Now they had this thisten, and Sophie couldn’t help but wonder if it was the start of Darius’s plan with the Shavln. They needed to get back to the city, warn the Taihg and the Raven Queen, and they needed to do so quickly.

Sophie took a small sip of the water. Her stomach rumbled, and she turned away from Nevarn, hiding it from him. If he were to know that her stomach rumbled, he would probably offer her another pastry, something else that would make Sophie feel she had to repay him.

“What do you think he might find?” she asked Nevarn.

He stared out over the horizon, looking out into Lorant. “I don’t know if he will find anything.”

“You know something,” Sophie said.

Nevarn frowned. “I don’t really know much. I just know...”

Sophie watched him, waiting for him to share something more, but Nevarn did not. It bothered her. He was keeping things from her. After the time they'd spent in the forest, she would have expected him to share more, so that they were on the same page with what they were dealing with.

"Then why did we let him go?"

"Do you really think you would have been able to deter your brother?" Nevarn smiled. "I don't know him that well, but my experience with him has been that he can be stubborn. Stubbornness can be a good thing in a soldier, but it can be frustrating in a sibling."

"I didn't know you had any siblings," she said.

"I don't. Not anymore."

He turned away, falling silent.

"What happened?" Sophie asked.

"It's not something I talk about," he said.

"Why not? If something happened—"

Nevarn turned back to her, shaking his head. There was tension there that she wasn't accustomed to seeing in him. "It's not something that I talk about."

Sophie recognized his intensity. It was one that she'd seen in her brother before—and it was one that she had seen in other men in her life, occasionally within Valan—but also before that, when she had been in Neylash, and even before then. There was a danger in pushing someone who had that barely constrained anger.

"I'm sorry I brought it up," she said.

"It's not your fault. I made a mistake."

Sophie shook her head, and she took another sip of the water as Nevarn looked away from her, staring out into the distance once again. She studied him, thinking about everything that she knew about Nevarn, along with the Raven Queen. There was so much about the prince that she realized she didn't know. She knew about his father, as stories spoke of

the king, but she had never known about any siblings. The Pale Princess had been nothing more than a story—hadn't she?

“We can keep moving,” Sophie said.

“Only when you're ready,” Nevarn replied.

His voice was soft, and it seemed more distant than she was accustomed to with him. Of course, ever since she had found her brother, Nevarn had seemed a little bit more distant. Given everything they had encountered, that didn't entirely surprise her. As far as she knew, Nevarn hadn't much experience with fighting, even though she had heard he was a skilled swordsman. What they had encountered had probably left Nevarn troubled.

It had left Sophie troubled.

Strangely, or perhaps not strangely, this experience hadn't bothered her brother as much as she would have expected. Lan had taken it all in stride. How much had he gone through over the years to be able to take such things in stride?

She climbed back into the saddle. Nevarn situated himself behind her, holding on to the saddle, leaving Sophie to clutch the reins. He said nothing when they took off. They rode quickly, heading along the forest line, leaving Sophie to marvel at just how far they had to travel.

“I can't believe we went this far in the forest,” she said at one point.

Nevarn looked over toward the trees. They reached high into the sky, and darkness swallowed their trunks, giving off a sense of energy, a sense that left Sophie wanting to turn away. As they rode, her gaze drifted to the thisten's head.

That wasn't a story.

The creature had been real. She had seen it. She had helped defeat it.

Nevarn's stomach grumbled, and she frowned at him.

“You need to eat.” Sophie opened the saddlebags and sorted through them. He had to have some food in them.



“I’m fine,” Nevarn said.

“Fine? You don’t look fine.” She frowned at him. “You look like you need a full water jug and a meal.” She flashed a smile. “Along with several pastries.”

“Pastries always make everything better,” he said.

“Of course they do,” she said, smiling at him. “What is it?”

“I didn’t tell you much about what happened before we left the city.”

“I didn’t know that something had happened before we left the city.”

“You knew that your brother and I...”

Sophie shrugged. “I figured that you had some experience with him.”

“He saved me.”

“And that angers you?”

“No, but it’s the reason why he had to save me.” Nevarn looked out behind them. “We haven’t seen any Lorant attack in quite some time. I’d been hearing rumblings through the network I have.”

Sophie started to grin. “Your *network*?”

“One of the things my mother has asked of me is to create a network of connections of my own. She tells me that such a thing will be valuable as I begin to take on a greater role within Reyash.”

Sophie could see the logic in that. “So?”

“So I’d been hearing about activity in Lorant. No one really believed me, least of all the Taihg. I brought some men with me, wanting to investigate, and... well, we were ambushed. Had your brother and a few others not come after me, I would probably have been killed.”

Sophie frowned. Why hadn’t Lan said anything about it?

But then, knowing her brother, he wouldn’t have said anything about it. Anything that he had done would have been

his responsibility. Saving Nevarn had been his responsibility.

“What happened?”

He shrugged. “My mother seems to think that it was nothing to be concerned with.” He scowled for a moment. “With her power, she feels that she is able to know what’s taking place out in the world far better than anyone else, and it means that she becomes unwilling to take action if she doesn’t think that it will matter.”

“She is the Raven Queen,” Sophie said.

Nevarn gave her an irritated look. “Don’t you start with that as well.”

“With what?”

“That’s all I’ve ever heard my entire life. ‘She’s the Raven Queen. She’s powerful. She’s...’” Nevarn shook his head. “She *is*. I suppose that’s all I need to say about her.”

“She’s protected Reyash.”

“In her own way, I suppose,” Nevarn said.

“You don’t think she has?”

“I don’t know. I only wish she had been around for me a little more than she has. I wish that she had been around for others more than she has.”

Sophie smiled at him. “At least your mother is there for you. My parents were lost so long ago that I don’t really know anything about them. Stories that my nana and papa told, but nothing more than that.”

He smiled at her. “There you go again.”

“There I go again with what?”

“With your stories. You still haven’t told me the key to Edgar’s story.”

“I told you that I’m not going to.”

“You can’t keep it from me. By the time we get to the city —”

“By the time we get to the city, you will have had plenty of opportunity to figure out the key yourself.”

“Why do I get the sense this story matters to you?”

Sophie turned away and took a bite of the pastry she’d fished out of a saddlebag. There weren’t many pastries remaining, and there certainly wasn’t much food left in the saddlebags. It was only a few scraps, along with a few sips of water in the waterskin.

“All stories matter,” Sophie said.

“Do they?”

“The way that my nana told them, they did,” she said.

“She sounds like an interesting woman.”

Sophie only nodded. What would Nana have thought of her now?

Maybe Nana would have been telling stories about Sophie, using those tales to regale her with her own feats, things that Sophie had done that would seem impossible to anyone who might be listening.

Given what Sophie had encountered in Neylash, she couldn’t help but feel there were aspects of her life that should have been impossible. Not only had she met the Pale Princess of stories, but she had been trained by a sorcerer in his tower, and she had uncovered a dangerous magic, one that threatened to overpower anyone else who possessed magic.

“She was an interesting woman,” Sophie said.

“I’m sorry they were killed,” he said.

She finished eating the pastry in silence, her mind going to her grandparents—and to her parents, though she tried not to think too much about them. The pastry was good, though maybe not quite as good as the one she had eaten when she had first come this way.

“How much farther do you think we have to go?” she asked.

Nevarn shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Why do I get the sense you’ve become more troubled the farther we go?”

“Because I have.” He took a deep breath and nodded to the thisten’s head. “Because of that.” He looked up at her. “That and what happened to me. I think they’re connected, though I don’t know quite how.”

“Connected?”

“The attack out of Lorant. This creature. Anything else that’s taking place within the forest.”

“If it’s tied to the Shavln, then the connection makes sense,” Sophie said.

“I’m not sure whether it’s the Shavln or whether it’s simply Darius starting to organize. I think it’s time we sent strength into Lorant—real strength—to investigate.”

Sophie had a good sense of what he implied. War.

“You would lead it?” she asked.

“Somebody has to. So few believe that Lorant poses the danger that it does.”

“What about what my brother sensed?”

His face wrinkled in a frown. “I’m not sure what your brother knows.”

“He knows about the thisten.”

Nevarn shrugged. “For all we know, they’ve lived in the forest for years.”

Sophie glanced at the thisten’s head. “Don’t you think that the people of Reyash would know if they had been there all along?”

“In that forest?” Nevarn shook his head. “They could have been there all along, and no one would have been the wiser.”

“What about the Shavln?”

“We’ve not seen any sign of it, Sophie.”

After everything else, she had hoped that Nevarn would share her concern, but he did not.

None did.

“We should move faster,” she said softly.

“Sophie...”

She squeezed her eyes shut, took a deep breath, and let it out as she opened her eyes. Nevarn stared into the distance, at the empty road. It fit her mood. It fit how she felt about everything she'd experienced within Reyash.

Despite everything, she still wasn't going to be able to prove herself.

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# CHAPTER 28

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Lan moved back, thinking that he'd already been spotted by the creature.

The thisten drank from the stream.

Lan prepared for an attack.

Surprisingly, he wasn't nearly as terrified as he had been within the forest. Perhaps that came from knowing that he had some way of defending himself, should it come down to a fight.

The ground started to rumble again. There came a low growl in response.

That wasn't another thisten.

Lan darted forward with his blade out, and he found someone facing off against the thisten. *The Hunter*.

He didn't appear to be carrying a weapon, but power spread out between his hands, a band of white light stretching from one palm to the other.

The Hunter twisted, using that band of light almost like a staff. He darted toward the thisten, wrapping the light around it. The thisten growled, and the ground shook, tossing the Hunter to the side.

Lan braced himself, but even as he did, he didn't know if it was necessary.

The thisten wasn't targeting him.

The Hunter was fast. He swirled his hands around, causing the thisten to back away, the pale band of power pushing it back.

The thisten moved quickly. Darkness radiated from it, pressing down upon the Hunter.

It would be too much.

Lan darted forward, letting out a shout as he did.

The thisten looked up at him. Lan swung his blade, driving it toward the thisten's head, carving at the creature. He missed.

He spun, swinging his blade back around.

Again he missed.

The Hunter got to his feet and danced forward. He twisted his hands around to create a loop in the band of power, trapping the thisten.

He held on to the thisten, wrestling it down.

Lan darted forward, slicing through the thisten's belly, eviscerating it.

He took a step back.

The thisten trembled, and the Hunter danced for a moment as he wrestled with the thisten's head. He wrapped another band of power around it and squeezed.

The power collapsed around the thisten's neck, and it snapped. With something of a pop, the thisten's head came free.

The Hunter spun around, dropping the thisten's head on the ground. "What are you doing here?"

"Apparently, I'm helping you."

"It shouldn't be necessary," the Hunter said.

Lan made his way around the fallen thisten, and much like he had when he had killed the thisten with his sister, he stabbed it in the heart. The creature trembled, and each of its legs spasmed for a moment before falling still again.



“She found you,” the Hunter said. “Ciydalla. The Heart of the Grove.”

“Is that what you call her?”

“That is what all call her. She has been bound within the forest.”

“By the streams,” Lan said.

The Hunter turned to him, frowning. “How is it that you know that?”

Lan nodded to the nearest stream. “I can sense it. The dark water split off many times within the forest. When I came across her, I did so in an elevated clearing near what I suspect to be the center of the forest. The streams converge there, forming a river that circles the clearing.”

“You saw this?”

Lan nodded.

“Could you find it again?”

“I don’t know. Why? What do you intend to do to her?”

“I don’t intend to do anything *to* her.”

Lan glanced down at the thisten. “Is that why you left?”

“The thisten have been roaming. Someone needed to do something about them.”

“It seems they are doing something more than roaming.”

“Perhaps,” the Hunter said.

“What about the Mistress of the Woods?” Now that he had escaped the forest, he didn’t know if the Hunter would share anything about her with him, but he suspected he knew more than he was letting on. “You scared her away when she tried to attack me, but what do you know about her?”

“There is nothing more to tell about her,” the Hunter said.

“The Heart of the Grove called her a herald.”

“That is perhaps the wrong term for her, as she has been used. One like her is always used.”

“By what?”

“By the dark.”

“Is that what you call the Shavln?”

The Hunter watched him, an unreadable expression in his eyes.

“At least, that’s what some have called a power that was recently released. Is that what we are dealing with?”

“It has gone by many names, but in this land, I suppose many have referred to it as the Shavln.”

Sophie was right. But if that was the case, then the Shavln had infested the waters around the forest. Why there, though?

“What exactly is it?”

“Death. Destruction. The kind of things that the Mistress of the Woods calls to.”

Lan thought about the way she had looked, the strangeness of her cloak. It had reminded him of decaying leaves, and there had been a sense of rot coming off her. That couldn’t have been a coincidence.

The Hunter crouched down next to the thisten, and he started to move his hands over the creature. As he did, the light between his hands continued to glow with an increasing intensity.

“How do we stop it?”

“We?” The Hunter looked up at him before turning his attention back to the thisten, running his hands along the creature. Power began to flow from him and into the thisten. “You cannot. Not one like yourself.”

Lan wasn’t sure if that was meant as an insult or merely some truth that he did not understand. Rather than pushing the issue, he focused on what the Hunter was doing now. As he had before, he found himself questioning whether the Hunter was actually Darish, or perhaps another of the gods.

“What are you doing?” Lan asked.

“If left like this, the thisten will revive. It has been infected and cannot be saved.”

“Even with its head cut off?”

“You have not killed it.”

“I don’t understand.” Lan thought about the thisten that he had helped cut down in the forest.

“It’s more of a slowing. Even that is not particularly accurate. It’s more of a delaying.”

“How do you kill it?”

“With difficulty. You must find one who has the proper power to separate it from its power, and only then can you destroy it.”

“Even cutting its head off won’t kill it?”

The Hunter looked over at him. “Your gift of power allows you to at least pose a threat to the thisten. Otherwise, you could do nothing.”

“How do I kill it?”

“It is not about killing. It is about separating it from its power.”

Lan looked down at the thisten. It seemed to be dead, but when he’d fought the thisten before, it had healed itself. He had a hard time thinking that the creature could restore itself without a head, but maybe that was what the Hunter was telling him.

“What if you have only the head?”

“With the kind of power inside this creature, a body will regrow,” he said. “In time.”

“How?”

“There is no understanding how.”

“And the body?”

“Will regrow a head.”

“So by killing it and cutting off its head, it will become two?”

The Hunter nodded. “You see how difficult it is when like this.”

“I don’t know if I see anything. I can’t imagine any creature that can live like that.”

“It’s not living. Not with how the darkness has touched it. It is merely a vessel.”

The Hunter pressed his hands above the thisten’s body, and the glowing emanated from them. It swept over the creature, and strange darkness twirled out from the thisten. The glowing persisted, and then it pressed through the body of the thisten.

With a surge of light, it exploded through the creature, and then it dissolved. The Hunter turned his attention to the head. It had a foul odor, much like the head of the thisten Lan had decapitated—the head that Sophie now traveled with. If it was able to regrow, then were they carrying a dangerous creature into Valan? The Hunter held the head and began to push out power, letting it sweep through him and away, through the thisten’s head. With another burst of white light, the thisten’s head dissolved into ash.

“That’s it?” Lan asked.

“It? That is incredibly difficult. It has taken considerable time for me to learn what is necessary for that to be effective.”

“I didn’t mean to diminish your power,” he said.

“You did not.”

The Hunter got to his feet.

“Something happened to the water, didn’t it?” Lan asked.

The Hunter turned to Lan for a moment before staring off into the distance again.

“That’s what the Mistress of the Woods was after. That’s what the Heart of the Grove wants me to stop.”

“Power has been released. It cannot be stopped. It can only be contained.”

“Contained?”

The Hunter nodded.

“You intend to hold it in the forest?”

“That is what Ciydalla intends.”

The Heart of the Grove wanted to hold the power? “Will it work?”

“I don’t know. I’ve offered my help, and that is all. And she has called you into this as well. There are dangers at play. You must know of them.”

Lan shook his head. “I haven’t heard of anything.” That wasn’t entirely true. He had heard of some things. The Karell were involved in something, though Lan wasn’t sure what that was. “Do you know what’s happening with the Karell?”

It was a long shot asking the Hunter. He may not know anything, and if he did, he may not share anything.

“All I know is that sides are forming.”

“War,” Lan suggested.

The Hunter shrugged. “Unfortunately, that is likely the case. It happens from time to time, power massing on one side or another. Now it happens again.”

Could that be what the Karell had uncovered?

That, combined with what Darius had done with the Shavln, was enough to make Lan feel he needed to get back to the Taihg. He took a deep breath. “I can’t stay here. I need to get back to my people.”

The Hunter regarded him for a long moment and then nodded. “Do what you must.”

Lan couldn’t tell if he was disappointed or angry, or maybe both.

Before going, Lan had another question, though he wasn’t sure if the Hunter would answer. “The Heart of the Grove. When I found her—or she found me—she tapped me on the head, and she gave me power. Is that how you got power?”

“I didn’t need Ciydalla to gift me power,” the Hunter said.

Lan shook his head. “I wasn’t trying to upset you.”

“You did not. I suppose I should thank you for helping, in your own feeble way.”

Lan laughed. “That’s the worst thank-you I’ve ever heard.”

“It is all that you will get.”

Lan looked out into the night. Darkness all around him made it difficult to see anything.

“What about you?” Lan asked. “What will you do?”

“I told you that I will help contain this power. We will hold it within the forest. There is much power there.”

“And if it isn’t contained?”

“Then others must act.”

Lan frowned, watching the Hunter. “Others like me or others like you?”

“Others.”

*Gods*, Lan suspected, though he wasn’t sure that the Hunter would even acknowledge that.

“Good luck...” Lan started, but the Hunter had already started to jog away.

He glowed, but he didn’t glow quite as much as Lan did. Maybe his power was different. If the Hunter were a god, it would be unlikely that he was the same sort of god as the Heart of the Grove.

He needed to return and warn everyone in Valan. Lan had no idea what would happen, but he felt the Taihg needed to know more, especially about the danger of the thisten.

He darted off, following the stream.

Lan didn’t take any breaks. He ran through the night, through the following day, trailing along the forest’s edge. In all that time, the only thing he felt was hunger. He felt no fatigue, not the way that he once would have. As he ran, he

kept looking for other signs of movement, any sign of thisten. There were none.

Lan found another stream as he crossed along the border of the forest, and he paused next to it. There was no sign of the darkness that he had seen within the forest. Maybe it really was contained, as the Hunter had claimed. Regardless, somebody had to alert the Raven Queen of what had happened, and what he had seen. He had no idea whether she would listen.

Lan didn't have much experience with the Raven Queen. Serving as a Taihg, he had no reason to interact with her. The only reason would be if she summoned him to serve, to secure her safety, but that was unlikely.

The forest stretched alongside him. As he ran, he felt something strange. There was an echoing within him, a warmth. Maybe the Hunter was in the forest, working with the Heart of the Grove. He didn't know. Or perhaps all of it was just his imagination.

Lan paused. Daylight was fading, leaving him with a strange mixture of colors all around. There was a sense of power here as well, an energy that existed everywhere around him. It was different from the power that he had sensed within the forest, certainly different from the power of the Heart of the Grove and even that of the Mistress of the Woods. There was nothing about it that reminded him of his sister's power.

Lan paused near another stream. This one was outside the forest, and in Reyash. In the darkness, he had a hard time determining whether the water would be safe to drink. He crouched over it, his entire body glowing softly. He had to think there would be some way to control the glowing, to prevent it from being visible to others in the night, but for now, Lan didn't have any control over it.

He stood. His mouth was dry. His stomach rumbled. He needed to understand the energy everywhere around him. As he focused on it, Lan still didn't know if there was anything that he would be able to do.

He thought that he should rest, though he still didn't feel tired. When he moved forward again, he hurried along the edge of the forest. Eventually, he came across a dirt road. Now on the road, Lan was able to move even more rapidly. He hurried, letting the road help him race back toward the city.

He saw no sign of anyone else traveling.

He supposed Sophie would have made it back by now, though she wouldn't have been riding nearly as fast as he had been running. He doubted the horse would have withstood such urging carrying two people.

Gradually the landscape changed.

The forest ended, and it was near morning, as sunlight had started to creep above the horizon. He was able to feel something familiar. It was something about Reyash, almost an energy to the air, something that he thought struck him as familiar.

Valan loomed in the distance. The tower rose above it all. He had a strange sense as he neared. It was early—early enough that he could make out only a faint trace of smoke drifting from chimneys. There wasn't much activity in the streets.

He was nearly at the outskirts, near the barracks, when the wind picked up.

Lan looked behind him, into the gusting wind. Storms weren't uncommon in Reyash, especially powerful storms. In the time that Lan had been training here, he had known plenty of storms to blow through, the heavy rains sometimes refreshing, other times leaving rivers of water running along the narrow streets of Valan. In this case, the darkening skies suggested the storm would be powerful.

Thunder rumbled distantly. That sound reminded him too much of the energy of the thisten. He didn't think that was what was out there, making its way toward him, but he needed to reach the center of the city and warn others. He was a Taihg, and he had to do his duty.

Lan could only hope that he had reached the city in time.



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# CHAPTER 29

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## SOPHIE

When they reached the tower, Sophie climbed off the horse and headed inside, leaving Nevarn. He called after her, but at this point, Sophie only wanted to get inside and sleep. She was exhausted.

Sophie paused at the main entrance, looking out over the garden. Master Vistan had restored much of the garden that Sophie had destroyed—not that Sophie had expected anything else. She had seen the garden was relatively easy to repair with the kind of magic that was present in the city. She was tempted to go through the garden, as she knew that the colors and fragrances might clear her head, but she wanted to be somewhere else. After everything they had been through, Nevarn still didn't want to believe her. It angered her.

Inside the tower, she paused again. There was a grand staircase leading to the second level. The entrance hall was one of the few places within the tower decorated in a way that reminded her of the palace. Sculptures on either side of the stairway stretched high overhead. Massive portraits, one of the Raven Queen and one of the long-dead king, hung on either side as well. A banner with the royal colors, midnight blue and green stripes, hung above the staircase, the symbol of the Raven Queen on it.

Sophie hurried upstairs, but a pair of soldiers blocked her path. She veered off, heading toward the kitchen. There was a better way up through the tower, one that Sophie had learned early on.

She found Lira in the back, leaning over a counter as she rolled out dough. Lira looked up at her, her eyes widening slightly. “Where have you been, girl? There have been rumors about you.”

“What sort of rumors?”

“The kind of rumors that suggest you went back to *them*.”

Sophie could only stare. “Back to them?”

Rumors that suggested Sophie had betrayed Reyash and gone back to Lorant.

“I didn’t go back to them,” she said.

“I didn’t think that you would,” Lira said, turning her attention back to rolling the dough. She worked quickly, with a practiced stroke, one that Sophie couldn’t help marveling at. Sophie looked around the kitchen at all the activity.

She didn’t want to stay here for too much longer. If the Raven Queen was around, then Sophie wanted to get to her, to ask for her help, and to see if there was something she might be able to do.

She smiled at Lira. “Thank you for everything.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It just means thank you,” Sophie said.

“It sounds as if you are going to do something stupid.”

Sophie smiled to herself, thinking that Oleda would once have cautioned her in the same way. “I don’t intend to do anything stupid.”

“Then what are you going on about?”

Sophie sighed. “Something happened. I don’t know what it means, but I have to do something about it. I can’t stay here.”

“Are you leaving the city?”

Sophie hadn’t planned on it, but given everything that she had gone through, she couldn’t help but wonder if perhaps that was what she should be doing, at least for now. She needed to

find proof that the Shavln was active, as she had suspected, and that it was just as dangerous as she had claimed.

They had brought the thisten head, but she didn't know if that was going to be enough.

She sighed again. "I don't want to leave the city, but there's something I have to prove."

"What exactly do you have to prove?"

"I have to prove that I am right. If I don't, something worse will take place."

"Worse than what? War?"

"Yes," Sophie said.

Lira watched her for a moment before turning her attention back to rolling out the dough. Sophie thought that maybe Lira would reveal that she was a Karell, much like Oleda had been. "I wish you the best, Sophie Varison."

Sophie started to turn away, but her stomach rumbled, and she headed to the cupboard near the back. She flashed a smile at Lira as she pulled some of the pastries out, then hurriedly ate several.

She stuffed some into her pocket, then headed out of the kitchen. If the Raven Queen wasn't here, then there might not be anything that Sophie could do.

*Unless I go to Thea.*

She doubted Thea would even listen to her, but what choice did she have?

Maybe not Thea at all. Parvella could help.

She was close to the Raven Queen. She might not be as close as Thea, but she could be useful.

Sophie hurried up the stairs to her door and knocked. She contemplated forming a pose, wrapping herself in magic, but what would that achieve? It might reveal to Parvella who was there.

She had no luck finding Parvella.

She checked her quarters and several of the other places that she often frequented, but she wasn't able to find her anywhere. Sophie had been gone for long enough that she knew that Parvella would probably be irritated with her—the way that she often was when Sophie abandoned her studies. Maybe it would be better to go to Thea after all.

But Thea was hard to find as well.

*What's going on?*

She should have been able to find one of them, and the inability not only irritated her but had her a bit worried. She needed to report to somebody about what she had found. Nevarn would fill in those he knew, and likely go to the Taihg, which she agreed was necessary, but Sophie thought that she needed to share with others in power what had happened, assuming Nevarn hadn't already done it.

*And I need to do it before Nevarn convinces the Taihg that Lorant plans to attack.*

She didn't think that was the case. She wasn't sure what they were dealing with, not yet, but she wanted to take some time to try to understand, if nothing else.

When she failed to find anyone else, she thought about going back to the kitchen. She had started down the stairs to question Lira on what she knew when she nearly collided with a familiar face.

“Dannith?”

He was coming up the stairs, and as far as she could tell, he was alone. That was unusual. She'd never seen him out of his room before, not since coming to the tower. He was dressed in a dark jacket and pants, the embroidery along the hems done in the patterns of Reyash, which surprised her. His gray hair was neatly brushed, and the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes were not quite as deep as she remembered from the last time she had seen him. He had a stack of books under one arm.

“There you are, Sophie,” he said, smiling broadly at her.

“What are you doing here?”

He glanced behind him, down the stairs that spiraled around the tower, leading toward the lower levels. “Oh, only stretching my legs. I finally convinced her that I was no danger.”

Sophie frowned. In the tower, there were quite a few people who could be “her” in this case. “Thea?”

“No,” Dannith said, shaking his head. “I don’t think she cares much for me. I think she feels Oleda was far too kind to me.”

“I didn’t realize that Oleda was kind to you.”

“Well, she certainly wasn’t unkind. She is... was”—he frowned for a moment, his eyes clouding briefly—“Karell, so she only got involved with magical disputes. I don’t think this Karell cares much for me.”

“Did you do anything to her?” Sophie thought that hard to believe, as Dannith was nothing if not kind. Even when she had been in the palace with him, she’d felt that kindness. Then again, at the time, she hadn’t known that he was the king. “You have to be nice, Dannith. You’re a guest here.”

That elicited the strongest reaction from him so far. “Sometimes I don’t feel like a guest. Often I feel like I am trapped here. Oh, I know it’s for my safety.” He waved his hand. “The Raven Queen,” he went on, saying her name with a slight mocking tone, “has made it quite clear that if Darius were to know that I still lived, I would be a target. As if she is not a target herself.”

“I think the Raven Queen has enough power to protect herself.”

Dannith flicked his gaze past Sophie. “I suppose that’s true enough. She certainly has demonstrated the power Ridaln used to tell me about.”

Even if she hadn’t seen it, she knew the queen had power. All the stories claimed that.

*Just like the stories claim that the Pale Princess had power.*

“You’ve been away,” Dannith said. When Sophie frowned, he chuckled. “I told you, I keep tabs on you. There were a few rumors,” he continued, his face turning more serious, “though I knew not to put much stock in them. Others suggested that you ran off with your brother. I figured that was more accurate.”

“You still have your spies in the tower,” she said.

He shrugged. “A few. They can be useful, such as when I learned that the Raven Queen has sent the Taihg into my kingdom.”

“She has?”

Lan hadn’t said anything about that, though when it came to the Taihg, Lan could be a little touchy, mostly because he felt it was his responsibility to protect his people. Then again, he had been away for a while.

“Oh, I can’t say with much certainty why she decided to send the Taihg into my kingdom. Maybe she got word on Darius.” He frowned, as if that was an unlikely possibility. “If she wanted to find him, the rumors are that he’s quite accessible.”

“Because he’s parading around as you.”

Dannith pressed his lips together in a dark frown. “Unfortunately. And the only ones who would have known have been slaughtered.” He breathed out. “I do wish that she would permit me to return. I suspect the Karell would be helpful in removing a sorcerer of his power, even if the Raven Queen does not want to instigate a war. The Karell are already active there, after all.”

Sophie knew that to be true, though she wasn’t sure what he meant by saying this, as it seemed to her that he was suggesting something more than just Karell activity.

“I’m sure it’s just for your safety,” she said.

“It’s not for my safety,” he countered. For the first time, Dannith sounded irritated. Most of the time when Sophie spoke to him, which wasn’t very often these days, he was fairly lighthearted. “Were it for my safety, she would have



mounted a more significant response by now, and we would have been able to depose Darius and reinstate me. She hasn't suggested that she wants this."

"You know that's not true. She doesn't want a sorcerer ruling Lorant."

He arched a brow at her. "Doesn't she?"

Sophie understood the implication. The Raven Queen was a sorcerer.

"The last time I talked to her about it," Sophie began, thinking back to the very last time that she had seen the Raven Queen, and warned her about what she had detected, "she suggested that it was too dangerous to take you back. She did say that plans were underway to return you."

"Of course there are. And such plans can take time," he said, the sarcasm dripping from his words. "How have your lessons been going?"

Sophie shrugged. "She has me working with one of her most skilled sorcerers in the tower. I've been learning how to hold different poses, and she certainly hasn't forbidden me access to the library, though I should be spending a little more time there than I have been." Sophie said the last with a bit of sheepishness. "When I was in your palace, I spent quite a bit more time in the library. Then again, Ridaln encouraged it."

"Because he understood that those with potential need to be pushed. Not that I necessarily agree with his technique, as I think that you might have been pushed a little harder than you needed to be, but I do agree that potential needs to be nurtured. Everything he told me about you suggested that you had quite a bit of potential. And do you feel your potential has been nurtured here?"

Sophie wanted to tell him that she did, but she wasn't entirely sure that she believed it. If her potential had been nurtured, wouldn't she have been more capable when she had left Valan to find her brother? She would have been able to protect Nevarn—and her brother—far more easily than she had.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I think so.”

“Just remember that everybody has their own objective.”

“Even you?”

He watched her for a moment. “Especially me, Sophie. I intend to lead my people once again.”

“Will you resume the war?”

Sophie wasn’t sure why she was questioning him like this, as she had never felt the desire to push Dannith so hard, but in this case, it was a matter of concern about what she had experienced. Nevarn wanted to resume the war. And Sophie couldn’t help but feel she needed to warn Dannith about that, even though there was nothing he could do about it.

Or could he?

He had spies. Maybe that mattered.

“I don’t want war,” he said. “Too many lives were lost. And war doesn’t serve either country. We would be better served by trade. It took me a while to see that. And I suspect I was a bit influenced initially. Well, maybe entirely influenced. It’s hard for me to say what influence Darius had upon me. And now, with him ruling in my stead, I fear that my people will be subjected to the same violence. And there will be no one there who can stop it. I have to trust that the Raven Queen will be cautious in her approach, and that she will ensure that peace reigns until they are able to remove Darius.”

When she didn’t say anything, he frowned at her.

“What is it?” Dannith asked.

“It’s not just the Raven Queen,” Sophie said. “Prince Nevarn experienced an attack along the border, and he thinks that Lorant is readying for an advance. Given what we encountered in the forest—”

“In the forest?”

She nodded. “In Devlar Forest.”

“And what does that have to do with Lorant?” Dannith asked. There was real confusion in his words.

“It’s complicated,” Sophie said, “but we think that the events we experienced in the forest are tied to the Shavln power that Darius released. I was looking for someone to talk to about it but haven’t found Thea or Parvella, both of whom would know how to reach the Raven Queen.”

“That forest doesn’t completely border my land,” he said.

“Are you sure? We headed south, and Nevarn claimed it did.” Sophie didn’t know the borders of Reyash all that well and trusted Nevarn did.

If nothing else, Lan should have known. As a Taihg, he would have been exposed to such things far more than she had.

“No. It doesn’t border my land. That’s closer to Wanash. But if the Shavln power was there, it means that Darius has started to move.” He frowned, scratching at his chin. “And given what I’ve heard of the Karell…”

When he trailed off, Sophie prompted him. “What have you heard?”

He blinked, glancing down at his books. “Perhaps nothing. I don’t know if it makes much of a difference, Sophie. Just be careful, will you?”

“I’m trying to be careful, but I don’t know what else I’m supposed to do.”

She was tempted to ask about the thisten but doubted that Dannith would know anything. She’d already revealed too much to him and worried that what she had shared would spread.

*Would that matter?*

From what she knew of Dannith, she believed him when he said that he didn’t want war.

Then again, he wanted to escape. He wanted to return. In order to do that, he needed to have Darius removed. He needed the Raven Queen’s help—along with the help of the Karell. If the Shavln power was active within Reyash, they wouldn’t be able to take any action. They would be preoccupied.

“Listen, Sophie,” Dannith said, and he looked around before lowering his voice. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I want you to be careful. Speak to the Raven Queen if you must, and to those you trust, but...”

Footsteps coming up the stairs caught his attention, and he trailed off. He looked behind him before frowning. His jaw clenched. He squeezed the books under his arm and then nodded, as if making a decision.

“Just be careful,” he said at last.

“Be careful of what?”

“This power you have gotten entangled in. It is more than you know.”

With that, he headed up the stairs.

He left Sophie watching after him. A pair of soldiers came marching up the stairs, glancing at her, and hurried after Dannith.

What was going on?

She needed answers, but she wasn’t sure how or where she was going to get them.

# CHAPTER 30

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## SOPHIE

Sophie was more frustrated than she had been in quite some time.

She hadn't been able to find Thea, or anybody who knew where she was. It seemed she'd been away from the tower for even longer than Sophie had, and she hadn't learned where Parvella had gone, though that wasn't nearly as unusual, as Parvella would often travel with the Raven Queen, who also seemed to be away from the tower at the moment. The usual gossip around Parvella and the Raven Queen had died down to the point where Sophie wasn't able to find out much about where they'd gone or what they were doing.

And worse, she hadn't been able to reach Nevarn.

She had no idea what he'd done since returning with the thisten head, though she hoped he had managed to convince the Taihg to at least investigate the forest—and help Lan. From what she'd heard, there had been no sign of that happening.

Dannith had been impossible to reach. He must have escaped from his room, as the soldiers guarding it were now unwilling to allow her to visit. When she tried to push, they had nearly drawn their blades. Sophie thought that she could use one of her poses, but after what had happened when she had unintentionally attacked the soldiers on the tower roof, she was unwilling to take the risk.

Sophie had been left to practice.

She'd only been back in the tower a little while, but something felt off, and she wasn't entirely sure what it was. Maybe it was the fact that she knew there was some dark energy out in the forest, not far from the city, or perhaps it was that she still hadn't heard that Lan had returned, and she grew worried about him. Or maybe it was that there was no sign of the people who were supposed to offer her a measure of support in the tower.

It was all of it.

Sophie was holding a pose when a knock came at her door.

She looked up, disrupting the posture, when Lira slipped in, carrying a tray. She frowned at the cook before shifting her posture briefly into the gilán pose and letting power sweep outward from her. If nothing else, Sophie had learned how to form the gilán pose rapidly, and she could use it as a barrier to prevent others from listening. And in the case of Lira coming to her room, Sophie had to believe that the cook wanted to share something with her.

Lira set the tray down on a table, nodding to it. "I figured you would need some treats while you were working."

"That's not why you are here."

"No," she said, glancing around. She lowered her voice. "There's another reason I came."

Sophie shook her head. "You can speak freely. I used some magic to protect the room. It should keep anyone from listening."

"You can do it that quickly?"

"It's actually a pretty easy pose," Sophie said, having not yet lifted her feet from the gilán pose.

It might be easy, but she still hadn't mastered holding it and not releasing the power before she wanted to. That was something else that she needed to discover, though she wasn't sure what it would entail. Parvella had not shared the technique with her, either. In fact, Parvella hadn't shared very much with her at all. Dannith's comment about how she had trained with Ridaln had stuck with her over the last two days,

making her increasingly irritable about just how little she had learned in the time she'd been in the tower. Sophie should have learned far more than she had, especially if the Raven Queen truly wanted her to learn. She had potential. Even the Raven Queen had to believe that.

“What is it?” Sophie asked.

Lira took a deep breath. “You asked me to see what I could find out about the Karell.”

Sophie nodded. After talking with Dannith on the stairs, she'd been intrigued. If something was taking place in Lorant, she wanted to know what it was. Maybe the Karell had decided it was time to remove the threat of Darius. Thea's absence would make sense in that case, as Sophie could see her being a part of that scheme.

“Did you find anything? All I know is they have been active, but I don't really know why or what's been going on.”

“Only a little,” Lira said. “It's always been difficult to get word on Karell movement.”

Sophie wasn't sure how impressed she should be that Lira could get anything. Then again, she suspected that kitchens were connected to the Karell in some way. It was where Oleda had hidden, after all. There had been other Karell in the palace in Neylash, but Oleda had been the one with authority, such as it was.

“Something big has happened. I don't know what it is, and I wouldn't have been able to find anything were it not for Anna.”

“Why her?”

“Oh, she's sweet on a soldier, and he happened to mention a Taihg mission that departed from the city not too long ago. High-ranking—and skilled—soldiers. All of them. Along with several Karell.”

Sophie knew that was unusual. The Taihg worked with the Karell.

Lan hadn't said anything. Had he known?



“So you’ve got soldiers going out with Karell. Why is that an issue?”

“Because they’ve already started to return. From what I’ve learned, soldiers were hurt. And the Karell.” She shook her head. “Well, I don’t really know what happened. Neither does my source.”

*Something big.*

The timing made sense with what Sophie had detected. She had used her pose, felt it wash away and collide with something powerful, which had worried the Raven Queen. She hadn’t shared with Sophie what she was worried about. She had only confirmed that there was something out there. And then Sophie had encountered... whatever it was that she had encountered.

Maybe it was the Shavln.

Regardless of what it was, there was some dark energy out in the forest, not far from Valan, and the timing of these events was suspect.

“I’m surprised that you needed to have me look,” Lira said. “Your brother could have helped you with this. He’s close with several of the Taihg who are involved.”

“Well, I didn’t tell you about why I was out of the city,” Sophie said. “It was because my brother went missing.”

Lira nodded as if that made sense. “I hope you stay out of this, Sophie. I don’t know what’s going on, but if the Karell are involved in such numbers, it can’t be good. That kind of magic...” Lira wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. She glanced at the tray. “Eat, and do whatever it is that you are doing. Let others take care of it.”

She looked over at the door.

“I can let you out,” Sophie said. “And I will be careful.”

Lira nodded.

Sophie released the pose, letting power flow away from her. She frowned as she did, feeling the power escaping and sweeping out and away. There was a bit of resistance to the

escaping magic, though it wasn't anything significant—not like it had been when she had felt the strangeness outside the city.

Once Lira had closed the door behind her, Sophie turned her attention back to her poses, feeling lost. She was training as a sorcerer, and she had to believe that her skill was enough that she should be able to be a part of whatever was happening, but it felt as if she was being kept out of things that she could participate in.

Why hadn't the Raven Queen involved her?

The only reason Sophie could think of was that the Raven Queen didn't trust her.

And that thought hurt more than she expected.

She tried to practice, but her mind wandered, making her poses unstable.



Sophie sat in the library. It was early, but she'd been unable to sleep. She hadn't been able to shake some of the things that Lira had said, but she believed that she needed to find answers. If nothing else, it was long past time that she found answers to the Shavl'n, even if there wasn't going to be anything in the library.

She had scoured the library when she had first come to the tower, looking for anything on the Shavl'n, but such information was difficult to find. There were references to dark powers, but that was it. She hadn't uncovered anything. This time, she had come with a very different purpose. She was looking for information about the Devlar Forest, curious about the border and where it was situated, along with any rumors that had spread. If the thisten were active in the forest, she would have expected to find something.

The librarian, an older, bespectacled man named Horace, wandered past her, carrying a stack of books nearly half as tall as he was. He was frail, and Sophie was surprised he was able

to carry them quite as well as he was, but he seemed to have no difficulty. He had on his brown librarian frock, along with the cross sigil that marked him as part of the scholarly guild within Reyash—something that Sophie had asked about when she had first come to the tower.

“You look troubled, Sophie,” he said.

She sat back. She’d been poring over a stack of books, not at all sure what she needed to find. She had spent a lot of time in the library early on, looking for poses and information about the Shavln, and she had really only found the former. Coming to the library brought a sense of normality to her. She loved sitting here, the smell, the silence, and the ability to be introspective.

“I don’t suppose you know what’s going on with the Karell?”

He set the books down on a nearby table. “I don’t keep track of them. I don’t think anybody really does. Well, perhaps the queen, as she has an arrangement with them to ensure access to their knowledge to allow safe passage through our lands.”

That was news to Sophie, but it did make a certain sort of sense.

“You have a few books there are on the Devlar Forest,” Horace observed. “Why is that?” He leaned forward, frowning. “You usually spend much more time looking at sorcery poses. And I have requested more titles from some other libraries, but they are slow to arrive, unfortunately.”

She smiled, thankful that he had done that much at least, though she still hadn’t even mastered some of the poses that she had access to. “I was just in the forest. My brother went missing...” She shook her head before breathing out heavily. “It’s a long story, and I’m sure that you don’t really care about it. We had a strange experience there. I thought it was connected to Lorant, only to be told recently that it’s not.”

“Not directly,” he agreed. “Why would you have thought that it was connected?”

“I don’t know if it matters. Say,” Sophie said, looking up from her stack of books, “I don’t suppose you have any books on creatures found within the forest? Or any books about strange creatures?”

“What did you find?” There was real curiosity in his voice, though Sophie wasn’t sure that she could even share what she had uncovered, as she didn’t know how to describe the thisten.

“I don’t really know. I’ve never seen anything like it. A strange bearlike creature. It was scary.”

Horace shivered. “It sounds scary. I much prefer to stay in the library, where it’s safe.” He winked at her. “But a sorcerer like yourself probably needs to be out in the world, where things aren’t so safe. I imagine you will find other terrifying creatures just like that. Are you hoping to learn more about it so that it’s easier for you to study?”

“Something like that,” she said.

*Or destroy*, she didn’t tell him.

“I have a few volumes that might be of use. I don’t know what you will find in them, but perhaps you can uncover something that will sate your curiosity.”

He hurried away and was gone for little more than ten minutes, during which time Sophie returned to her study of the geography around Valan, something that she should have studied before. It surprised her that the city of Valan sat on a small finger of land that was now considered part of Reyash, though it hadn’t always been. It was surrounded by mountains, along with a small canyon to the north, which she had seen, and it was otherwise physically isolated from Lorant—along with the rest of Reyash.

When Horace set down the books, he patted them. “Some of these might be of use. One of them is more theoretical, whereas another details some native creatures. I’m hopeful that you can find something here that will help you.”

“Thank you, Horace. Truly.”

He flashed a broad smile. “It is all part of my responsibilities, Sophie.”

She stared at the books, then started going through them. She found nothing of use, unfortunately. It wasn't that there weren't interesting creatures found around the city, but there was no record of a thisten, or anything quite like it.

Around midday, when her stomach started to grumble, she grabbed the books, nodded to Horace, and headed out of the library. She took some food from the kitchen, wrapping it in a napkin, and looked around for Lira, only to find that she was out, so she made her way back upstairs. She paused on Dannith's level, checking whether she might be able to see him, but he was once again shielded from her, so she went back to her room.

She ate while reading some more and then turned her attention to one of the more advanced pose books, flipping through it. She needed to master more advanced sorcery, especially if Parvella wasn't going to teach her anything.

One of the poses was particularly challenging, but it also spoke of purity. It reminded her of the piasa pose, which she had used with Nevarn. It would be useful to know something like that, but she also wanted to know more advanced—and offensive—poses.

There was one that spoke of flames. Surprisingly, it wasn't nearly as complicated as Sophie would have expected. She had started to form the posture, shifting her feet, feeling the buildup of power, when her door slammed open.

Parvella stood in the doorway. Her dark gray gown had no embroidery on it, and her eyes flashed with irritation. Sophie nearly lost her pose, but as she had almost finished it, she knew better than to lose control.

“What are you doing?” Parvella snapped, slamming the door closed behind her.

Sophie carefully released the power within the pose, shifting into the prayer pose. She wasn't sure why, but Parvella made her uncomfortable. She didn't think that she was going to do anything to her, but it was better to be safe. As the pose solidified, faint white energy flowed out from her.

“Just training,” Sophie said.

“With something like that?”

“What? This is nothing more than the prayer pose.”

It was one of the first poses she had ever learned, and it remained one of the most effective—and useful. Not only did it create a focus of protection around her, but it also allowed her to harness energy and hold it.

“Oh, so you weren’t using the emsar pose? And I suppose you can control it as you burn through the entire tower when you lose control—which you most certainly will.”

She could burn down the tower?

Sophie didn’t think that was quite possible, but without knowing some of the true dangers of a pose, maybe she should be a bit more careful with advanced ones.

“I’m sorry. I was just trying to study. The Raven Queen told me that I could practice here. And she said that my room was protected.”

“It is protected,” Parvella said, shaking her head. She sighed. “And that’s not why I’m here.”

“Why are you here?”

“You went *there*.”

“There? I assume you are referring to the rumors that I went to Lorant.”

Sophie hadn’t realized that Parvella was holding a pose of her own, her feet shifted inward ever so slightly, and her weight leaning on one hip more than the other. Sophie couldn’t tell what Parvella was doing, much like she had never been able to tell what Ridaln had been doing. Both of them knew how to use magic without needing such dramatic poses.

“You were observed traveling there,” Parvella said.

“Observed by who? Did they also observe that I went with Nevarn?”

Parvella frowned at her. “What was that?”

“Prince Nevarn was with me. We went after my brother, since no one else seemed interested in doing so. We found him. He’s fine, by the way, not that you care. But when we found him, we also found something else.”

She’d been looking for Parvella—well, actually for Thea or the Raven Queen—ever since returning. Now was her chance to report what she, Nevarn, and Lan had uncovered. And she wished that she had the thisten head to reveal. She could easily imagine how Parvella would react if she were to throw it down at her feet. This wasn’t a story, and she needed to convince Parvella, who had the Raven Queen’s ear.

It would be so much easier if it were Thea.

“We went into the forest. We were attacked by creatures. My brother called them thisten. I’ve never heard of them before, and I’ve never seen anything like them before, but we killed one, and Nevarn brought the head back here.”

Her posture remained consistent, slowly easing power out from her.

Parvella’s reaction was not at all what Sophie had expected. “You brought it here?”

“We did. I know you don’t believe me about the Shavln, but everything we found out there tells me that it’s real. Everything that I have been warning you about is real. The Shavln was released by Darius, and that power is starting to converge. My brother encountered a woman he called the Mistress of the Woods, and she was using some dark power, and these thisten were serving her...”

Sophie realized how crazed she sounded.

All of this was no different from the stories Parvella knew she loved so much.

None of this was believable.

Parvella shifted her feet. Her posture altered. The power she had been holding was gone, fading with a soft burst that Sophie was distinctly aware of pressing up against her prayer pose and the power that she was holding. “Where is it?”

“I told you. Nevarn brought the head here. He...”

What did it even matter?

Parvella watched Sophie. Sophie knew better than to release her own pose.

“Show me,” Parvella said.

“I already told you that Nevarn has the head. He took it with him.”

“Took it where?”

Sophie shrugged. “I can only imagine that he took it to the Taihg. He intends to prove that Lorant has been using creatures like the thisten to attack. I hope they don’t attack, as I don’t think it’s Lorant, but I don’t know what it is. Maybe the Shavln.” She tilted her chin defiantly. “Not that I expect you to believe me.”

Parvella sighed. “Come with me, girl.”

“What?”

Parvella pushed open the door. “Come with me.”

“Why? So that you can attack me again?”

“Because the Raven Queen is not in the city, and with her gone, you might be the only one who can protect Valan.”

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# CHAPTER 31

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## SOPHIE

Sophie stood on the roof of the tower, holding the pose as Parvella had instructed, her mind racing. From what Parvella had told her, Thea was gone. That wasn't terribly surprising, as she often left the tower for stretches of time, but it was unusual for Parvella to be here and not Thea.

Usually Parvella was only here when the Raven Queen was present. Or when she was anticipated to be present. Why was Parvella here now?

Sophie eyed her for a moment, trying to decide what more she needed to do. "How is this supposed to help?" she asked Parvella.

The wind whipped at Parvella's gray hair, pulling at her cloak. "If you brought the creature here, then we are all in danger."

"It's dead," Sophie said.

"It doesn't die," she said.

Sophie turned her attention toward Parvella, her pose suddenly disrupted. "You know about it?"

"*You* shouldn't know about it," Parvella said. "The fact that you do, and that you bring such a story to me..." Parvella shook her head. "I can only suspect that what you saw was real."

"It was real. My brother was trapped in the forest, chased by this creature. He met someone." Even that aspect of the story seemed too incredible to believe. "He claims she gifted

him with power. And... well, she probably did. He *glowed*. I know how that sounds. But it's true. I saw it."

"If your brother was gifted power, then perhaps we will be safe. For a little while longer."

"Safe from what?"

Sophie could see over the edge of the roof, and she realized the Taihg had started to congregate outside the tower. There were dozens of them, and more were coming. They streamed from the barracks, but not just the Taihg. There were other soldiers. Hundreds upon hundreds of them.

"What's going on?"

"The troops are mobilizing," Parvella said.

"Why?"

Parvella looked over at her. "You were with Nevarn. What did he say?"

It was all too fast. Now Nevarn had mobilized the troops?

"He didn't say anything."

"He sent word ahead."

"Nevarn did?"

"He has a means of communicating with the Taihg," she said.

If that was the case, then why wouldn't Nevarn have contacted them during their journey into Devlar Forest?

"Hold the pose," Parvella said again.

"Can't you?"

"I have the control but not the power. You have the power but no control. Now hold it."

"I'm not sure that I'm the right person for this. If you could call the Raven Queen—"

"The Raven Queen is unavailable," Parvella said.

"Why?"

Sophie turned toward Parvella again, and as before, the pose began to slip, her control over it fading. It was a mistake she kept making. She swore under her breath, cursing Darish for allowing her to continue to make the same mistake, but she was the one responsible.

“More than you know has been taking place,” Parvella said. “The Karell decided to take action and worked to remove Darius, seeking to place Dannith back on the throne.”

It was about time, but if that was the case, wouldn't Dannith have known? He hadn't said anything to her.

“Something went wrong,” Parvella said. “I don't know what, but the Raven Queen was called to aid. Now I'm here. Now, maintain your focus, Sophie Varison.”

“I am trying to maintain my focus.”

“I can feel your magic, and I can feel the need for it. Focus, Sophie Varison.”

Sophie shook her head. “I wouldn't have to focus so much if you were around more often to teach.” She muttered the last, shaking her head as she started to re-form the pose.

Parvella looked in her direction. Power bloomed from her, sweeping around the entire tower.

“Who do you think taught the Raven Queen?”

Sophie blinked, her concentration shattered once more. “What was that?”

“Who do you think taught the Raven Queen? Why do you think she wants you to learn from me?”

“I thought she wanted to make sure I wasn't using poses to call to Lorant or Neylash or Ridaln or Darius or...”

“She did,” Parvella said. “And I was to teach you.”

Sophie shook her head. “You haven't taught me anything.”

“Because you weren't willing to listen. You will have answers later, Sophie Varison. For now, hold on to what you are drawing.”

Parvella said it far more firmly than Sophie thought she needed to, but at the same time, Parvella had her back turned to Sophie and was staring over the edge of the tower.

“How do you know of the thisten?” Sophie asked.

“They are an ancient power,” Parvella said.

Sophie looked at her. “Like Darish?”

Parvella’s brow furrowed. “Not the gods, but perhaps connected to the gods. Much like the Karell.”

Which would explain just how much power the thisten seemed to have. Sophie was distracted, and she stumbled, losing control of her pose.

“How do the thisten play into all of this?”

“They are complicated. At least, from what I know. And what I know is only what the Raven Queen has told me. They are considered a bridge of some sort.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that they hold power.”

Sophie snorted. “I’ve seen the kind of power they hold. It’s dangerous. Deadly.”

“But it doesn’t have to be,” Parvella said. “At least, that is what the Raven Queen believes. Now, maintain your posture.” She hadn’t even looked back.

“I’m trying,” Sophie said.

“You must try harder. You can’t hold this—”

“I’m doing everything I can,” Sophie said.

“I hear that you are far more capable than this. If this is all you can do, then I have to admit that I am quite disappointed after what I have heard about you and your ability.”

Sophie growled, and she held the pose, shifting her feet slightly, raising her arms. Energy built in her, but it did so slowly. She had to find power and hold it. Parvella continued to demonstrate the pose, power flowing from her.

“What did the Karell intend to do with Darius?”

“Disrupt his power long enough to reveal that he was not Dannith. It should have been simple. It has not been, from what I have heard.”

Sophie almost lost the pose again but managed to steady it. Distantly she heard a faint rumbling, like the rumbling she had heard in the forest. “That’s strange,” she muttered.

“What is strange?”

“That sound. I’ve heard something like it before.”

“Where?”

“When we were in the forest. There was a storm, but even without the storm, there was a rumbling like this.” Sophie shifted her foot slightly, drawing more power. She didn’t dare lift her foot. Doing so would alter the pose. She had to make small and subtle changes to it.

“Thisten,” Parvella muttered.

“That’s not the thisten. The thisten is—”

The rumbling came again, this time filling her. Parvella turned away from the edge of the tower. Pale light flowed from her, sweeping along the stone, swirling down through it.

Sophie couldn’t help but stare. “What are you doing?”

“Searching for proof,” she said.

“Proof of what?”

“A betrayal,” she whispered.

The rumbling came again.

Parvella was tossed back. Sophie almost moved, but were she to do so, she would lose control, and she would lose the pose, and everything that she had already started to form would fail. The pose was difficult enough as it was, and Sophie had to hold it. Otherwise, she feared she wouldn’t be able to re-form it.

She couldn’t help Parvella.

Parvella got to her feet, shifting her pose.

“What was that?” Sophie asked.

“The thisten.”

“How did one get in here?”

“You brought it here,” Parvella said.

“We didn’t bring a thisten with us. We brought the thisten head as proof.”

“Proof.” Parvella shook her head. “Unfortunately, I think the only proof we have is that there has been a betrayal.” She sighed. “I’ve been searching for answers but have not found them.”

“What kind of answers?”

“Why it has been so difficult for us to get word about the Shavln,” Parvella said softly.

“And you understand now?”

“There is a traitor within Reyash.”

The thundering came again. Parvella wasn’t tossed this time.

Sophie maintained her pose as solidly as she could.

“The thisten cannot die,” Parvella said. “Not easily. It takes someone who has a particular gift to dispel the dark energy within them. Until they do, there is no way to completely destroy a thisten.”

“You are saying that the thisten can recover from being beheaded?” Sophie started to laugh. “I don’t think any magical creature would be able to recover from that. Besides, when my brother beheaded the thisten, he did so with a magic-infused sword.”

“I can only hope that is true,” Parvella said. “Because if it is not, then it means that Nevarn is the one responsible for this.”

Parvella shifted her feet, forming another pose, though this one was far more complicated than any Sophie had seen before. The skill left Sophie marveling at her. Sophie tried to hold her pose but felt a trembling sort of resistance. It was as if something was countering her.

“We have been detecting something unusual for a while—ever since you brought it to the Raven Queen’s attention. She didn’t know what it was but thought it was tied to the gods. Now I’m not sure.”

“It feels more like the thisten.”

“Perhaps it is. I wish I knew more about them, and I wish the queen were here, as she does know more about them. As it is, we must do what we can to offer protection to the city.”

“It’s getting harder,” Sophie said.

“I’m not surprised,” Parvella said.

“Why?”

“Because there is another power coming, Sophie.”

“What can I do?”

“Continue to hold your pose.”

“I don’t know how much longer I’m going to be able to,” Sophie said.

She tried to shift, but it seemed as if there was something within her that fought against the movement. Every time she tried to slide her feet, she found that she couldn’t move nearly as well as she wanted. The strange resistance lingered within her.

“You must do it. You must overpower it.”

“What if I can’t?”

Parvella turned and looked out over the city. Her gaze drifted down, lingering where the troops were congregating. Sophie tried not to think about what it meant that Nevarn had brought the head back to the tower. He couldn’t have known that it would regenerate. He hadn’t known anything about it, had he? He hadn’t wanted Sophie to go into the forest. They had only gone in there because of the rain. And within the forest, Nevarn had protected her, keeping her from danger.

*Almost as if he knew.*



He hadn't wanted her to drink from the stream. He had known not to do so.

Nevarn had known that it was contaminated.

Sophie tried not to think that was true. She tried to come up with an alternative explanation, but it must have been the case.

*He wouldn't have betrayed his people.*

Sophie had known Nevarn since she had first come to the tower. He was the one constant, the one companion that she had, and the one person who had seemed to actually care about her. As much as he might have annoyed her, he had also been a friend.

Sophie didn't know if she would have found her brother had he not gone with her to the forest. She didn't know if she would have been able to survive what she had faced.

Parvella headed away, and Sophie resisted the temptation to look in her direction.

"Where are you going?"

"This isn't over," Parvella said.

"I realize that it isn't over, but what are you doing?"

"If the thisten draws on power that resists your attempt to create the circle of protection, then we must do whatever we can to stop the thisten. I will go and see what I can do."

"What if you can't do anything?"

"I can."

Sophie flicked her gaze toward Parvella.

"Finish what you are doing, Sophie Varison."

"What if I can't?"

"That is not an option."

With that, Parvella disappeared, heading down the stairs.

Sophie's mind raced through everything Parvella had told her.

She tried to shift her footing. Parvella wanted her to form this pose, and Sophie knew it would be effective in holding a protection—if only she could maintain it. The challenge was getting her feet positioned in a way that would allow her to maintain it.

All the time that she'd been working on her poses, she'd never succeeded in doing so without moving. There *was* a way. Ridaln had proven that to her, and the Raven Queen was able to use her power without moving.

How could Sophie do the same thing?

Sophie focused on the pose she was holding, and she started to think about what it intended to accomplish. In her mind, that seemed to be important. What she had to do was find the way to walk. She'd been crawling long enough, and it was long past time that Sophie found another way to use her power.

When she had watched Ridaln—and the Raven Queen—using power, they had never closed their eyes while working, but Sophie needed to, so that she could *sense* the power.

The pose helped her concentrate the power. The pose wasn't the power.

She had to think about it in those terms. More than anything else, Sophie understood that the pose was merely a connection to power. A vessel of sorts. If she really wanted to embrace the power, she should find something within the connection that she could use.

Sophie visualized the pose in her mind.

That was the key to the magic.

Her body was a conduit—nothing more. She could feel the stirrings of magic. She had been able to feel that all along. Even when she lost control of it, Sophie knew what it would do.

She held the image of what she formed in her mind. She recognized the energy that was there. The pose persisted even though her body didn't hold it—at least, not completely. If she

could form the rest of the pose in her mind, her body had done part of the work.

Something about this wasn't quite right, but it flowed, solidifying in a barrier, sweeping beyond her, beyond the tower, beyond the city. When it settled, it fell around the city.

And held.

Sophie opened her eyes.

She had done it.

She had created a pose without actually moving.

Sophie hadn't completed the entire pose while not moving, but she had done enough to be successful.

Excitement surged within her, thrilling her, and Sophie moved forward, releasing her hold on the pose, but she didn't release any of the power within it when she did. That had already been released. She didn't need to do anything more now.

It amazed her.

The ground rumbled.

She jerked her head back around, looking for the source.

It was near.

Not only that, but something slammed into the barrier she'd laid around the city.

Whatever it was came with incredible force and power.

Sophie stood in place, focusing outward, and could detect the energy crashing into her barrier. Even though she was no longer connected to it, it was still her power. The power allowed her to know what was taking place, but more than that, it allowed her to recognize how the barrier started to fade.

She wouldn't be able to hold it for long.

When it failed, what would happen?

Or more importantly, *who* would come?

# CHAPTER 32

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Lan jogged toward the barracks. By the time he arrived, the night had faded, the early morning daylight growing brighter by the moment. The air was heavy with dew, and he breathed it in. He felt as if he'd been gone from the barracks for ages rather than only a week. It felt as if so much had changed, though it was only him. He didn't know what that would mean for him, but now he had power. Magic power.

Now he could really be a Taihg.

As he was pushing open the door to the barracks, a familiar face stepped toward him.

“Lan?”

Lan turned toward Jalyn. Her red hair hung loose around her shoulders, her pale skin seeming to glow, making him think that she radiated some magic. A dark gray cloak covered her shoulders, as if she were preparing to depart.

“You're back?” he asked. She had gone to look for what had happened to the Karell. He hadn't expected her to be back so soon.

“Just me. We got separated from the others and returned to report to the Raven Queen.”

“Separated?”

“I'm not supposed to talk about it. At least, that's what the Karell leading us said,” she went on, glancing up at the tower.

After what Lan had experienced, and the strange darkness in the forest, he couldn't help but question whether what he

had been through was somehow tied to Jalyn's mission. Perhaps not, but he was left with questions.

"Did you find evidence of the Shavln?"

She frowned at him. "That's not what we went for. There have been disappearances," she said, as if uncertain about whether she should reveal that much to him. "I don't know all the details, so don't push me on it, but the Raven Queen had been receiving word of dangers."

"And you didn't find anything?"

"Oh, we did. There were Karell, and many of them died."

"How?" Lan had never heard of anybody able to easily attack the Karell.

"I don't really know. Maybe sorcery, though we're not sure. It's part of the reason that we came back to report to the Raven Queen. The Karell who led us brought word back."

"That's good. I had a little trouble myself."

"So I understand. What happened to you?" Jalyn asked.

"I lost my ride."

"Joralt returned."

"Again?"

"Yes. He returned once before, but then your sister took him away."

Lan nodded, quickly filling her in on some of what had happened, though not all of it.

"There's a danger coming," Lan said.

"We know. We've been preparing. The Raven Queen warned us."

If anyone was going to be able to compel the Taihg and Karell to take action, it was the Raven Queen. "What preparations have been made?"

Jalyn looked past him, as if she needed to see something behind him, before looking back at him. "I can show you."

Lan looked at the barracks. All he wanted was rest. He was tired. Now that he'd finally returned to the city, he needed to recuperate so he could be ready to fight, but perhaps that wasn't going to be possible.

"What's wrong?" Jalyn asked.

"I'm tired," he said.

She offered a slight shrug. "You can sleep when this is over."

She set off, and he followed.

Lan thought she might go deeper into the barracks, toward the Th'lar—the leader of the Taihg—but she didn't. Instead, she headed deeper into the city.

"What happened to you?" Jalyn asked.

Lan tensed. "What do you mean?"

"Nevarn said you were attacked and stayed out by the forest." She watched him. "It took Nevarn and your sister two days to return on horseback, so we didn't think to see you for another week—or even longer. A patrol went out in your direction, once we knew you were still alive."

"You didn't send anyone until then?"

"We always have patrols, Lan."

"I know that."

"We didn't shift our patrols on your behalf. Besides, you knew there was a danger and went out anyway." She watched him for a long moment as if trying to gauge his reaction. "And now you're back."

"I needed to get away."

"You were so disappointed that you weren't included?"

"I felt like I wasn't good enough."

Jalyn snorted. "That's never been the case. And there are certain things that you are prepared for and certain things you are not."

It had to be tied to his lack of magic.

At least, his previous lack of magic.

What would they do now?

“It is good to have you back, especially now.” Jalyn motioned for him to follow, and they continued to head into the city. In the distance, Lan could make out a line of soldiers riding toward the tower. “We are going to need your help.”

“Now you want it?”

“If we are riding against Lorant... of course I do. As do Magnus and the others.”

“How many have remained behind?”

“Not many,” Jalyn said, glancing back. She tried to hide it, but her brow furrowed in a troubled expression. “This will be a big push.”

There might be thousands of soldiers, but there were hundreds of Taihg. That changed the dynamics of any fight. It would be enough to turn the nature of the attack—enough to destroy Lorant.

Was that what they wanted?

“What’s the point of this attack?” he asked.

“The point? Lan, we’ve been dealing with Lorant for years. This is our chance.”

“Chance for what? To slaughter the people there?”

That was what would happen. Regardless of what he knew of the Taihg and the training they’d gone through, the moment they came upon a village, the people there would be slaughtered. They would fight, but they wouldn’t be able to win.

Lan wanted nothing to do with that.

“That’s a strange reaction for someone who has been through what you have,” Jalyn said.

Lan could only look at her. How could that be a strange reaction? How could anything that he did or said now be strange compared to the kind of thing she implied? He had



gone through quite a bit in Lorant, but he'd gotten away. More than that, it wasn't as if the people of Lorant had been at fault.

Something felt off, though Lan wasn't sure what it was. "I need to find my sister."

"You can't abandon your assignment."

"I'll catch up to you." At least, he could on foot, he now believed, but even if not on foot, his horse had returned, and Joralt had proven that he was incredibly swift.

"Don't do anything that's going to make them question you anymore."

"I'm not going to. I just need to talk to Sophie. I need to understand something that we saw."

Jalyn watched him for a moment. "Do it quickly."

Lan headed through the city. Everything seemed surprisingly quiet. Maybe it was just that there weren't any soldiers present in the barracks, and that everything felt off there, or perhaps it was that the streets were far emptier than he was accustomed to. It was as if the people had been told to stay off the streets. Something was wrong, but he couldn't quite put a finger on what it was.

Lan made his way toward the tower. He had been in the city for a few years and had only visited Sophie in the tower a few times. He reached the entrance, noticing that it was unguarded, and headed inside, making his way toward the stairs. There was pressure upon him, which strangely reminded him of the thisten.

He climbed slowly, reaching a window where he could look out. The Taihg and other soldiers were all arranged for the attack. Lan should be there, only he felt he needed to be here for Sophie. Conflicting emotions filled him. He should be down with the Taihg.

When a rumbling echoed through the tower, he knew what he needed to do. He raced up the stairs, following the strange sense that he felt, the strange sound that he heard, but it faded to nothing. He paused at another window, looking down once again upon the soldiers preparing for departure.

“It’s impressive, isn’t it?”

Lan turned and saw Nevarn behind him. “Nevarn. I’m looking for Sophie.”

“I’m sure that you are,” he said.

Nevarn headed down the stairs, meeting Lan. “I’m surprised that you made it back so soon. It’s really too bad.”

“Too bad?”

“I care about your sister.”

Lan was confused by the sudden change of topic, and he nodded. “I’ve gotten that sense from you. I realize that you care about her.”

“I care about her, but I can’t allow her to delay my plans for Lorant. It’s necessary, as I imagine you understand.”

Lan could only shake his head. “There’s nothing necessary about it. We don’t need to attack Lorant.”

“You came from Lorant. How could you believe that we don’t need to attack? The people there are willing to do anything to us.”

Lan shook his head. “Most of the people within Lorant don’t understand what those in power intend.”

Nevarn smiled at him. “If only I could believe that.”

“Where is Sophie?”

Nevarn’s gaze flicked toward the upper levels of the tower. “She’s safe.”

“What did you do with the thisten’s head?”

“Why?”

“Where is it?”

Nevarn turned toward him, crossing his arms. “I would advise you to be careful with how you speak to your prince.”

Lan took a step back. The energy within him continued to glow, creating a warmth that washed over him. That warmth pulsated, radiating from him. It was the gift of the Heart of the

Grove, and it flowed through him, through his sword. Lan was aware of it in a way that he hadn't been before. More than that, he was aware that an energy tried to counter him.

It came from Nevarn.

“What happened to you?” Lan asked.

“Happened? Why, nothing happened.” Nevarn grinned at Lan.

Lan took a step back, holding his sword. There wasn't much space on the landing. He could either go up the stairs or try to push past Nevarn and head down the stairs.

The prince watched Lan. It was as if he was aware of the battle waging within Lan's mind. “I would caution you about your choice here,” Nevarn said. “I can see you debating what to do.”

Nevarn unsheathed his sword. Lan retreated up two steps.

Nevarn sensed Lan's hesitation. “I've been training since I was two,” Nevarn said. “I imagine you and I have shared sword masters over the years.”

Nevarn laughed. It was a dark sound, a sound Lan remembered from the recent journey out of the city before. There was something within it that he recognized. With a dawning understanding, he knew what had happened.

Nevarn had been tainted. It was the same thing he had felt from the thisten.

Lan remembered what he had seen when the prince had been captured. The people surrounding him had been pouring some liquid on him. Not water, something tainted, Lan was certain. They must have known what it would do to him.

The same way that water had corrupted his sister.

Would it have corrupted him?

“I can help you,” Lan said.

“What makes you think that I need any help?”

“You've been touched by the Shavln.”

Lan was certain that was what this was.

How had his sister been around Nevarn and not known? She was the one that was so attuned to the Shavln, and he believed that if anyone would know about someone being influenced by the Shavln, it would be Sophie—only she hadn't recognized it. She had traveled with Nevarn, and she still hadn't known.

*Unless she did.*

Lan swung his blade to counter Nevarn's attack. The prince was incredibly skilled, but it was more than just the way that he fought. Nevarn was somehow using his ability, the darkness that he'd been touched by, to combat Lan.

Lan tried something different.

He thought about the way that he had fought the thisten. Lan turned his sword, drawing on the energy within it, and twisted that power, letting it flow from him toward Nevarn. The white light that he'd been drawing on surged free.

Nevarn growled. The sound reminded Lan of the thisten.

"I'm... stronger. Does that scare you?"

"What scares me is that I should have listened to Sophie."

"Your sister believes there is a dark power in the world. Even my mother didn't believe that."

"Your mother made a mistake."

Nevarn grinned at him. "Yes. She did."

The prince darted toward Lan.

Pale energy exploded away from Lan.

When it gushed toward Nevarn, he cried out. Lan used that moment. He darted forward, swinging his blade. He couldn't fight with the same freedom as he had with the thisten. In this case, he had to find a way to incapacitate Nevarn, not kill him.

Lan feinted an attack, twisting, and then he drove his heel toward Nevarn.

When it connected, the prince stumbled back.

His eyes widened slightly, and he growled. Considerable power emanated from him.

Nevarn surprised him by darting backward down the stairs.

Lan hesitated. What had Nevarn meant when he had agreed that his mother had made a mistake?

There was something more taking place, something that Lan needed to better understand. The only way he could was by finding Sophie. She would know. She had to. And if he couldn't...

If he couldn't, they might not be fast enough.

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# CHAPTER 33

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## SOPHIE

Sophie could feel the power flowing out and away from her and wondered how long she'd be able to maintain this connection. Distantly she felt something pushing against her barrier, even as she released the pose. It was a strange sensation, and one that left Sophie wondering if she was even feeling it correctly.

Parvella had gone to see if she could stop the thisten, but was there anything she could do?

Sophie doubted that Parvella would be able to manage on her own. Sophie would need to help. She had some experience with the thisten, after all, and she knew where Nevarn had taken its head.

That is, if he had left it there.

Why wouldn't she have heard more about the thisten in the time that she'd been back in the city, though? If he had raised the issue with the Taihg, shouldn't there be some concern about the kind of creature that they might have to face, rather than a drive to take the soldiers out of Valan?

Which was what they were doing now.

In the distance, the Taihg soldiers marched away from the city. Nevarn was probably among them, leading them to Lorant.

And then what?

Sophie wasn't sure what would happen then. War, she thought.

The hard part for her was she wasn't sure how to feel about that. She had grown up outside the war, in a land that had not been a part of it but had been touched by it through the loss of her parents. Sophie had never truly learned the truth of what had happened to them. She had only been told that they had been lost due to the war. Whenever she had asked her grandparents about it, she had not gotten consistent answers. Perhaps that should bother her, though what really bothered her was never knowing the truth about her nana and the kind of magic that she'd obviously had. Was that the reason for the stories?

Whenever she had tried to talk to any Karell about her grandmother, she'd not found anyone who knew anything. Oleda had been the closest to Sophie, and she hadn't shared anything, most likely because she had not known anything.

Sophie sighed and turned away from the edge of the tower. She wasn't able to determine anything dangerous. She had placed the barrier that Parvella had wanted, and now...

Now Sophie didn't know whether she could do anything more. She wasn't going to be able to create any more barriers, as the amount of power in the one she had created seemed to be considerable. What she really needed to do was find out what else Parvella might do. Maybe she knew something more.

She headed down through the tower, checking on the Raven Queen's level, but didn't find anything. The hallways were empty. She checked for Parvella but didn't see her. When she reached her level, she was tempted to go to her room, but there was nothing there for her. Besides, she didn't feel she could sit and rest, not with everything that had been taking place.

She headed down a few more levels and paused on Dannith's level.

He was in the hallway. She saw a pair of guards behind him but didn't recognize either man. There were several others behind them, which surprised her. Then again, if something



was taking place in the city, maybe the Raven Queen had left orders that Dannith was to be protected.

Dannith was dressed in a black jacket and pants, though different from the ones she'd last seen him in. He had a long cane in one hand, and it looked as if he was holding it carefully, ready for some sort of attack, possibly.

“You shouldn't be here, Sophie.”

Sophie frowned. “You know that something's going on?”

He tapped his cane, glancing behind him for a moment before turning his attention back to her. “I don't know what's going on, but I do know that you shouldn't be here. My sources have told me that significant events are taking place. It's a dangerous time.”

“Sources?” Sophie took a step toward him and began to focus on one of her poses, though she wasn't willing to use any magic against Dannith. She liked him, and she didn't think that Dannith was responsible for what was happening. But then, he did seem to know more than he should. And if he were responsible...

Sophie didn't like the thought that he might have something to do with what was happening, but what other explanation could there be?

“Are you responsible for this?”

He shook his head. “I'm not responsible for anything. I just know that significant events are taking place, and it is dangerous to be out. You should go back to your room.”

“I can't do that. Parvella needs me to help. When I told her about the thisten—”

Dannith darted toward her, faster than she would have expected. “About the what?”

There was real intensity in his voice. “A creature that I encountered while I was outside of the city. It's called a thisten.” She looked at him, frowning. “And you know about them.”

He nodded slowly. “I have heard of them. They are rumors, nothing more than that.”

“Well, unfortunately, these are more than rumors. More than stories. Although they would’ve made a good story when I was younger.”

Her nana had rarely told her stories about creatures, though. Maybe that was because she hadn’t wanted to scare Sophie, or maybe it was because some of those stories would have been too close to the truth. Then again, her nana had always viewed stories as having some basis in truth, as that was the key to what a person could take from a story.

“Where did you see them?”

“In Devlar Forest.”

Dannith squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, tapping his cane. There seemed to be a strange rhythm to the way that he did. “That’s why you spoke about the forest.”

Sophie nodded.

Dannith breathed out heavily, glancing behind him again. “You shouldn’t be a part of this, Sophie. You are not fully trained, and you are definitely not prepared for the kinds of dangers that exist in this world.”

She arched a brow at him. “And you are?”

Dannith looked as if he wanted to argue with her, but he spread his hands, still holding the cane upright. “Not prepared, and not a part of it. In fact, I am trapped here in the tower, which is where you should stay. It’s safer that way.”

“I’m afraid that I can’t just sit back and do nothing.”

“Stay away from the edge of the city,” Dannith said.

“Why? What do you know?”

“Just do it, Sophie.”

“I…”

Sophie trailed off as she felt something on the barrier.

It was strange that she would still be connected to it, as she was not holding her pose any longer. Still, she felt some aspect of the barrier linking to her, connecting to her in a way that she had not expected. A sliver of energy lingered in her, such that the barrier was somehow tethered to her. Perhaps that was because she had pushed so much power out.

“Sophie?”

“I’m sorry, Dannith. I have to go.”

“Please stay here,” he said.

Sophie looked over at him. “You should go back to your room. You don’t have any power of your own. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

She meant it.

Sophie hesitated, and then she wrapped him in a quick hug before spinning and heading down the stairs. She heard Dannith calling after her, but she wasn’t willing to listen. If there was something happening in the city, she needed to take a look, if only so that she could figure out why she felt some pressure on the barrier. Parvella had to be active somewhere. She had gone looking for the thisten, though maybe she was still in the tower.

As she stepped outside, a cool breeze struck her. The air smelled of the garden, the floral fragrances striking her with a sweetness that she wished she had time to appreciate. Once outside, she was far more attuned to the strange barrier that she had placed around the city. She could still feel it, the dome-like shield.

It did leave her wondering why her.

Parvella had claimed that Sophie was powerful but had no control, whereas she had control but no power.

But the Raven Queen had both.

Why not the Raven Queen?

If Parvella was here in the city, that suggested the Raven Queen was here as well. And if that were the case, then it

seemed to Sophie that the Raven Queen should be the one to place the protections around the city.

Unless something had happened to her.

Or...

Another possibility crept into Sophie's mind, and it was one that left her a bit more worried. Maybe more worried than she needed to be. What if Parvella was a part of what was happening?

And, she worried, what if Parvella wanted Sophie for her power so that she could somehow preclude the Raven Queen from reaching the city while she did whatever she intended?

Sophie had never had any reason to doubt Parvella, but she had always been stern, and a bit violent. More than that, she had been the one to suggest that there was somebody else involved.

*That is what the guilty person in every story does.*

Sophie wished that she knew where Thea had gone.

She trusted Thea, but then again, Sophie tended to trust Karell, because they had helped her as often as they had. If she could find her, or other Karell...

Where were they?

More importantly, where were those who could protect the city?

She paused for a moment, then raced through the garden to reach the gate on the far side. She pushed it open and stepped out into the streets. They were strangely empty. That was unusual. There was an odd power about as well, though she wasn't sure what it was. Maybe that was what Dannith had advised her against going near.

She raced through the streets, heading toward the barracks. The Taihg. That was who she needed to find. There had to be somebody there who could help, and maybe somebody she could warn about what she had detected. Maybe there was somebody there who had a way of reaching the Raven Queen.

When Sophie reached the barracks, she slowed and found them empty, much like the rest of the city.

There would be no help from the Taihg.

She continued onward. She reached the edge of the city. Most of the outskirts of the city contained smaller stone buildings that were primarily homes, though there were a few shops scattered around here as well. The buildings were spaced farther apart than those deeper into the city, and there wasn't the same sense of age as most of the buildings closer to the tower had. Not only the sense of age, but those older buildings had a sense of energy as well.

She looked outward. She could see the shimmering edge of the barrier that she had formed. The amount of power that she had summoned was astonishing.

She had never attempted anything quite like this before. Sophie wasn't sure that she would have managed to draw that much energy had Parvella not been there, nor would she have been able to sweep it around the city itself.

Why had Parvella wanted her to create a bubble?

Sophie was tempted to remove it.

As she focused on the dome of power, she used a bit of her prayer pose, simply to probe at it, and felt that it was solid. Still, she was aware of something pressing on the power, as if it was trying to intrude upon what she had done and the way that she had placed her magic. Whatever was out there was significant enough that Sophie couldn't help but wonder if she would have any way of stopping it without the dome.

Until she knew, it was better to leave her barrier in place.

She walked along the edge of the city. There were some people, but not as many as she would have expected. Most stayed in their homes. Why?

That was odd, as if they knew there was something dangerous taking place, or had been warned in some fashion.

Who could have warned them?

The only person that had the kind of power to make that possible was the Raven Queen.

But if she was here, why would Sophie need to do anything?

She wandered a little longer before feeling another pressure on the dome of power. This time it was a bit more familiar. It struck her as sorcery.

But it was a strange sorcery, something that she felt she had experienced before.

Could Darius have used this as an opportunity to attack?

He could have planned to draw the Taihg out of the city, use some strange dark power, tie it to this peculiar Mistress of the Woods that Lan had uncovered, and then use the thisten. All of it made a dangerous sort of sense.

But if it were Darius, Sophie wouldn't be able to do anything to stop him. She didn't have the knowledge necessary to rival his ability. She was powerful—she no longer doubted that—but she certainly wasn't skilled enough, and definitely not as skilled as a sorcerer like Darius. What she really needed was the Raven Queen. She wished that she had some way of reaching her.

No. She wished that the Raven Queen were here.

Sophie started back toward the tower. The pressure was building upon her barrier, but it was subtle. Eventually, if that pressure continued to build, and it became too much for her, it would overpower the barrier. And if so...

It would crumble. The city would be unprotected.

And if Darius were coming to attack, there would be no way to stop him.

She could get back to the tower, and she could place another layer of protection.

Maybe that would help. It was the only thing Sophie could think of to do.

# CHAPTER 34

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Sophie hurried back through the city.

Everything she'd been doing continued to draw upon her strength, sapping it far more rapidly than she was accustomed to. Sophie hadn't used that much of her connection to the poses, though she felt exhausted. It was as if something had poisoned her ability to hold power.

She skidded to a stop.

She was in one of the lower sections of the city, a place where there were bakers and butchers and candymakers. This was a part of the city she had visited many times, and she found it comforting—or she always had before. For some reason, right now she felt nothing but a chill washing through her.

*Poisoned my ability.*

She thought about what she had gone through in the forest. She had lost her connection to power for a little while. Not indefinitely, and it had returned, but for long enough that Sophie had questioned whether she would fully recover. Even as she had returned to the city with Nevorn, she had felt tired, weakened, and had blamed it on the long travel, but what if that hadn't been the only cause? When she had been on top of the tower, that energy had started to come back, but now that she was out here, within the outskirts of the city, she felt weakened and tired again.

*Why would I be so tired?*



Sophie hadn't done anything other than attempt some simple magic. She had used the prayer pose, but the prayer pose shouldn't have been enough to overwhelm her. Sophie had used that pose many times and had never had any difficulty with it—at least, not like this.

She might have done something, though. She had drunk from the well beneath the city—the source of water used by everyone in the city.

And the streams in the forest had also had some strange corruption. They were far enough away that Sophie would not have expected that water to reach here, but what if it had? It might explain why she felt this way.

When she had been traveling with Nevarn, she had healed herself using a particular pose, and she needed to do that again. Sophie hurriedly formed the piasa pose, and power began to build. When she turned inward, and it washed through her, there was a wave of weakness followed by a cool sense of relief. Then the weakness was gone.

She *had* been poisoned.

Which meant that others might have been as well.

As she raced back into the city, heading toward the well, a different thought came to her. What about Nevarn? Maybe he hadn't betrayed anyone.

Sophie was making her way through the city, hurrying past empty shops, when she saw a blur of dark shadows. She hesitated, thinking that maybe they were soldiers, but the soldiers were all out of the city now.

Not soldiers. Thisten.

There were several of them. And they were prowling the streets.

Her heart hammered. Her mouth went dry.

What were they doing here?

And furthermore, how had they gotten here?

Sophie darted toward an alley to hide. Now, more than ever, she wished she had the ability to form poses without actually forming them. Now, more than ever, she wished she could use magic the way that Ridaln had. However, she *had* used it in that way—at least, partly in that way.

What if she could do something like that again? Sophie focused, thinking about which pose she would use. It had to be something that she knew well, but it also had to be something that would be useful.

In order to incapacitate the thisten, it was going to have to involve considerable power, but it was also going to have to involve trapping the thisten. She turned her focus to the thisten coming across the street.

The creature was enormous. It sniffed at the air as it prowled. There was something dark surrounding it, along with a foul odor that wafted toward her. It was the smell of rot.

Sophie wrinkled her nose, but she began to form the thief pose.

It was strangely named, but it had a variety of uses, not the least of which was its ability to trap power. That was all she needed. Sophie quickly formed the pose. Power built within her, and she sent it surging out.

When it reached the thisten, she twisted it.

She had formed the thief pose often enough that she knew it deep within her. Practice and the opportunity to form the magic from that pose meant that when she used it, when that power rolled away from her, it struck the thisten.

She didn't even worry about trying to harm it. All she needed was to trap it.

Her power held.

She started out along the street. There was another thisten. It came at her from the opposite direction. She was going to have to hold one pose while forming another.

She hurriedly started to form the pose, though the thisten raced toward her.

The thisten moved quickly, and Sophie immediately worried that she wouldn't be quick enough. The speed of the thisten was more than she thought she could react to in time.

She attempted to form her pose. She visualized it. When she did, she could feel power building within her, and she forced it away.

A hazy white power blasted out from her, and it struck the thisten.

Sophie wrapped a looping band of pale energy around the thisten to bind the creature.

Now that she had trapped two, she didn't know how long they would hold. Already she could feel the thisten struggling, fighting against what she was doing. Before long, they would overpower her. She could tell that the thisten would be too much for her to withstand.

Sophie forced a bit more energy through herself. Now that she had an understanding of forming a pose in her mind and then pushing energy up through it, she understood how she could take the power and force it away.

The energy within her started to fade. The thisten overwhelmed her. She scrambled along the street, and when she reached an intersection, one of the thisten erupted through the thief pose.

She reached another intersection.

There was another thisten in front of her.

Sophie formed the thief pose, but she questioned whether it was even going to work.

*What if the thief pose isn't enough?*

The other two thisten had already escaped, and now she didn't know if anything that she used would be enough compared to the kind of power that she detected. There might be something else she could try, though she wouldn't have much of an opportunity if it failed.

*Don't think like that.*

She hurriedly formed the thief pose, then switched to the piasa pose.

With this one, she took her time to create the entire pose. She wasn't willing to simply form the pose in her mind. She raised her arms, stretching them out to either side, and then shifted her feet.

The thisten came toward her, racing quickly.

Sophie pulled on the piasa pose, feeling the energy building, and then she pushed it away.

It was different from when she pushed power through herself to heal. She had no idea if this would even work, and as the power flowed away from her, she began to form the thief pose in her mind, readying for the possibility that she would need to attack.

The thisten reached her. Sophie forced the thief pose away, and it wrapped around the thisten. The creature struggled, but strangely enough, the piasa pose struck it at about the same time as the thief pose held the thisten. The energy held the thisten, though it seemed this thisten didn't fight in the same manner as the others.

The other two still hadn't come after her, though she suspected it wouldn't be long before they did.

The one that she now had confined within the thief pose didn't tear at the barrier the same way as the others had. This thisten stood in place. Rather than struggling, it remained within the barrier, but it looked at Sophie, twisting so that it could see her, almost as if it was an intelligent being. When the thisten had attacked in the forest, Sophie had had no sense of intelligence from it. What she saw now was something different.

She approached.

The thisten watched her as she neared.

Sophie held her hands out, looking at the thisten.

Up close, she was able to take in the dappled fur, the tall ears that swiveled as it turned, watching her. She was able to

make out the muscles beneath its flesh as they rippled, the tension within the creature potent as it seemed to prepare its attack.

Sophie held her hand out, waiting.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” she said. “I’m not going to hesitate if you give me a reason to.”

The thisten turned, its head swiveling, and it looked at Sophie.

“You have a darkness within you. I don’t really understand it, but if you let me, I can help you.”

It was unsettling having this creature watching her like this. At least when a thisten was mindlessly attacking, there was a reason for her to attack it, and destroy it. With it behaving like this, Sophie felt uncomfortable destroying the creature.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” she repeated.

*What am I thinking?*

She couldn’t have a conversation with a creature like this. It wouldn’t even understand her.

However, she had the feeling that there was something wrong with this one. What if she could help it? Wouldn’t that be valuable? Not destroy it—but heal it.

She held her hand out and waited.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” she said again.

She’d felt that they were mindless creatures, only this one didn’t look at her with that same mindless rage of energy. It looked at her with uncertainty. It was still terrifying. The creature was massive, and it could rip her apart at a moment’s notice—something that she believed possible, given how she had felt the other thisten ripping at her power. But this one did not try anything.

Movement along the street caught her attention. She glanced at it briefly to see three thisten coming toward her. The ground trembled beneath them with each step.

Sophie wasn't going to be able to stop three of them, not unless she held them in a single pose. However, even if she were to do that, she didn't know if it would be enough to contain them.

Sophie considered her options.

She could run, but the thisten were fast and would likely catch her before she managed to escape.

That left the only option of trying to place them within the power of a pose, risking the possibility that it wouldn't hold.

Sophie began forming the pose. The thisten nearest her turned its ears toward her and swiveled so that it could look at her. The attention was unsettling, but Sophie had to ignore it, choosing instead to finish the thief pose and send power streaking away.

When it connected with the three thisten, she felt it form around them.

Rather than lingering to find out if the power would hold, Sophie ran.

She reached the end of the street.

The thisten nearest her broke free. It made a small circle, a pattern of sorts, and then it bounded toward the others. It started to make a pattern around the others, as if it were circling them, though it wasn't a complete circle. It was a different sort of pattern, one that Sophie couldn't fully identify.

As she headed toward the tower, she felt the trembling behind her. The thisten that she had dealt with were coming, and if she wasn't fast enough, or if they reached her, she worried that they would overwhelm her, but she should be able to get to the tower before they managed to get to her.

Sophie reached the tower grounds.

When she did, the thundering suddenly ceased.

*That can't be good.*

By the time she reached the door, it came crashing open.

Nevarn was there. He turned toward Sophie, locking eyes with her. There was a strange dark expression on his face. She had seen that same expression in the forest but had thought that it had come from the difficulty that they had been going through.

“You shouldn’t be here, Sophie.”

With a daunting horror, she understood. “Something happened to you, Nevarn. You’ve been contaminated.” It sounded ridiculous to say, but she felt like it was true. “I think that when you went into Lorant with my brother, something happened to you. Something that has been happening within Lorant. It changed you.”

Nevarn regarded her with a blankness. “I had intended to keep you out of this, Sophie. I cared for you. I really did, but perhaps that was my mistake.”

“No,” she said, holding her hand up, the same way that she had when she had approached the thisten. She doubted it made a difference.

Nevarn shook his head. “Do not try to placate me.”

Sophie shook her head. “I’m not trying to placate you. I’m not trying to do anything other than help you.”

She shifted her feet, starting to form the gilán pose, but to form that pose, she was going to have to raise her arms. She suspected that the moment she did, Nevarn would know what she was doing. He obviously understood the nature of the poses, having studied them.

Nevarn frowned at her. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Sophie shook her head. “I’m not doing anything.”

“I see you forming a pose. Do you think to use that against me?”

Nevarn took a step toward her, his sword suddenly in hand.

Sophie immediately formed the prayer pose, wishing that she didn’t need the slow posture to do so. She had to protect herself from Nevarn—something that horrified her. He had always been kind to her.

*And what if he isn't contaminated?*

That thought troubled her just as much. The possibility that Nevarn might have betrayed her—and his mother—bothered her more than she could even explain.

Nevarn darted toward her, slamming into the prayer pose.

He backed away, grinning at her. “I can’t believe my mother ever believed you didn’t have any power.”

“She never believed that,” Sophie said.

“No? If she had believed that you had any potential, she would’ve taught you herself. She attempted to teach me, you know.”

“I know,” Sophie said.

“It became apparent that I don’t have the same potential as my mother does. Unfortunate—at least, according to her. If she had asked me when she first wanted to teach me, I would have told her from the very beginning that I had no interest, not in the kind of magic that she wanted me to have. She never really understood my interest in working with the Karell, though she condemns them for their type of magic. Weaker.” He smiled. “Only it’s no longer weaker.”

Whatever he was doing was potent—and might be more than Sophie could withstand.

Nevarn smiled at her. “You feel it, don’t you? I don’t know what it is that Parvella managed to place around the city, but it won’t work. It won’t hold.”

“Parvella?” Sophie asked, feeling her mind wandering.

“She has long presumed to defend this place. She’s been here for decades, claiming that she understands the need to protect Valan better than any others, and certainly better than my mother. It always surprised me that my mother allowed her to have such influence, as if she was placating her, though my mother does often play favorites like that.”

Sophie tried to ignore the conversation, focusing instead on Nevarn. If she could create the necessary pose, maybe she



could help him. If she couldn't help him, then she was going to have to stop him.

Nevarn made a circle around her. There was something about the movement that reminded her of the thisten and the way that it had prowled around the other three.

Was he using some different sort of pattern?

She readied to shift her pose, sliding her feet slightly so that she could not only create the prayer pose but also turn it into another pose. Nevarn continued to make a circle around her, with something that suggested a pattern that would call to power.

Sophie needed to hold the prayer pose while attempting the gilán pose.

She had no experience holding one pose while creating another. The only way to do so would be to hold the image of one in her mind. And as she watched Nevarn, she decided that it was the only way this would work.

A thundering sound shook her concentration.

She looked past Nevarn.

The thisten.

They were coming.

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# CHAPTER 35

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Lan raced up the stairs, his heart hammering. He didn't know where to find Sophie. He only knew that she would be in the tower. The rumbling that came through the tower suggested the thisten, but what if it was not the thisten? And if not, what was causing it?

The city was so empty that it left him unnerved. What was going on? This was more than just the Taihg marching for Lorant. This was something worse. He needed to find someone of power in the city to help him. If not his sister, then somebody else.

Energy guided him toward a door adorned with markings of the gods, where he slowed. A pair of soldiers lay motionless on the floor, on either side of the door. Lan crouched, checking for injuries, but both men were gone.

Lan squeezed his sword, feeling a wave of warmth washing through him. Power immediately pressed on him. He dropped, bringing his sword up. His blade caught a blur of darkness.

Thisten.

Lan rolled to the side, warmth swelling inside him. The glow that the Heart of the Grove had gifted him radiated from him. He would use that gift.

A streak of black fur moved past him. He stayed down, narrowly avoiding one attack, but something raked across his shoulder from behind. He cried out, dropping his sword as

cold like the icy grip of the Mistress of the Woods worked through him.

Lan ignored it. He had to ignore it.

He scrambled forward, looking for his sword. Without it, how was he going to withstand a thisten attack?

Another streak of black came toward him.

Lan did the only thing that he could think of. He held his hand up.

It glowed.

It reminded him of the glow the Hunter had produced. The glowing spread from one hand to another, a band of light stretching between them. When the thisten approached, Lan wrapped the light around the thisten and squeezed.

The thisten growled, a painful energy.

Lan didn't have the same control as the Hunter to spread power from hand to hand, but if he could use some semblance of it, he might be able to incapacitate—even decapitate—the thisten, which would buy him some time.

Lan squeezed the thisten with everything he had.

It struggled against him. He held the band of white light, and warmth radiated from him. That was what he needed. That was the key to the energy within him.

Lan jerked until the thisten stopped struggling.

Only then did he step to the side, still holding his power. He looked around the room. Despite spending years within Valan, he didn't really know the inside of the tower. Sophie visited him much more often than he had ever come to the tower. Even when he had come, he hadn't been invited to the upper levels.

The inside of the tower was sparsely decorated. The stone around him felt cold, as if it didn't want him here. There did come the sense of energy, though Lan didn't know if the energy was real or in his imagination. There had been a time when he would have claimed that he wasn't able to detect

energy, but that was before he'd proven that he most definitely could use magic.

There was nothing here.

The room was empty.

The thisten had destroyed whatever *had* been here.

Clothes were strewn about. A wardrobe had a massive gash in it. A bed visible behind another doorway had been ripped apart, the bedding strewn everywhere. There was nothing left.

Thankfully, there was no body here.

Lan had feared that he'd find Sophie—not that he doubted her ability to handle the thisten. Given what he'd seen of her magic, he wouldn't be shocked if she was able to at least confine the thisten, but he didn't think that she would be able to remove the threat completely. That had taken the strange power of the Heart of the Grove.

How long had the thisten been here?

Another answer he didn't have.

Whatever reason Nevarn had to place the creature here must have been significant. Looking over at the still form of the thisten, Lan debated what to do with it. Leaving it ran the risk of it coming around and attacking again. Decapitating it ran the risk of the creature coming back to life—but doubled.

Lan didn't know what the right answer was.

If only the Hunter had taught him how to control this power.

Lan had to have some way of using it, as he had done so before. There was an aspect of it that was familiar to him. He could push it through his hands—and maybe he'd be able to destroy the thisten.

Now that it was incapacitated, he could try.

He stood over it, holding his hands out, letting power flow from him and into the creature. Warmth built, his hands glowing softly. He tried to think about what the Hunter had

done and could only think that he had pushed the warmth into the thisten somehow.

When Lan did the same thing, he felt a cold resistance.

The thisten started to struggle.

It thrashed, violently. Maybe that was the reason the Hunter had done this when he had decapitated the thisten. Lan couldn't hesitate, though, and had to keep pushing. He sent more power flowing from him. Energy within the creature built, cold pushing against Lan. He had to push back with the warmth that the Heart of the Grove had given him. Lan squeezed power around the creature's neck, trying to hold it. The thisten continued to struggle.

Lan shifted his posture, sitting atop the thisten. His weight held the creature down. It clawed at him, but he avoided the attacks. Warmth surged through Lan, and he slammed his hand down toward the thisten, pressing his energy out. The dark energy felt cold against him. Lan didn't know what the thisten did as it resisted him, but power pushed against him, such that warmth fought cold. Light fought dark. Lan fought the thisten.

He had to find power from somewhere deeper.

Calling on the energy that he felt within him, he realized there was more than he'd been using so far. He dug into that power, letting it fill him, and sent it surging out and away. The power swept toward the thisten. The resistance persisted, but Lan pushed against it as much as he could.

Then he felt the resistance fading.

The thisten roared.

The sound was loud in the small room, and it thundered off the walls, echoing around Lan, leaving his ears ringing. He continued to push power out, thinking about what the Hunter had done, and using it in the same way.

The thisten continued roaring.

Then the resistance faded.

Lan rolled off the thisten.

He wasn't sure what he expected to have happened, but now that he was off the thisten, he looked at the creature. The warm, glowing light had changed it. The fur no longer had the same darkened appearance, as if dappled by shadows. Now it had a soft golden-brown hue. The thisten lived, though it breathed differently, not with the same agitation.

Lan backed away.

*I should decapitate it now.*

Getting to his feet, he reached for his sword, but another scream caught his attention.

It was nearby.

Lan was looking down at the creature, readying to strike, when the scream came again.

Lan raced from the room, pulling the door closed. He would deal with the thisten later. For now, he had to see who was screaming and what they faced. From the rumbling he detected, he realized that it was probably another thisten. Lan would have to be ready. He hoped the gift of power the Heart of the Grove had given him would last long enough for whatever he needed to do.

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# CHAPTER 36

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The scream came from above him.

The tower continued to rumble, though the rumbling had a different quality to it now. It wasn't the steady rumbling of power from the thisten. It seemed as if the tower itself trembled.

As he neared the next landing, another scream echoed down the stairway, with a note of anger.

He squeezed his sword. The warmth continued to glow through him. A landing in front of him drew his attention, the decoration in the hallway unlike any of the other landings he'd seen within the tower.

*This has to be the Raven Queen's level.*

Lan had never seen the Raven Queen in her full power, but he could imagine what that might look like. Having been around others with magic, the Karell and his sister, he had an understanding of what kind of power existed, even if he didn't have any way of controlling it himself.

There were no guards. Nothing to suggest the Raven Queen was here.

*There was the scream.*

Lan raced toward the end of the hallway to find a massive set of doors, which he hurriedly pulled open. If the Raven Queen was here, he'd deal with the consequences later.

Two thisten were on the other side. One of them lunged toward him.

Lan twisted at the last moment, dropping to the side, and swept his glowing sword up to drive it into the thisten's belly.

He rolled, scrambled to his feet, and hurriedly looked around to see who had screamed. There was no sign of anyone.

One of the massive creatures swung a paw at him. Lan kicked its hind leg.

As the other thisten came toward him, Lan swung his sword at the one approaching from his left, near the door. The blade carved through the thisten's fur, and the creature roared.

He twisted to the side and jabbed the other thisten through the neck, releasing a spray of blood. Had they been any other creature, Lan would have thought that would be the end of it, but these were thisten, creatures that wouldn't die.

He spun, turning toward one of the thisten, and slammed his blade down into its back. He turned and kicked as the other thisten came toward him.

The creature howled, and the kick sent a jarring pain shooting through Lan's body. He ignored it, focusing instead on trying to keep the thisten from reaching him.

He backed into the room.

*This might be a mistake.* By coming into the room, he might be trapping himself, but he had to see who had screamed. He doubted it was the Raven Queen, but *somebody* had to be here.

He found nothing but the thisten.

Lan slashed at one of the thisten as it tried to push him back. The force of his movement carried him forward—only for him to fall. He nearly lost his sword, but as he started to roll, the other thisten grabbed one of his legs.

Then the thisten he'd been stabbing at grabbed his arm. Not to shred him, though. Lan felt himself being stretched between the two thisten, which were drawing him apart. Cold started to seep through him where their claws pinched his flesh.

*They'll tear me apart.*

The only thing he could think of doing was pulling upon the warmth that still filled him. Warmth flowed up from deep within, and he pushed it against the cold. He started by pushing on the cold in his leg and his arm, the injuries, and the warmth overpowered it, and he pushed out from there.

One of the thisten roared. It was the one holding his arm.

Lan jerked.

Flesh tore painfully. The cold continued through him, but he pushed the warmth through the cold, restoring it as much as he could.

Lan brought his sword around and slammed it into the thisten's head.

The thisten roared again.

Lan stabbed at it. The creature backed away from him.

Lan used the opportunity to turn his focus to the other thisten.

Jabbing the sword into the thisten, he got his leg free and kicked. The cold lingered in his leg longer than it had in his arm, leaving him concerned about how injured he actually was. Lan would need to be able to walk. Hopefully, the Heart of the Grove's gift allowed him to recover quickly.

On his feet, he limped.

Lan looked at the thisten. As injured as he was, he wouldn't be able to do much against them. He had to either wait until he recovered—something that he didn't know would happen—or risk the attack. Risking an attack while the thisten were also injured seemed the best strategy.

*Perhaps the only one.*

He still didn't know who was in the room with him. *Someone* had cried out.

Lan lunged at the nearest thisten. It was the one that had grabbed his arm. He jabbed his sword into the thisten's head and swung his body around so that he rode astride the thisten.

The creature roared again, the floor rumbling beneath him. The thisten tried to buck him off, but Lan held on tightly, gripping the thisten so that he wouldn't be tossed off. He squeezed the rough fur, held on with one hand, and stabbed at the thisten with his other.

He wouldn't be able to hold this position for long. With his legs wrapped around the thisten, he struggled to squeeze, trying to ignore the pain that surged through his injured leg.

Lan jabbed the sword down and held it. With it planted, he pushed the warmth through the blade and into the thisten.

His power met cold resistance.

Lan pushed against it the way he'd seen the Hunter doing so.

*Only that thisten was dead already.*

The thisten thrashed.

He ignored it. The blade remained lodged in the thisten's neck. The warmth flooding out from Lan was enough that he could feel power flowing outward, enough that it poured from him and into the thisten.

The other thisten latched on to Lan's leg, ripping at it.

Lan tried to ignore the other thisten's attempt to tear him off. He held on tightly to his sword, pushing the warmth out and letting it spill into the thisten he rode. Power flowed from him, his blade glowing brightly.

Warmth slammed into the thisten.

The bucking stopped.

Lan was jerked free.

He clung to his sword and swung it around toward the other thisten as he was dragged across the floor. The creature snarled as it pulled on him, jerking its head from side to side as if trying to snap his leg completely off.

Lan scrambled, trying to get free of the thisten, but the creature continued to jerk its head from side to side, and Lan was dragged to the far side of the room.

He grabbed for something—anything.

A table was near enough that he reached for it, trying to get a grip on it, but he couldn't.

He swung his sword around, trying to jab it into the thisten. He didn't know how long he had before the other thisten came around—if it did it all. Lan didn't know if he had done enough to prevent it from stirring back to consciousness.

There had been a fading of the resistance, but that didn't necessarily mean that he had overwhelmed it, nor did it mean that the thisten was dead.

Lan missed, and he scrambled around to jab again. But time and again he missed.

Lan was tossed to the side.

His leg bent awkwardly, a loud crack ringing in his ears.

His entire leg went painfully cold. He tried to move, but agony washed over him.

*It's broken.*

Given the way the thisten had been jerking his leg from side to side, Lan wouldn't be surprised if it was shattered. The Heart of the Grove's healing energy might be able to restore him, but he didn't know how quickly that would work.

He had to try to move, but the pain made that impossible.

The thisten was close, and he could feel it getting closer.

Lan blinked back tears, and he jabbed with his sword, poking at shadows. He didn't think that he would even be able to stop the thisten at this point, but if nothing else, he would hold it off.

The heat within his leg burned, flaring, and it pushed against the cold. Lan tried to ignore it, but he realized that warmth was trying to help him.

*It's restoring you. Don't fight it.*

What he needed was to embrace it.

More than that, he needed to be intentional about the way the energy was rolling through him, to see if there was any way to augment it so that it would continue to heal him.

Lan focused his power within his chest, then moved it down, sliding it along his leg. The warmth met the cold resistance, and he pushed it through.

Lan cried out.

The thisten roared near him.

Lan swung his blade.

It connected with the creature.

Lan scrambled up to his elbows, looking to see where the thisten had gone, but he didn't see where it was. He could feel it prowling near him, could feel the pressure of it, and he was aware of some deep energy rumbling in the room.

It was almost too much for him.

*Where's the thisten?*

The heat in his leg flared brightly. Then the pain retreated.

Scrambling to his knees, he tried not to think about what it meant to be able to recover from an injury that quickly. The Heart of the Grove truly *had* given him a gift.

Lan got up, though it was barely in time.

The thisten lunged at him, jaw agape, and Lan jammed his sword into the thisten's mouth, sliding the blade in all the way.

The thisten roared, screaming at Lan, but he focused only on the energy that he had, the power that he was holding. He pushed the warmth and power into the thisten.

The thisten raged, but Lan held it pinned to the sword. He didn't know if the warmth was going to do anything to this creature, but when he had pushed it at the other thisten, some resistance had faded.

The resistance pushed against him, that cold energy that came from the thisten, but Lan pushed as much as he could back. He overwhelmed the resistance.

Then he rolled away, pulling the sword out of the creature's mouth. Lan got to his feet, standing shakily for a moment, leaning on his sword. Everything spun around him.

He was tired, dizzy, and exhausted.

The thisten didn't move.

*Maybe they're dead.*

If nothing else, having these creatures incapacitated might enable him to prove to the Taihg the danger they posed. He needed to get to the Taihg.

Lan paused in front of one of the thisten. The creature looked much like the other after he'd pushed the warm power through it, the dark, shadowy fur now changed into something else, almost golden in appearance. He lifted his sword to drive it into the creature and cut its head off. Then movement near him caught his attention.

Lan turned toward an upturned table. In all the chaos of the attack, he hadn't seen the table, and he hadn't seen the legs sticking out from behind it. Hurrying over—at least as quickly as he could, given his injuries and the fatigue that still worked through him—he reached the table and leaned on it. His breath came in heavy, panting gasps, and he tried to settle it.

An older woman rested on the floor on the other side of the table. She looked up at him, her eyes wide, staring at Lan.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

She glanced at her leg. “That thing bit me. It's cold.”

Her voice was sharp, as if she was used to commanding. Probably a senior servant in the tower, someone who sat high up in the Raven Queen's household, for her to be in this room.

“Let me see if I can do something,” he said.

Crouching down next to her, Lan set his sword to the side and studied the woman. She wore a blue-and-green-striped dress of a silky fabric. Gray hair was twisted into a bun, though strands of it fell loose around her face. Tears streamed down her cheeks, which she didn't bother to brush away.

After pushing up the dress and pulling down her stocking, he looked at her leg. The bite was deep. Bone protruded through flesh. She needed a healer to recover from an injury like this.

“It’s broken. I can splint it—”

“I need you to find Thea.”

“Who’s Thea?”

The woman regarded him sharply for a moment. “How is it that you don’t know? You’re a tower guard and don’t know Thea?”

Lan shook his head. “Not a tower guard. A Taihg, and not stationed in the tower.”

The woman watched him as if the pain in her leg had been completely forgotten. “Why would you come here?”

“My sister is in the tower. I came to check on her. She would be with Nevarn.”

Lan knew it was best not to reveal what Nevarn had done quite yet. He didn’t know how the people of the tower would handle that. Lan wasn’t sure how *he* would handle that. When this was over—whatever this was—he would have to deal with Nevarn’s betrayal.

“Sophie,” the woman said softly.

Lan nodded. “That’s right. Do you know her?”

“I’m Parvella.” When Lan looked at her with continued confusion, the woman shook her head. “I’ve been working with her, trying to help her...” She paused and squeezed her eyes shut, her jaw clenching. Lan could imagine the pain that worked through her and the concentration she had to have in order to speak past it. “Learn her poses,” she finished.

“Do you know where she is?” Lan hadn’t seen her, but she had to be here somewhere. He would find his sister, and he would do whatever it took to help her. She might not know she needed his help, and knowing Sophie, she probably wouldn’t agree to it, but he knew that she needed him.



“I haven’t seen her. I asked her to place a protection, and I hope that she was able to do it in time. She may be the only one in the city strong enough to do so.”

*Sophie?*

Why did that surprise him?

It shouldn’t. He had seen that Sophie was incredibly skilled and powerful.

“What’s above this level?”

“Not much. A few storerooms. Servant quarters for those who serve the queen when she’s here. Then the roof of the tower.”

Would Sophie be in any of those places?

It wasn’t that he’d checked everywhere on his way up through the tower, but Sophie would have detected the thisten energy and come. That she hadn’t told him that either she couldn’t—or she wasn’t here.

“Would she be higher up?” he asked Parvella.

“It’s possible. She has spent some time on the upper levels of the tower, so she may have gone up there to escape this.”

Lan had rested his hands on either side of the woman’s leg. Without realizing what he’d been doing, the warmth had flowed from him and into her leg. Lan didn’t know if the power would work in the same way on her as it did on him, but as he pulled his hands back, the injury to her leg didn’t look as bad. Either it had healed, or it had at least recovered somewhat.

“I’ll drag them away and lock you in. If I find Thea, I’ll send her to you.” Lan stood and then hesitated. “How will I know Thea?”

“She’s the leader of the Karell here.”

Lan nodded.

He grabbed one of the fallen thisten and dragged it with him. The creature didn’t fight. It still lived, and he debated whether he should cut off its head, but he decided against it.

Curiosity made him wonder whether the thisten had changed after he had pushed his warmth through it. It seemed to have changed, but Lan didn't know if that was just his imagination.

When he got the thisten into the hallway, he paused to catch his breath for a moment and then hurried back in to grab the other creature and drag it out, too. When he was done, he pulled the door closed, sealing it behind him.

Doing so left him alone with the two thisten. There was another door along the hallway, and Lan tested it, finding that it opened easily. A storeroom. He shoved the two thisten into the storeroom and pulled the door closed. He had no idea if the storeroom would hold them, nor did he know if the thisten would stay unconscious, but he wasn't sure that he could kill them—and he needed to find his sister.

Nevarn had gone for her.

Lan headed up the stairs.

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# CHAPTER 37

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The tower roof gave an incredible view over Valan. Lan stood looking out, sweeping his gaze around the city.

There was no movement in the streets, as if everyone had disappeared. The Taihg had been deployed and were heading out to Lorant on their assignment. Lorant would be overwhelmed, though there was no reason for them to attack.

The city had been left unprotected, and this left Lan wondering if all of this was about attacking Lorant—or Valan.

Lan took a deep breath as he watched the emptiness below him. When he turned his attention to the base of the tower, he saw a figure down below.

*Not just one figure, but two.*

One of them circled the other.

*Nevarn.* Lan could tell that it was the prince from the gleaming of his mail, and he tried to make out who it was that he circled.

*Sophie.*

Nevarn made a pattern as he circled her. Lan didn't know the magic of patterns, but he could see that something was happening. Movement along the street caught his attention. Thisten headed toward Sophie. Nevarn must be calling to them.

He noticed other thisten out in the city. Many of them. Far too many.

An entire army of thisten was attacking.

*What had Nevarn done?*

This didn't seem possible. He wouldn't have had the time to put together an army. And that meant somebody else was helping. Maybe the Mistress of the Woods.

As he watched, he noticed a shimmering in the distance. More than that, he could feel something. Power was approaching. Maybe it was Karell power, and if so, they could help. That was what he and Sophie needed now.

Lan raced toward the stairs.

As soon as he reached the landing with the Raven Queen's quarters, an explosion thundered behind him. The thisten he had trapped in the storage room emerged. They looked at him. There was a different gleam in their eyes now. Lan didn't have the time to deal with them, so he raced down the stairs, pausing when he saw another thisten.

*Darish curse me!* He had left the thisten to live. Which meant that he had put others in danger. Hopefully, Parvella had locked herself in on the upper level and should be safe. He could draw the thisten down.

Holding out his sword, he called on the warmth and felt it flowing through him, causing him—and his sword—to glow. He could use it to draw the thisten away.

The thisten resisted, ignoring the warmth Lan pressed out.

At the next landing, he paused and listened. The thisten were coming, though not racing with the same violent energy that he had detected before. Their pace was slower, steadier, as if they were calculating how best to attack him.

Lan tried to ignore that thought.

He focused instead on moving as quickly as he could, and he paused at each landing, wanting to ensure the thisten followed him and didn't head deeper into the rest of the tower. There were other people within the tower who needed his protection.

Lan went floor by floor, pausing and pushing out the glowing warmth.

Each time he did, he could feel energy spreading away from him, heading out into the hallways.

The thisten trailed him down the stairs.

When he reached the ground level, he froze.

There was something different here.

The sense of the thisten continued to build. Lan could feel the energy as they continued down the stairs. But that wasn't all he felt.

It was the familiar pressure that he had come to know from the thisten.

And it was outside the tower.

Near Sophie—who needed his help.

At the main entrance, Lan paused to assess the situation on the other side of the door. Sophie stood in one of her poses, holding her hands out from her awkwardly. He knew these poses had names and purposes, and that Sophie spent considerable time studying them. She didn't move her head while Nevarn circled her. As far as Lan could tell, she didn't move *anything* while Nevarn circled her.

Power flowed from his sister, forming a barrier of some sort.

She held Nevarn at bay using that barrier.

Would she be able to hold off the thisten Nevarn had summoned?

Lan could only imagine that was what the prince had done.

He didn't know how long Sophie would be able to maintain her barrier. There would have to be limits. If her power was anything like what the Heart of the Grove had gifted him, there would be limits.

Then again, why would her power be anything like what the Heart of the Grove had gifted him?

She would have a different sort of magic. Sophie's was her own power, that of a sorcerer, closer to the power of the Raven

Queen than the power of the Karell.

The thisten Lan had seen from the top of the tower weren't near them—yet.

He darted toward his sister.

Nevarn jerked his head around and grinned at Lan. “You should have stayed in Lorant.”

Lan held out his sword. It was the only thing he could think of doing. He needed to find the strange energy inside him and use it, but he wasn't sure if he could do so without harming Nevarn. Regardless of what Nevarn was doing now, Lan could not harm the son of the Raven Queen.

All he really needed to do was stop him.

Maybe he could use the energy from the Heart of the Grove. It had a healing quality to it, but Lan didn't know if that quality would be enough to remove the corruption from Nevarn.

The thisten emerged from the tower.

*Darish curse my foolishness!*

Nevarn looked past Lan, a hint of a smile spreading on his face. “You should have removed them before coming after me. Now it seems you'll have to make a decision. Either you save yourself, or you save your sister. Which will it be, Lannerdon?”

Lan shot him a look before catching Sophie's eye.

There was something there. She tried to push something to him, as if she wanted to communicate with him, only he was too dense to know what she tried to tell him.

The thisten started forward.

Toward Lan.

He backed away.

It forced him away from Sophie.

Away from Nevarn.

Lan would have to choose. Three thisten would be more than he could withstand. Lan didn't like the odds, but he also didn't like the odds against his sister's ability to hold a barrier that would protect her indefinitely. Plus other thisten were coming.

Lan should have removed them as a threat, and not doing so had been a mistake. He knew better. Sophie locked eyes with him. Was she able to do anything more than hold her barrier? In the forest, she'd held the thisten elevated in the air. Maybe she could lift Lan now. He just had to get to her.

He switched directions, shifting his feet to slide toward Sophie. The thisten followed him. There was a calmness to them that he hadn't seen before. They stalked toward him with an almost casual energy, as if they feared nothing.

Nevarn continued to make a strange pattern around Sophie, as if he was using it to hold her. Sophie had taught Lan that patterns mattered. He wasn't sure what this pattern did.

The longer he waited, the more likely it was that Nevarn would accomplish whatever he planned.

Lan took a deep breath, and then he darted forward.

The thisten didn't follow. The thisten in the city approached.

Lan reached the barrier and braced for the impact, but he felt the edge of the barrier and then fell through it. He almost crashed into Sophie, but he knew enough to catch himself, stopping just short of her.

"How did you get back here so quickly?" she asked. "Did you find Joralt?"

Lan shook his head. Joralt was a good horse, and he enjoyed riding him, even though he could be stubborn. "I ran back here."

"How did you run back here?" she asked, though she didn't turn in his direction. She maintained her focus straight ahead, her entire posture rigid.



“I think the gift that the Heart of the Grove gave me enables me to run faster.”

“Nevarn is poisoned,” she said.

Lan turned to watch Nevarn as he continued to circle them. The man darted forward, swinging his sword, and it crashed off Sophie’s barrier. Thankfully, the barrier held.

“I think he was poisoned when he was captured and you rescued him. At least, I hope that’s the case. If it was another time...” She took a deep breath, as if uncertain about how much to share with him. “If it was another time, then he might be beyond redemption.”

“I don’t know if we can do anything now,” Lan said. “There are other thisten coming into the city. And there’s something else, Sophie. I felt magic.”

Sophie watched him for a moment. “You felt it?”

He nodded. “I don’t know what it is. Maybe the Karell.”

Sophie shifted her feet. “Or other sorcerers,” she said softly.

Other sorcerers could be the Raven Queen.

If that were the case, then they’d be safe.

But first they had to deal with these thisten.

“If I can shift my pose, I might be able to cleanse him. I think I can generate enough healing power to protect us and return him to the way he was before.”

“There are three thisten from the tower. And there are more coming.”

“I know,” Sophie said.

“I would think that you would be more concerned about them than you are.”

“I *am* concerned about most of them, but...”

“But what?”

“I don’t know what to make of the thisten,” she said, flicking her gaze toward him. “There was one that I healed. At

least, I think I healed it. I used one of my poses, and I healed it. Something about the thisten changed. I don't really know what to make of it, but the energy of the creature seemed different. It didn't seem quite as wild or angry or as willing to attack me. Plus there was an intelligence in its eyes."

Lan turned toward the thisten that had come out of the tower. They had arranged themselves around the barrier. They hadn't moved otherwise. They watched.

Much like Sophie had said, there did appear to be an intelligence burning within their eyes that hadn't been there before. And he had seen it before, when he had worked with the thisten inside the tower. Could he have healed them as well?

"I might be able to help you with Nevarn," Lan said.

"Go ahead," Sophie said.

Lan turned his attention to Nevarn. The prince tried to stay a pace or two away from the edge of the barrier, and Lan tracked him, watching as Nevarn moved in place, though Lan thought that he still moved in a pattern. Lan pushed out the warmth flowing through him. He let the energy radiate away from him.

Nevarn seemed to recognize what Lan was doing, and he grinned at him. "I won't be twisted by your touch," he said.

"You've already been twisted," Lan said to him. "Let us help you."

"There is nothing to help."

Nevarn brought his sword around, and Lan knew that he couldn't wait too much longer. He had to take action. So he did the only thing he could think of—and darted toward Nevarn.

The suddenness of Lan's movement seemed to catch Nevarn off guard, and the man stumbled back. It disrupted some of the pattern that he had been forming.

"Now," Sophie urged.

Lan scrambled toward Nevarn.

He brought his blade up, preparing to sweep it down, before remembering who he was fighting. He couldn't harm Nevarn. His hesitation gave Nevarn a moment of reprieve, and he scrambled to his feet. He watched Lan for a moment, as if trying to discern whether he would attack, before he spun and darted away—toward the tower.

Lan glanced over at Sophie, who shook her head. "I don't know where he's going."

"There was something about the tower when I was in there before. I don't know what it is, but I felt..." Lan didn't know what he'd felt, but some part of the tower had felt wrong.

And if Nevarn was going toward the tower, that meant he was heading toward that wrongness, for whatever reason.

Lan was going to have to do something, but he didn't know what. He only knew that he had to intervene. Sophie had to intervene.

But what could they do?

"We have to help him," Sophie said. "I don't think he knows what he's doing, and I feel like we need to be there for him."

Lan wasn't sure what all of this was about. The Taihg were attacking, heading to Lorant. The thisten were in the city, and there was some sort of magic coming.

"It's a war," Lan said. "I just don't know what the target is. We need Nevarn."

It would be the only way they would really know. If they could help him, get through to him, they might find the answers they needed to understand what all of this was about.

"Then we need to get to him. We need to help him."

Sophie was looking at the thisten. They were studying her, but they hadn't moved to attack. There was something different about them, Lan could tell, even if he wasn't sure what it was. He just felt a strangeness from them.

Sophie turned her feet, and then she shifted her posture, broadening her stance, twisting her hands strangely, and he

could see her building power. He'd never been able to see it before, but it glowed from somewhere deep inside her. She clenched her jaw, and sweat beaded on her brow.

"This is going to be difficult," Sophie said. "I just wish that I were stronger."

He stepped closer. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I have to do this myself," Sophie said.

"I helped Parvella," he said.

Sophie flicked her gaze toward the tower briefly. "Maybe she can help, but I have to do this myself."

Lan just nodded.

As he stood there watching his sister, he began to feel the warmth inside him. Strangely, it seemed to be echoing what he felt Sophie doing. As her power began to press outward, some part of him was drawn out as well, as if he was adding to what she was doing, augmenting her power.

"That's strange," Sophie said.

Lan was tempted to tell her what he felt, but he decided against it. For now, he would let her work.

The energy flowed outward, wave after wave of it. Then it was gone.

The strange connection that he'd had to her was gone.

Sophie stood for a long moment before she relaxed her hands, shifted her feet back together, and then glanced at the tower.

"I did what I could. Now we should go after Nevarn."

Lan nodded, and they turned toward the tower.

They darted forward, into the tower, and didn't need to look very hard to discover where Nevarn had gone. A body lay near a stairway leading down into the tower basements.

Sophie crouched next to the person, but Lan moved past her to press his hands onto the soldier, and he felt warmth bubble up within him without doing anything. That warmth

washed through Lan, then through the soldier, who took a sharp, gasping breath.

Lan stood, looking down the stairs. “Here. This is where he’s going.”

“There’s nothing down there,” Sophie said.

“Have you explored all of the tower?”

“Not the entire tower, but near enough that I know there is nothing in the basements. What reason would he have for going down there?”

Lan had no idea. And it didn’t even matter.

They had to get to Nevarn.

He started down, holding his blade, which was glowing with a soft white light. Sophie trailed after him as they descended into the darkness.

They hadn’t gone very far when Lan heard the sound of footsteps drifting toward him. And perhaps the sound of water dripping.

They reached a narrow hallway, and a figure moved up ahead.

Lan darted forward.

The figure spun back to face him. Nevarn had his sword angled toward Lan, and he moved with a fluid grace that Lan had not seen when sparring with him. Now he was much more skilled. It had to be whatever dark power influenced him.

“You were always too skilled, weren’t you?” Nevarn asked.

“I don’t know what happened to you, but we can help you,” Lan said.

Sophie moved to stand next to him, already beginning to shift her feet, forming a pose. Lan had no idea what her pose would do, but he suspected that it was designed to hold power.

“We can save you,” Lan said.

“I was given a gift,” Nevarn said. “I can use this to help my people. We are now strong enough to destroy Lorant. With enough thisten, I can end the war.”

“There has been no war,” Lan said. Not for a long time, and certainly not since he had been a member of the Taihg.

“You haven’t been here long enough to know. You can’t understand what they did to my people. My father. My brother.” There was a hitch in his voice.

“You know what it’s like to lose those close to you,” Sophie said. She was still holding her hands up, her body in a strange, almost awkward position. “But that doesn’t mean that you need to do this. That doesn’t mean that you can do this. All you will do is hurt those who care about you.”

Nevarn glowered at her. “I’ve been around my mother long enough to know her tricks, Sophie. It’s not going to work.”

He brought his blade forward in a sharp arc.

As he did, Lan saw a darkness streaming from the end of the blade, as if shadows were streaking toward Sophie. He did the only thing he could think of, and he threw himself between whatever Nevarn was doing and his sister, wanting nothing more than to protect her. As the darkness struck, he felt a wave of cold wash through him.

Then the warmth began to burn, building and glowing.

Lan had no idea what had happened, but somehow he’d been given a gift that would help him face Nevarn and his dark magic—probably the Shavln. But how was he to overpower it?

How could *he* stop the power of a god?

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# CHAPTER 38

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Sophie looked past Lan. Seeing him glow still troubled her, but she suspected the magic he had been given truly *was* a gift, not like what Nevarn seemed to possess. That energy was different, much darker, and it had a deadly sense that left her cold. It pushed on the barrier she had made, attempting to overpower it. She had to keep holding her gilán pose, but she had to find a way to heal Nevarn somehow. The moment she released her pose, they risked another attack.

There was something she could try, but she didn't know if it would work. If she could form a pose in her mind...

That was going from crawling with her magic to sprinting. That was the kind of skill that the Raven Queen had. But she had to try.

Unexpectedly, lessons that Parvella had given her came to mind.

*Focus. Concentrate. Hold the image.*

All the poses were there in her mind. She did not change her posture, did not let go of the gilán pose, but she began to visualize the piása pose. It formed in her mind.

Surprisingly, power formed as well.

She didn't hesitate and used the power on Nevarn.

When the magic of her pose struck him, it wrapped around him. He turned toward her, darkness shining in his eyes. The Shavln, not Nevarn.



He darted toward her, sword in hand. If her gilán pose failed...

It couldn't fail.

His sword arced toward her. She braced for the impact.

But Lan was there. Power exploded from him, from his sword, power that she could *see*. The magic he possessed reminded her of the power of the Karell, only it was a soft white light rather than the greenish light of the Karell, which she'd seen from Oleda and Thea. Sophie held her pose, pushing it outward. Her brother was there, using something that reminded her of her own magic.

"Don't kill him," she said.

Lan stood within the gilán pose barrier. Could he tell where the boundary existed? He must, as he didn't get any closer to it than he already had.

"I don't intend to kill him. All I'm trying to do is free him from this."

"You won't be able to free anything," Nevarn sneered.

Anger filled his eyes, and he backed away before starting toward them again.

He swung his blade, sweeping it toward them in a sharp arc.

Sophie's barrier still held.

She hadn't been sure if it would work while she held the image of the piasa pose in her mind, but thankfully, it did. She had to use it to overpower—and heal—Nevarn. But she didn't have to do it alone. Lan was here, fighting alongside her.

She had never fought beside her brother. She had fought *with* her brother many times, though over the last few years, fighting with him had been rare. This was something else. She could feel the way the power he held flowed from him, but it also mingled with the power that she used. It was as if her pose had joined with what he pressed out, creating something that was augmented and greater than either of them had been by themselves.

When she had used the piasa pose in the city, he had helped. She was sure of it. She didn't know how, but she hadn't been nearly as weak as she had expected to be. More than that, there was far more power in the pose than there should have been.

Sophie focused on the pose in her mind.

She squeezed the power down, holding it against Nevarn, who raged against her.

It reminded her of when the thisten had raged against her.

Sophie continued to constrict Nevarn, binding power around him.

Pale light exploded from Lan. It became trapped within the power of the pose Sophie held.

"How much longer?" Lan asked.

"I don't know. There's resistance, but I feel as if we need to hold it longer."

Nevarn thrashed, twisting violently, looking more like an animal than a man as he raged inside the power of the pose and whatever power Lan used against him. Sophie had to hold on as tightly as she could, maintaining her focus, only she didn't know if what she was doing would be enough.

"I can't hold it much longer," Lan whispered. "But I feel something changing."

She wanted to look over at him, but the moment she did, her gilán pose would fade. She didn't trust herself to look at her brother.

*How can Lan feel the power?*

The idea that he would have such an understanding of magic surprised her. Lan had always been the practical one—well, at least as practical as a boy with no soldiering experience could be when he had joined the soldiers in Neylash. She had been the one who had wanted stories. She had been the one who had embraced the magic of those tales. However, Lan had also sat at the fireplace with her. He had always listened, even though he had pretended not to. He had

always wanted to know the same stories as she had, to know the endings.

She maintained the piasa pose in her mind. If it hadn't been this one, she wasn't sure that her attempt would even work. She had practiced the piasa pose enough times that she could easily visualize it. Maybe Parvella had known that she would need to.

That thought almost made Sophie lose control. Could she have known?

Lan cried out.

Sophie turned her attention back to her brother, ignoring her thoughts for now. She would have to come back to them, though. Nevarn thrashed again, twisting and writhing within the barrier that she held.

Finally he fell still.

Lan sagged forward. "I think it's done," he said. "But give me a chance to test him."

He got back to his feet, and he stepped through the barrier. He glanced toward the thisten, but they still hadn't moved. Sophie worried about their lack of movement, but there had to be some reason for that. Either they were waiting for their opportunity, hoping that Sophie and Lan would weaken themselves, or they had changed enough that they would no longer attack.

Lan started to glow again, and power flowed away from him. He sent it through Nevarn.

Finally Lan stepped back.

"I think it's done, but I don't know. You should probably check," he said.

Sophie didn't have the strength to hold the pose in her mind, so she hurriedly formed the piasa pose and let it wash through Nevarn again. She didn't feel any resistance, not as she had while battling him, and certainly not as she had when dealing with the thisten.

She released the energy. Nevarn still didn't move.

“We need to—”

A massive thundering sounded from nearby. Sophie turned.

Lan jerked his head toward her. Sophie ignored him, and the thisten that watched her, and even Nevarn as he stood staring blankly straight ahead. The power behind the thunder was all that she paid attention to.

*What was that?*

It felt like what she'd sensed in the forest, the same sort of energy that she felt from the thisten, but more powerful. And it was here beneath the tower somehow.

The thisten prowled around the perimeter of where she'd held the barrier created by the gilán pose, not coming any closer. The three were unlike any of the thisten she'd seen before. They each had a golden-brown coat, and their dark eyes stared at her as if they could see something they shouldn't. It unsettled her, but she didn't dare look at them for too long.

“Grab Nevarn,” she said to Lan.

“What do you have planned?”

Sophie shook her head. “I don't really know. There's some sort of power coming...”

Lan glanced at her before heading to Nevarn. He approached the prince slowly, holding his glowing sword out as if he was concerned about what Nevarn might attempt. Given the way that Nevarn had attacked, they didn't really know what he might try to do now. Was he really healed? Sophie couldn't tell, and without taking the time to attempt different poses around him, she wasn't sure that she would know.

“Come on,” Lan said, nudging Nevarn.

He barely turned in Lan's direction.

“I hope we didn't do anything that harmed him too badly. His mother won't take well to that,” Sophie said.

“If we did, the Raven Queen will have to understand.”

At the mention of his mother, Nevarn stiffened slightly.

There were four thisten now. They watched Sophie and Lan but so far hadn't attacked.

Sophie stepped in front of Nevarn. “Nevarn. If you're in there, I need you to come around.”

Once again there came a burst of power. It was drawing on them.

“We should get back to the city.”

“I think we need to follow this power, Lan. I placed a protection around the city, and we did what we could with the thisten,” she added, thinking of what she had done with the piasa pose. “I think we need to follow this and see what it is. It's along this hallway.” She stared down the corridor. “But that means we have to go through *them*.”

The thisten blocked their path.

“It's strange, watching them. I've never seen the thisten like this before,” Lan said. “They seem to be trying to decide what to do with us.”

“I told you what happened when I healed one.”

Now there were six thisten.

She'd healed one. Lan claimed to have done something to three. Where were the other two from? Maybe it was what she had done before coming down into the tower. Her pose might have helped the thisten.

“We need to move past them to see what's coming,” Lan said.

“I might be able to hold the gilán pose.”

“While walking?”

“I said I *might*.”

Lan grinned at her. “You've become more like the Raven Queen than I knew.”

“I'm not like the Raven Queen. It's...”

Sophie wasn't sure what it was. She did have a different connection to her power now. She understood it in a way that allowed her to use it more effectively. Wasn't that similar to the Raven Queen?

She had learned to use her power in a way that she had never imagined.

The strange energy came again.

Sophie formed the gilán pose, holding it in her mind. She'd practiced it enough that she knew how to form it without even thinking that much about it. The only part of the pose she had to think about was how much power she would push out. She had to include Lan—and Nevár. Until they knew what had happened to him, they were bringing him with them.

"I thought stopping Nevár would be the end of this," Sophie said.

"Because you think he's the one in charge?" Lan shook his head. "If you're right, then he was influenced when he went into Lorant. At least, that was probably when it happened. We still don't know anything about the Mistress of the Woods."

The thisten. The Taihg leaving the city. And all of this was about...

Sophie had no idea.

"The Shavln has had years to spread," she said.

She had warned them. Thea. Parvella. The Raven Queen.

So many others.

And none had done anything.

Sophie tried not to be upset by that, but it was difficult.

The only thing she could do now was keep moving. Keep fighting. But a part of her wasn't sure if that was possible. How could they stop this kind of power, the power of a god?

She moved forward, holding the gilán pose in her mind, and the thisten didn't attempt to push at it, nor did they attempt to come through it. They made their way down the tunnel, and

through the darkness, though Lan glowed brightly enough that he lit her path.

“Keep moving,” Lan urged.

“I’m going. I’m trying to hold the pose while moving, and that takes a bit more concentration than I’m used to.”

Lan glanced at her. “Not you. I was telling Nevarn to keep moving. It’s good to know that you need to concentrate, though. I’ll keep you safe.”

Sophie looked at her brother. Since she held the power of the gilán pose in her mind, the movement didn’t disrupt it. It was strange, but for maybe the first time, she believed her big brother actually wanted to keep her safe. Not only that, but she believed he *could* keep her safe. There was no boasting to what he said. As a Taihg, he would be incredibly capable.

But what if there was magic involved? Lan had been gifted in some way, but Sophie didn’t know what that meant for him—or his ability to protect her. Maybe he’d always had power. The weavers, and their circles, were key to identifying those who had Karell potential. Sophie had never been much of a weaver, but Lan had.

As she looked at her brother, she wondered if he even knew.

A weaver and whatever it was that she was.

*Sorcerer.*

Two kinds of power. Those powers *had* worked together. She’d felt it. And that had to matter.

She made her way through the tunnel, feeling the strange energy. She feared what would happen if they did nothing. The Shavln would destroy. People would suffer. She couldn’t do nothing.

The thisten still hadn’t moved.

Sophie expected that to change at any moment. When the thisten pressed toward them, would Sophie and Lan be able to withstand them? The strange trembling came again, echoing

loudly. It seemed to radiate through the entire tower, as if it was going to destroy it.

“Lan—”

The rumbling came again. Lan pushed her forward.

Sophie held the energy of the gilán pose as she went. Near her, she could feel Lan moving, dragging Nevarn with him. There was another shuffling sound, and she glanced back. The thísten followed them.

“Do you see that?” she whispered.

“I see it,” Lan said. “We should just keep moving.”

The trembling came again, as if coming from all around. It was near enough that Sophie could feel the tunnel shaking around her, as if the entire tower was trembling.

Sophie shifted her feet, holding her posture for a moment, and reasserted her control over her pose.

When she was convinced that she had the pose fortified, she moved onward.

Sophie hadn’t spent much time down here before. In the time that she had lived in the tower, she had explored much of it, though she had rarely gone underground. This was somewhere different, but she heard the sound of rushing water. Even the walls were damp. They glistened with the energy Lan radiated.

“The streams,” Lan whispered. “The streams. Maybe even the river. This is where they flow. The water is all contaminated, Sophie. I think that was how Nevarn was influenced. It was how the Mistress of the Woods was holding the Heart of the Grove. I’m certain of it. I don’t really understand it, but some of this power encircles the center of the forest. That is where the Heart of the Grove is strongest.”

Sophie frowned, but she didn’t have a chance to think on it too much. A brightness came toward them. There was something sickly about it, twisted compared to the soft white light that Lan radiated.

Lan sucked in a breath. “The Mistress of the Woods.”



Sophie stared into the distance. A figure approached, and this time, it was her turn to catch her breath. The figure was average height, with dark hair, but there was a slight drag to her leg that Sophie recognized.

“Thea?”

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# CHAPTER 39

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Lan stared ahead, barely able to move. The Mistress of the Woods was coming toward them, her energy flowing along the strange underground space they now found themselves in. Nevarn was motionless, as if still under the effect of the strange taint.

Now that Lan saw the Mistress of the Woods, he couldn't help but think this was all part of some plan.

"How do you know her?" Lan asked.

"This is Thea. She's the leader of the Karell in Valan."

If she was a Karell—or at least, if she presented herself as a Karell—she would have full access within the city. She would have been able to influence the city in dangerous ways. Worse, it was possible that Nevarn had been influenced by her for far longer than he and Sophie had believed.

Only... Lan didn't think that was possible.

The Mistress of the Woods approached, and the strange sickly energy radiated off her. Lan could feel the way it flowed, working through the water. He had tracked the streams back into Lorant, but that had been a mistake. It wasn't the water flowing into Lorant that he had needed to pay attention to. It was the water flowing into Reyash.

The corrupting power of the Shavln.

Sophie had been right all along.

Lan started forward, holding his sword, power flowing from him. He didn't know if he had enough energy remaining

to withstand the Mistress of the Woods, but he wasn't about to allow her to harm his sister.

"What are you doing here?" Sophie asked. "You're with the Karell. You should want to destroy this."

"Oh, the others were searching for Darius, and they've probably found him, which is for the best, though I don't think he will be able to do all that much now." She smiled. "I was searching for something else. When you spoke of the Shavln, I decided that I needed to find it."

"It's dark power," Sophie said.

"Power is not dark, Sophie. Power is to be used."

The Mistress of the Woods turned to Lan. "You have become stronger. I can't believe you are her champion."

Lan tried to pull on the warmth within him, but even as he did so, power didn't float up nearly as quickly as it had before. He had used quite a bit of energy when he'd faced the thisten within the tower and Nevarn. Perhaps there was a limit.

However, he believed that the Heart of the Grove had wanted to gift him enough power.

"You are using the Shavln," Sophie said.

"This power was meant to be used," the Mistress of the Woods said. "I can see that now. I can feel that now. You could as well, if you weren't so afraid."

Sophie started to move, but the Mistress of the Woods raised a hand. Her strange energy slapped at Sophie. Thankfully, Sophie was still holding the barrier that she had used on the way down the stairs, and it solidified long enough to protect her.

The Mistress of the Woods grinned at Sophie. "I hadn't heard of your ability to use power without twisting your body. Parvella is a slow instructor. Sometimes too slow. Deliberate. Perhaps if you had somebody who was more inclined to teach, you might have learned more." She spread her hands. "Sometimes you have to ask, and sometimes the gods answer. After I lost my family, I wanted nothing more than power to

exact my revenge. More power than I could've gotten by serving the Karell."

"Not the gods. The Shavln," Sophie said.

"And what do you think the Shavln is?"

Dark energy whipped away from the Mistress of the Woods toward Sophie.

Sophie turned and hurriedly moved her hands.

*What is she doing?*

It was a pose, but it was a different kind of pose. Power exploded from her. It struck the Mistress of the Woods, sending her staggering back. Sophie strode forward, tall and strong. Confident.

Lan had never seen his sister quite like this before, but he wasn't about to allow her to face the Mistress of the Woods alone. He would do whatever it took to help his sister. She needed him now. He got to his feet, hazarding a glance at the thisten that stayed behind them, and then at Nevarn, who still didn't move, before turning to the Mistress of the Woods.

"We aren't that dissimilar, Thea," Sophie said. "We've both lost people. You lost your family. I lost mine. So did Lan. We can work with you. We can help you."

"You can only help if you stand aside. I need to do this so that I can remove her."

"The Raven Queen?"

"To start with," the Mistress of the Woods said. "Once that's done, I will go after *her*."

Lan suspected that he knew who she was talking about.

The Heart of the Grove.

This was about power. Nothing more and nothing less.

Sophie looked over at him briefly before turning her attention back to the Mistress of the Woods. She contorted her body in one of her poses, and Lan began to wonder if that was going to be enough. He gripped his sword in both hands,

focusing on the warmth within him. That seemed to be the key. He didn't know exactly what he would need to do, but the energy within him was tied to the warmth.

He focused on where it started. When the Heart of the Grove had tapped his forehead, there had come a surge of energy. He had believed that it had started at his feet, warmth rushing up through him, but that wasn't it at all. The energy had come from within his mind, connecting him to something he had known about all along.

Lan turned his power inward, focusing on it. The warmth was there, still surging through him. All he needed to do was find it, let the power flow up through him, and then release it. The last time he had faced the Mistress of the Woods, he had been unprepared. He had been alone.

Now he was neither.

Lan didn't think that he was any better prepared than he had been back in the forest, but now he had power. The idea that he had magic, the same sort of magic that his sister possessed, the same sort of magic that existed within the stories Nana had told him, left him surprised, but at the same time, he felt relieved.

The Mistress of the Woods started to summon her energy again, and she turned upon Sophie, ignoring Lan as if he were no sort of threat. And maybe he wasn't to her.

But he could find out.

Lan darted forward, whipping his sword around in a sharp arc.

The Mistress of the Woods turned her attention to him, holding out a Karell wand, and a streamer of grayish light shot toward him. Lan nearly stumbled before swinging his blade up. It cut through... something.

He was safe, though.

Planting his feet more securely, he looked up. A thisten was there. It didn't attack.

*What's it waiting for?*

The strange rumbling came again.

“Why here?” Lan asked.

“I’m going to take everything from her, the same way that she took everything from me,” the Mistress of the Woods said. “Only it’s a little more difficult to take everything from the queen. I’m going to take not only her family but also her people. The Karell might be neutral, but I’m not.”

He glanced down, knowing what she was doing. “The water.”

She turned to him, darkness radiating from her. “Had I known then...”

She turned power toward him again. Lan darted forward, trying to call on the warmth to cut through her magic, uncertain if it was enough. When the rumbling came again, it was the familiar rumbling of thisten.

Lan glanced behind him, and the six thisten that had followed them beneath the tower suddenly darted past, racing along the hall in two lines of three, before disappearing entirely. Lan shared a look with Sophie. He had no idea what that had been about, though it might be dangerous.

The Mistress of the Woods watched Sophie.

Sophie immediately shifted her hands and seemed to work faster than the Mistress of the Woods had been prepared for. Lan noticed a soft white energy building inside Sophie, and it surged outward, sweeping toward the Mistress of the Woods. Sophie was pushing her back. Lan smiled to himself. His sister was powerful. Maybe powerful enough to stop the Mistress of the Woods.

Then the Mistress of the Woods pointed her wand up at the ceiling, a blast of dark energy shooting out of it, and bits of debris began to rain down, clouding the tunnel. As it settled, Lan saw the Mistress of the Woods disappearing farther down the hall. She was moving quickly.

“We can’t let her escape,” Lan said. “I don’t know what she intends, but—”

The rumbling came again, this time louder and closer, and Lan stumbled. When he got to his feet, he had no idea why he should feel power so closely, but it was echoing along the hallway. The Mistress of the Woods intended to use her power here, but for what purpose? He and Sophie had to do something to stop her. They might be the only ones able to do so.

“We need the Raven Queen,” Sophie said softly.

Lan turned to her, touching her arm. “That’s what *she* wants. If we let her have the queen, we’ll be lost.”

Sophie shook her head. “I was holding as much power as I could, and even then, she nearly overwhelmed me. I did everything that I could just to protect myself, but...”

Lan squeezed his sister’s arm. “You can do this. We can do this.”

“What if we can’t? If this is the Shavln—”

“It may be,” Lan said. “But we can’t stand aside, even if it’s beyond our ability.”

It was strange for him to feel this way, but he couldn’t allow others to suffer because someone had been wronged.

“What about Nevarn?” Sophie asked.

“I think we need to leave him for now.”

“What if he comes around and helps her?”

“Then we deal with it.”

They raced forward at an unusual speed. In the distance, there came a hint of light, and he and Sophie continued toward it, feeling the rumbling of energy all around them.

Finally the tunnel came to an end in a steep slope.

“Are you ready?” Lan asked.

Sophie nodded. They started up the incline, and Lan realized there were steps within it. When he reached the top, he pressed forward. Stepping out of the tunnel, he looked around. It was the forest.



“How is this possible?” Sophie asked.

“Maybe we went farther than we thought,” Lan said.

“Unless there is something about that corridor...”

There came an ongoing sense of power all around. It was the Mistress of the Woods. It seemed fitting they would face her here. This was clearly her place of power, the place where she would be able to summon the dark power that she had been concentrating here.

A rumbling came, this time close. Lan turned and saw a dozen thisten. More than there should have been—and more than he and Sophie had helped.

He backed closer to Sophie. “I can hold them. I don’t know if I can do anything more. I don’t know if I can even heal them.”

Maybe it wasn’t about healing them. Holding them might be enough.

“We can—”

Lan didn’t get the chance to finish.

The thisten circled them, but not facing them. They faced outward. Into the forest. They were doing something, though Lan couldn’t tell what it was. Power rumbled through them. He held up his sword, but Sophie shook her head.

“I don’t know what they are doing, but I don’t think they intend to harm us. Parvella spoke of them as a bridge. I think we’ve turned them in our favor.”

As soon as she said this, the rumbling exploded away from the thisten, and they went sprinting into the forest.

“What was that?” Sophie asked when they were gone.

“I don’t know,” Lan said.

“Where do you think Thea went?”

There was only one place Lan could think of. She wanted to get to the Heart of the Grove.

They raced into the forest. They followed the path of the thisten, though when Lan came across the first stream, he used that as a guide. Darkness attempted to press around them, though the strange light glowing within Lan kept it at bay.

What did it mean that they had ended up in the forest again? Why here?

“Lan?”

“What is it?”

“You’re glowing more than before.”

He looked down but wasn’t able to see anything different about himself. “I think we’re getting close.”

“Close to what?”

“The Heart of the Grove.”

“What happens then?”

Lan shook his head. “I don’t know.”

They followed the stream to the small area at the heart of the forest, surrounded by the river. Thisten circled it.

Sophie grabbed Lan, holding him back.

“We need to get over there,” he said, pointing to the clearing beyond the river.

“Give me a moment. I can hold a pose to clear a way, and then you can cross.”

“Just me? I think we both need to get over there.”

Sophie stared ahead. “I can try,” she said.

He felt the power burst from her when she released it. It surrounded them. There was warmth within it, a similar warmth to what he felt within himself. He would have to wonder what that meant later. For now, he needed to keep moving.

*Reach the area beyond the river.*

*Find the Heart of the Grove.*

*Then stop the Mistress of the Woods.*

Sophie joined him as he started forward. The thistens were there, but she created an opening. They climbed down the rocky bank, and Lan helped Sophie to cross. When they started to climb up the other side, she looked back.

“They didn’t even try to attack us,” she whispered.

“I’m not sure what happened to them,” Lan said.

Whatever had happened seemed to have helped. Climbing to the top of the bank, he could feel power pressing on him. Just as he could feel something was off. The Heart of the Grove was here, as was the Mistress of the Woods.

“How did *he* get here?” Sophie whispered.

Nevarn had followed them. And here Lan had thought they had somehow helped him, but he was still tainted. They needed the Heart of the Grove.

Sophie stretched her hands up, wrapping a barrier around them—and just in time. Nevarn darted toward them. He was fast—and powerful.

“I’m not sure how to stop him,” Lan said.

Sophie smiled at him. “You big fool.”

“Thanks.”

“It has to be us. Together. I don’t understand it, but you have power, and I have poses. I think that’s going to be the key.”

Lan looked at Nevarn. Could that be the key?

When they’d faced him alone, they had struggled, but together...

He might have been chosen by the Heart of the Grove, but that didn’t mean he had to do this alone.

“Can you add a protection around me?” Lan asked.

“What sort of protection?”

“Just don’t let him get close.”

“What do you intend to do?”

“Stop him.”

“Lan—”

Lan looked over at his sister. “Not kill him. Just stop him.”

Sophie clenched her jaw before nodding. “I think I can.”

Lan stepped away. The warmth stayed with him. In the forest, he could feel the source of the warmth was much closer. It seemed as if the forest itself tried to help him, though Lan didn't know if that was just his imagination.

Nevarn grinned at him. He unsheathed his sword, spinning it quickly. He was skilled. Possibly more skilled than Lan. And he had been tainted by the Shavln.

Some god power.

But Lan had been chosen by the Heart of the Grove. Another god power.

More than that, Sophie was here.

“It's ready,” she whispered behind him.

Lan darted forward. He used the power within him. The energy surged upward, drawn through him. The energy was there, buried within his mind, but within his heart as well.

He pushed it into his sword. One of Nevarn's attacks slipped past, and Lan readied for pain as the blade struck, but Sophie's barrier protected him.

Nevarn looked past Lan to Sophie. “Clever.”

He made a move as if to go after Sophie, but Lan was there, blocking him. Power flowed up from deep within, rolling through him. Lan darted forward, trying to use the energy. Somehow the power would make him stronger.

Lan put himself between Sophie and Nevarn, and he battled as quickly as he could. The barrier around him gave him confidence. However, Nevarn was quick. Powerful. And tainted by the Shavln.

Lan knew about the taint. He knew what had been done. He knew the effect of the Shavln. He and Sophie could work

together. They had to.

“Sophie,” he began, not looking over his shoulder at his sister. “You need to restore the water.”

“Lan—”

He shook his head. “You need to do this. Try.”

Lan knew that the moment she did, she would break her connection to the barrier around him, but he would have to manage on his own. Until she restored the water, the power of the Mistress of the Woods would overpower that of the Heart of the Grove.

“You know what that means,” Sophie said.

“I know. Work quickly.”

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# CHAPTER 40

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## SOPHIE

Sophie watched her brother battling Nevarn. Nevarn was much faster with the blade than Sophie could ever have imagined. She had known that he was skilled, and had heard that he had trained with some of the best sword masters in Reyash, but seeing him up close was entirely different.

Lan wanted her to do something to the water, but what was she to do?

Cleanse it?

There was no doubt in her mind that the water had somehow been corrupted. She had experienced that herself, but what could she do about it? Her magic wouldn't be enough, would it?

Lan seemed to think that it would.

She released the barrier around herself, though she refused to remove the protection she had placed around Lan. Surprisingly, she would use the pose Nevarn had suggested, forming the piasa pose while holding the energy of the gilán pose in her mind, splitting her power. She could do that, she knew. She had to hold it. It was the only way she could help her brother.

It might be the only way she could help Nevarn.

The ground trembled. The suddenness of it was too much for Sophie, and she was tossed from her feet.

She rolled over, looking at Lan. Somehow she had managed to hold on to the gilán pose energy. Lan was still

protected. Nevarn was forcing him back. Lan needed her to do this.

“Keep going,” he said through gritted teeth. “This is how we overpower the Mistress of the Woods.”

Thea. Not the Mistress of the Woods. A Karell.

Sophie could do that, couldn't she?

The Karell were powerful, but Parvella—and the Raven Queen—had made it clear that Sophie's type of magic was more potent than the magic the Karell could reach. That mattered. She had to take advantage of that now. She had to use what she could to ensure that she defeated Thea. But her pose wasn't going to be enough.

The ground continued to tremble, and Sophie didn't think she could hold the piasa pose safely. Could she form it within her mind? It was more than she had accomplished so far, but as she lay there, she knew that she had to try it. Not only for Lan. She needed to do it because Thea had drawn upon the Shavln.

Sophie got to her feet.

Rather than forming the pose by manipulating her body, she stared at the water. The piasa pose formed in her mind. She still held the gilán pose, but this new one came alongside it. It was incredibly difficult. However, as she held both poses in her mind, she could feel the separate source of power beginning to form for the piasa pose.

The ground trembled, sending her staggering, but because she held the power in her mind rather than in a physical pose, Sophie didn't lose control over it. She stared at the water. Power flowed through her, and then she started to push it out. When it reached the water, she felt resistance. It was almost oily, slick, and as she continued to push on the substance within the water, she tried to overwhelm it.

She had to overwhelm the Shavln. Sophie had been the one to release it, at least in part. She had to be the one to stop it now.



A shout rang out behind her, and she glanced back. Nevarn had forced her brother back to the riverbank. He dropped down, kicking at Nevarn, and though Nevarn stepped back, it was clear that Lan was outmatched.

Sophie had to work quickly so that she could help her brother.

Ridaln had thought that she had power. Sophie had to find that power now.

It was within her.

It flowed, out of her, into the water.

She ignored the slickness, pushing past the oily nature of it, and forced power into it.

Gradually—so slowly—the resistance started to fade.

A rumbling echoed around the clearing, only this time it came from the far side of the river. The thisten started to circle. She didn't know what that meant, or if they would harm her. For now, she had to ignore them.

If they attacked, there would be nothing that she could do. She might be able to shift a gilán pose around her in order to protect herself, but then she would lose control over the piasa pose as she attempted to heal the water.

The rumbling coming from the thisten intensified.

The resistance within the water pushed against her.

Sophie pushed back, using as much energy as she could.

There was more resistance.

She heard a grunt.

She looked back, and Lan lay on his back. Nevarn stood over him, his blade held out, and he looked as if he was readying to drive it down into her brother's chest.

“The story!” she shouted, needing to distract Nevarn.

Nevarn looked over at her.

“The gods don't choose your fate. You do,” she said, looking at Nevarn.

There was a moment of confusion on his face. “What?”

“You wanted to know the purpose of Edgar’s story.”

Nevarn looked down at Lan. The darkness within him surged, streaming from Thea. She was using the Shavln. And Sophie could not overwhelm it.

But she would choose her fate, wouldn’t she?

The rumbling intensified. Surprisingly, it seemed to augment Sophie’s power. The rumbling came from the thisten. They were helping.

Bubbles formed in the river. They spread, a cloud of darkness forming just above the surface of the water, as if they were peeling away the effect of the Shavln. Sophie did this. Her pose did this.

And the thisten helped.

*Strange that they would.*

She would have to ask about that later. For now, she had to draw upon everything that she had learned. Not just from Ridaln, but his lessons were the foundation. She had to add what Parvella had taught her. She added what she had taught herself, using books she’d found in the library, along with some of the complicated poses that she had practiced and thought that she had failed to master.

But she could form those poses in her mind. And the piasa pose was complicated, but there were variations that she knew, variations that she had seen in the books she had studied in the library.

Lan cried out.

Sophie’s attention was drawn back to her brother. He had grabbed Nevarn’s blade and squeezed it in his hands. White light glowed between them, protecting him somehow. That light surged, and then Nevarn’s blade shattered.

Sophie continued to hold her pose and felt a deep trembling. It seemed to come from somewhere buried inside her, a source she had never encountered while holding one of her poses. She had unlocked some part of herself.

Ridaln had always spoken about learning to walk before she could run, and Sophie had never been able to do anything more than crawl with her power. Somehow she'd learned to run.

Power poured out of her, amplified by the thisten.

And there was a massive explosion of energy, of white light that radiated from her, from Lan, from everything around them.

Nevarn was tossed back, and he lay still for a long moment, staring up blankly.

Finally he turned to look at her. "Sophie?"

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# CHAPTER 41

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Lan made a circuit of the area where they had battled, but there was no sign of the Mistress of the Woods. She was gone. So too was evidence of the energy that she had concentrated around here. He paused at the river's edge, and he pushed out the power that flowed through him and let it roll into the water.

As it did, he felt it was clean.

There was no taint to it, nothing like there had been before.

He took a deep breath.

As he turned back to his sister, a surge of brightness surrounded him.

The Heart of the Grove was there.

*Ciydalla*. That was what the Hunter had called her.

*Is she a goddess?*

"You did well," she said.

Lan looked past her, searching for Sophie, but the Heart of the Grove laughed softly.

"She won't be able to see this."

"She can't see that you're here with me?"

"No. This is for the two of us."

Lan swept his gaze around before looking back upon the Heart. She was impossibly beautiful, and the energy that

radiated off her was incredible, far more than he was able to draw upon.

“Are you a goddess?” he asked.

“Is that what you want me to be?”

“I just want to know who you are and what you did to me.”

“You know what I did to you.”

“You made me your champion.”

“Something like that,” the Heart of the Grove said.

“Does that mean that I have to fight on your behalf?”

She’d said he was marked by O dian, but why would *she* have helped?

*Who is O dian?*

“It means whatever you choose it to mean.”

“And the Shavln? Is it gone?”

“No. That power has been released once more into the world. We need those capable of suppressing it.”

“Why can’t the gods take care of it?”

“There are certain things that can be done, and certain things that cannot,” the Heart of the Grove said, though her answer did nothing to explain things for Lan.

“What can I do?”

“What you already have.”

“I don’t need to stay here and train?”

“Do you believe that to be necessary?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t know how to use this power.”

“You will find the answers within you—and within your heart.”

Lan looked around the clearing. “What about you?”

“This was once my home.”

“She was trying to kill you.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because there are some things that can oppose the darkness.”

“You?”

“Yes.”

“The Hunter?” Maybe he really *was* Darish.

“He is another, though he shares my limitations.”

“And now me.”

The Heart of the Grove smiled. “And now you.”

“What of my sister?”

“She has done well.” She smiled again. “You both have. I don’t know what fate has in store for either of you, but you will be tied together. Prepare, and know that darkness is coming.”

With that, the light faded, and Lan looked over to see Sophie sitting next to Nevarn. They were talking softly, and he wondered whether the prince had truly recovered. When Lan made his way over to him, he found Nevarn starting to get up.

“I don’t know what happened,” Nevarn said. “I have only memories.”

“You were used,” Lan said.

“By what?”

“The Shavln,” he said. “We were all used.”

“You?” Sophie asked, getting to her feet.

“I was used by the Heart of the Grove.”

“But you saved us.”

“I didn’t save us. You did. I just used her power when she wasn’t able to.”

“Why do I get the sense that you are troubled by all of this?” Sophie asked.

Lan looked back toward where the Heart of the Grove had disappeared. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Because I feel as if we are caught in some battle between the gods.”

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# CHAPTER 42

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## SOPHIE

The wind whipped around her, and Sophie looked out from atop the tower. In the weeks since the attack, Valan had started to return to normality again. Some of the Taihg had returned, filling the barracks. Lan would be down there, training with Jalyn and Magnus and several of the others she had come to know.

She breathed in, standing in place.

“You come up here often,” a voice said.

Sophie spun and saw the Raven Queen watching her.

She flashed her a smile. “Only to look down. How did you know?”

“I have my sources.” The Raven Queen came to join Sophie at the edge of the tower roof. “You saved Nevarn.”

“You have my brother to thank for that.”

“And I will. The two of you are both responsible.”

“I don’t even know what happened.”

“Well, many things happened,” the Raven Queen said. “The Taihg have been recalled, as the order was not mine, and I didn’t realize that Nevarn was trying to push them away. As for the thisten army, it seems your sorcery was considerable. You constantly surprise me. And with regard to Dannith, well, he is gone.”

Sophie had assumed that the Taihg had been recalled, and she had suspected the truth about the thisten. But Dannith?

“How?” Sophie asked.

“I suspect Ridaln,” she said, a hint of a smile curling her lips.

“He’s alive?”

“I’m not sure. But he has a certain signature to his power.”

Sophie remembered Ridaln mentioning something about that.

And if he lived, she would need to find him.

Lan had mentioned a power at the edge of the city. She had assumed it was the Karell, but what if it hadn’t been?

“Is Ridaln responsible for what happened to the Karell?”

She wanted to believe that Ridaln had some good in him. At least, it was what she thought. He had fought for her.

“It was not Ridaln. That was Darius. He has become active. Which is part of the reason that I’m here.”

“What about Thea? She was angry with you. She blamed you for what happened to her family.”

“Yes. That is a difficult situation. Once she connected to the Shavl, she thought to use it to corrupt an ancient power. She wanted to use that strength to overpower me. And she thought to use the thisten, but she doesn’t fully understand them. Nor do I,” the Raven Queen said softly.

Sophie snorted. “She thought to corrupt a god?”

“Such a thing might possibly be done, but not by someone like her,” the Raven Queen said.

Sophie glanced over. “Did you really not believe the Shavl had been released?”

“I didn’t know,” the Raven Queen said. “Stories of the Shavl have existed for centuries, but it’s difficult to know what truth to find in them. When you came and brought a story of Darius releasing the Shavl, I didn’t know whether to believe it.”

“Is it a god?”

That was what Sophie still didn't really know. She thought she did, but there were aspects she still wasn't certain about.

"Probably. Or a part of one. And stopping that power will be difficult."

"And this Heart of the Grove that Lan now serves?"

The Raven Queen shook her head, a troubled look on her face. "I don't know."

"Thea is still out there," Sophie said.

The Raven Queen nodded. "She is." She turned to Sophie. "But that is not why I am here."

"Why are you here?"

"You've been working with Parvella, but she tells me that you have reached the limit of her ability to teach you."

Sophie looked away. "I haven't always been the best student."

"She has taught what she could. There comes a point when the student must find their own way. I understand you have done just that."

Sophie glanced at the Raven Queen before looking away, staring out over the expanse of the city. "I figured out what it takes to hold the pose in my mind."

"Good. I've been waiting for that."

"You have?" Sophie asked, turning to her.

The Raven Queen nodded. "If you're ready, it's time for me to teach you. If the Shavln truly has been released, and the darkness encroaches upon us, I fear we may not have enough time for you to learn what is necessary. You must be ready, Sophie Varison. We must all be ready."



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All my best,

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