


THE STORYWEAVER SAGA • BOOK 3



THE
RED
WRATH

D.K. HOLMBERG

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE RED WRATH

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CHAPTER I

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SOPHIE

A massive forest stretched out in front of Sophie, looming with a darkness that left her feeling the energy of it, but not so much that she worried about the power that might be trapped among the trees. She held her prayer pose, as it was one of the easiest to form. It had been one of the very first that she had ever mastered, all those years ago, when she had begun to train with Ridaln. Even now, she found herself drawn to some of those early lessons, and the way that he had taught her, so that she focused the power from somewhere deep inside her. The difference between now and when she had first trained with Ridaln was that she no longer contorted her body into a pose.

The pose was still necessary. It just wasn't as necessary as it once had been. Sophie was now able to form the image of the pose in her mind and use that image to concentrate the same sort of power. The position was key, as it permitted her, as a sorcerer, to create the form of power that she wanted. Yet it was not necessary for her to position her body as she once had.

She shifted from the prayer pose into another. The gilán pose offered protection she needed.

"Be ready," Sophie said softly.

She didn't glance behind her, though she had the distinct sense that several Karella were waiting on her. They had all come out here because of something that Sophie had detected, to know whether there was a danger present near the city, though Sophie wasn't quite certain what she had sensed. She

might be able to draw upon considerable power now, but she didn't necessarily have enough control to be able to determine what she was picking up on.

She shifted the prayer pose, the mental image forming so that she sent it sweeping out and into the trees.

When it flowed away from her, there was a faint shimmering. That was the only sign that Sophie had other than what she could feel flowing outward. There were some sorcerers who could easily see the type of power that they held, but Sophie wasn't one of them. She could feel it, though. There remained a connection, however faint, that linked her to the power that she sent away.

The prayer pose could be used in many different ways. She suspected that was why Ridaln had taught it to her so early on. As could the gilan pose, one she'd learned from Parvella. She had initially treated it as nothing more than a barrier, but that wasn't the only thing that the prayer pose was good for. As she had increasingly grown confident with forming it in her mind and pushing power through it, she had gained an understanding of how she could send the power sweeping outward, turning it into a technique that allowed her to detect other entities. That was what she did now.

But there was something else to the prayer pose that Sophie appreciated. In this case, it was the fact that she remained connected to the pose, which allowed her to feel the energy as it swept outward. She scanned through the forest. The Karell behind her began to take up a different position, as if they were aware of what she was doing. She didn't move, though she was curious about how much they could detect.

She wanted to push them back, though. If they stepped forward too quickly, they would disrupt the remnants of the pose, and Sophie wouldn't be able to detect what she wanted.

"Stay still," she snapped.

As she did, she formed a second pose in her mind. The lional pose was simple and created a curving sort of energy that she could solidify. She didn't want anything complicated now. She would need only to hold them back, and so as she

solidified the power, she created a wall they couldn't push past. She even shifted the pose ever so slightly so that they would be able to see it and know what she was doing.

She felt one of the Karell attempting to push against her wall. Sophie resisted the urge to push more power out from it, not wanting it to explode against the Karell, but irritation was there.

There had been a time when she would never have been so irritable with the Karell, but having been betrayed by one of them, Sophie found it hard to trust them. This despite the Raven Queen telling Sophie that she needed to move past such betrayals, as it didn't serve her or her people at all. Sophie found that incredibly difficult to get past as well.

But she could find a measure of calm so she could perform the pose well enough to push power out through it and track what she knew was out there. As she focused, she could feel the sweeping of energy...

There.

She darted forward.

She could now hold different poses while she was moving, which made it easier to be prepared to encounter something dangerous. Inside this forest, there were many dangers. It wasn't like the Devlar Forest, in which she had been trapped with Nevarn a year ago, though that was part of the reason that she was out here now. This was what the Raven Queen wanted from Sophie.

But she didn't feel anything.

Part of the mission was about chasing these unusual powers to ensure that the Raven Queen was not surprised by the Shavln power, something that Sophie had come to believe was tied to one of the gods, though it was one of the gods that she had not come to know very well. The other part was to seek out creatures that might pose a danger. She hadn't seen the thisten for quite a while, but that didn't mean they were not still present. There might be other creatures with some

connection to the gods. At least, that was what the Raven Queen believed.

Sophie continued sprinting through the forest and realized too late that she had been holding the secondary pose that prevented the Karell from following her. She released the wall of power but didn't slow down. Up ahead, she felt something. She passed pines, a few oaks, and some small shrubs bursting with berries, then jumped over a stream. She really should wait. It might be unsafe for her to go by herself.

Or it once would have been. Now she was a sorcerer.

Then she reached a small clearing. This was what Sophie had detected. She wasn't sure what she might find here, but there had been a vague sense of emptiness pressing upon her. When she had been in the city, using her pose to test for any sign of the Shavln, she had detected a faint stirring. Sophie had no idea what had caused it, and she knew better than to ignore such strangeness. In the time since Thea had attacked, Sophie had been using her prayer pose more and more, to try to uncover additional dangers, but had not found anything.

"Is this it?" Sophie asked.

Sophie glanced over at the woman approaching. Jamilla was about ten years older than Sophie and had been serving the Karell for longer than Sophie knew. She was capable, though as far as Sophie was aware, all the Karell were capable. She had green eyes that seemed to take in everything, reflecting the colors of the forest. Her dark cloak matched her eyes, and she held her Karell wand in hand, glowing with energy of the same green as her cloak and eyes. All of this suggested to Sophie that this place was more for the Karell than for her.

Maybe I should've left them to it.

But the Raven Queen had wanted Sophie to go.

"They may need a sorcerer, Sophie Varison," the Raven Queen had said before she'd departed. "And you may need what they can share."

"What's that?" she'd asked.

The Raven Queen had watched her, then sighed. “Perhaps the stories you seek.”

Sophie wasn't sure what that meant, but she'd agreed to work with the Karell—as she had several other times over the last year, always looking into some strange ruins that the Karell had seemed to know about already.

And now she had to trust them.

“What do you think?” Jamilla asked.

“I don't know what it is,” Sophie said, turning her attention back to the ruins that the forest had attempted to swallow. Vines crawled over broken debris, and moss coated exposed stone. Some plants cropped up in cracks along the boulders. Sophie couldn't imagine what it might have looked like at one time, though her research had suggested that this had been a vibrant and thriving city long ago. Not only that, but there once would have been a temple here.

Perhaps this was a temple.

She certainly detected something. She felt her prayer pose washing over the stone, and though she couldn't detect anything clearly, she was ready for any energy here to push against her. She had been using the prayer pose repeatedly, testing for anything unusual, but each time she attempted to do so, she felt some part of the energy in the forest, and of these ruins, straining against her.

“You told her there was a danger here,” Leanne said, joining Jamilla. She was an older woman, with graying hair and a round face that matched her body. “If this is what your sorcery detected,” she started, almost sneering at the word *sorcery*, “then I fail to see the danger. There are other things we could be doing.”

Sophie resisted the urge to tell her that she could absolutely go and do whatever it was that she thought she needed to be doing. The Karell did not need to come with her.

That's not entirely true.

She hated having to remind herself of that, but then the Raven Queen had suggested that the Karell come with Sophie,

because they could offer her a measure of protection. Not that Sophie needed protection from anything—at least, not that she wanted to acknowledge—though having others with magical power, especially the Karell, who were well known to have considerable magical power, was potentially beneficial.

Only potentially.

Sophie wouldn't acknowledge that they could offer her much more than that.

“When I was back in the city, I detected something out here,” Sophie said, and she shifted her pose, switching to one that the Raven Queen herself had taught her. It was a variation of the prayer pose, which meant that it shared many similarities, as variations often drew upon similar aspects of power. But in this case, the variation allowed her to probe a little more deeply and to have a bit more of a sense of connection to what she felt. “There was a void of power.”

Jamilla regarded Sophie for a long moment before tapping her wand on her free hand, and then she paused, positioned her feet at about shoulder width apart, and waved her wand in front of her.

Leanne frowned, though she motioned to some of the other Karell, who had continued to spread out into the forest, though they had not gone any farther. They were waiting on someone—probably Sophie—to tell them that it was safe to proceed.

A streamer of green energy slipped out from Jamilla's wand. It twisted, spiraling, and formed a pattern. It reminded Sophie somewhat of one of her poses, though when she had asked the Karell about the similarities, she'd been told that their magic was not at all like the kind of sorcery that she performed. Given that weavers, like her nana, had some connection to the Karell, she believed them, even though the parallels seemed strange.

“I'm not detecting any void here,” Jamilla said.

“The effect is subtle,” Sophie said.

She held her pose and let the power flow from somewhere deep inside her. The concentration of energy built up, and as

she pushed it out, she began to feel it sweeping out and away, flowing toward the boundary of the forest around the ruins. As it touched all within the clearing, Sophie became aware of something else here, though she wasn't entirely sure if it was tied to the ruins or if it was simply her power fading with the distance. There was a reason that she couldn't use this modified pose over such a distance, as it did not generate the same strength as the standard prayer pose did. Still, Sophie thought that if she could uncover anything by holding this variation, she needed to try. This was the reason she was out here, after all.

She stepped forward, and Jamilla joined her. She held her pose firmly in mind. That was a lesson that Parvella had taught her, helping Sophie find that concentration, and ensuring that she was able to maintain the poses as silently as possible.

"I can feel it now," Sophie said, continuing to push outward. "But..." She frowned. The power that she was pushing out didn't allow her to detect much of anything. Whatever was here, whatever void of energy she detected, it was mild. "It's not strong enough."

"We can search," Jamilla suggested. "We can report back to the Raven Queen and let her know we haven't found anything dangerous."

"We need to," Sophie said.

Jamilla was watching her, and there was a look in her eye that suggested that she wasn't sure why Sophie had been the one entrusted with this journey. For her part, Sophie wasn't sure why she had been chosen either. Maybe it was because of what she had experienced and the power that she had felt in the past, or maybe it was just because the Raven Queen had been working with Sophie and wanted to see what Sophie was capable of. Perhaps this was nothing more than a test.

"Let's start digging," Jamilla said, waving her wand, and the other Karell began to march in from the forest, surrounding the temple ruins. Each of them had their wand out, and they worked together, forming a weave of power that swept downward.

It was more potent than anything that Sophie could draw on her own, and it left her wondering, once again, why the Raven Queen had sent her.



Her return to the city was quick. Sophie hadn't waited for the Karell, as she had learned that she wasn't going to find much inside the temple ruins and hadn't wanted to linger there any longer than necessary, especially as the Karell were intrigued about some of the markings on the stone for reasons that Sophie was not. There were aspects of the Karell magic, and the way that they used it, that Sophie did not fully understand and was not permitted to ask about—or get an answer when she did.

She reached the palace without any complication.

The city of Hester was quite different from Valan, the city she had first come to when she had left Lorant. For one, it was deeper into Reyash, which protected it somewhat from Lorant, but there were fewer Taihg here as well. Sophie was accustomed to having the Taihg around her, and she felt their absence. Maybe it was just about not having Lan, or maybe it was the idea that she didn't have the measure of protection that she had come to value.

That was partly because the Taihg were more than just soldiers. Sophie knew that they had some connection to magic, even if she didn't know what that connection entailed, and her brother had not been helpful. Now that he had connected to a goddess, he might not be able to explain anything more to her.

She would have preferred to stay in Valan, but then again, that was only because of a familiarity, not because it was a place that she would call home. The tower there had served as a training ground for several years, but now that she was working more with the Raven Queen, she had reason to study away from that city and here in Hester.

The palace was enormous. When she had been trapped in Neylash, Sophie had thought that the palace there was

massive, but this one put it to shame. It towered over the city, stretching out with its enormity, and was built all of a gleaming white stone, with flowering vines that crept over its surface. Sophie suspected the flowers offered a measure of power and protection, as everything around Hester had been made with purpose, all of it guided by the Raven Queen's hand.

Sophie paused in the garden for a moment and was sweeping her gaze along a series of rose beds when she heard someone clear their throat behind her.

"Get on with it," Sophie said without looking up.

Parvella approached. Sophie had detected her. She had taken to holding the prayer pose in her mind and letting a faint amount of power leak out from her. It permitted her to feel others approaching, so that she wouldn't be surprised by somebody like Parvella. Then again, if Parvella truly wanted to surprise her, Sophie had little doubt that she'd be able to do so.

"Did you find anything?"

"Not exactly," Sophie said, and she filled her in on the remains of the temple. "I think the Karell were irritated with me, but I know what I felt before I left. There was an emptiness there. But I didn't feel anything more."

Parvella leaned forward, and she breathed in the rose aroma. She leaned back and let out a heavy breath. "The Raven Queen believes there are others."

"I know she does," Sophie agreed.

"And you do not?"

It was strange to have Parvella questioning her like this, but mostly because Parvella was somebody who had trained Sophie and had far more experience with most things in Reyash than she did. At least, she should have. She was a sorcerer of considerable skill, though perhaps not quite as much power as Sophie possessed. And while Sophie had continued to progress in her ability to perform the poses without needing to twist her body, she still didn't rival Parvella

—which meant that Sophie was nowhere near the sorcerer that the Raven Queen was.

But when it came to the search for these ancient ruins, anything that was tied to the gods, Parvella deferred to Sophie because of her experience.

She should be deferring to Lan.

But then again, Lan was preoccupied with the Taihg. And Sophie suspected that he also had his own assignment from the Raven Queen, something that kept him preoccupied in ways that Sophie couldn't even understand. She wouldn't put it past the Raven Queen to talk to Lan about what he had been through and try to use his connection. Knowing Lan as Sophie did—which admittedly was not nearly as well as she once had—he probably wouldn't betray the confidence of the Heart of the Grove.

“I'm not sure what you want me to say. I know she wants me to keep searching and working with the Karell, but I don't know what I will find. Why can't she just let me go alone?”

Parvella frowned as she studied her. “That is not what you need, Sophie.”

“And what do I need? To research ancient ruins that won't tell us anything? You might as well let me search in the library. I'd be better there, anyway.”

“We have some of our greatest librarians working so that you don't have to,” Parvella said.

“I know,” Sophie said.

It was the reason that she had a hard time in the library, as those same librarians were limiting to her. It was not that they were unwelcoming—given her connection to the Raven Queen, Sophie had a hard time thinking that any of the librarians would refuse her entrance—it was just that they were not very accommodating.

“What's the urgency?” Sophie asked. “I know you're trying to keep things from me, and that the Raven Queen has her own reasons for doing so, but it seems to me that there's some reason you and she are pushing me to uncover as much

as I can. I'm going as quickly as I can, but I don't know if I'm going to find anything soon. My resources are limited, and..."

And she didn't want to travel as often as she had been with the Karell. Sophie didn't say that, as the Karell were supposedly neutral when it came to magic, though in Sophie's experience, the Karell were anything but neutral.

"I suppose you need to know," Parvella said, and she flicked her gaze to one of the upper windows in the palace. It was the Raven Queen's quarters, a place that Sophie had visited a few times while in Hester, but she had not spent that much time there—certainly not enough for her to know it like she did other parts of the palace.

And surprisingly, she did know the palace quite well. It struck her as odd that she would be as familiar as she was with the palace. Growing up in Halith, she had been accustomed to little more than farm life and had thought that was always going to be her fortune. When she had been brought with Ridaln to the palace in Neylash, she had been exposed to a different side of the world that she had never even imagined. And now...

As hard as it was for her to acknowledge, Sophie couldn't imagine life any other way. She had become a palace girl. *Woman*, she had to remind herself.

Parvella guided her into the palace and motioned for her to follow quickly. Sophie did, and when they reached the second level, she stopped inside a small room. Sophie had been here before. It was a planning room, and large enough for a table, several chairs, and a series of lanterns that could be lit with either Karell magic or sorcery but not in any other way. Their presence suggested that the Raven Queen only trusted those with magic.

Parvella made quick work of illuminating the room and then reached into a section of the wall that she triggered to open. She pulled out a stack of papers and set them on the table, smoothing them out. In the faint light, she pointed to one section of a map.

It was not difficult for Sophie to follow, partly because she had spent quite a bit of time studying maps in Hester, but also partly because she had traveled to many of these places.

“What am I supposed to see here?”

“You recognize this is Reyash and Lorant?”

“Of course,” Sophie said.

How could she not? The map was quite distinct. Even the Devlar Forest was marked on it, which she knew was not coincidental. Ever since Sophie had gone into the forest and revealed that Valan was connected to it through some strange tunnel network, the forest had taken up a place of much more importance to the Raven Queen. The Karell had surrounded it, stationing several of their more senior members around the forest, all because they had some hope of seeing the Heart of the Grove. From what Sophie had discovered, and from what she suspected, it was more than just seeing the Heart of the Grove. Some among the Karell wanted to see if they could gain her favor, and perhaps be granted additional power in the same way that Lan had been.

“What am I supposed to notice here?” She pointed to a section of the map where there were several other markings. They were on the border with Lorant, but some of them were deeper inside that nation, the markings harder to follow.

“Movement,” Parvella said, looking up at Sophie.

“What kind of movement? Is this what Darius is doing?”

Parvella shook her head. “As far as we can tell, Darius has solidified his hold on most of this land, and he has become increasingly attuned to any Karell that have infiltrated his domain. We’ve barely been able to get anybody inside. The only ones who can bypass his ability to detect them are those without power of their own.”

Which was dangerous, Sophie knew. Sending somebody without any power into Lorant, to risk themselves against Darius, meant that they were vulnerable. That wasn’t the kind of thing the Raven Queen wanted her people to do. But it was more than just that. They needed to have Karell, or sorcerers,

inside Lorant so that they could learn what Darius might be planning to do with the Shavl. And as far as Sophie knew, he was planning to do something.

“Then if it’s not Darius, what is it?”

“Oh, it’s Darius, only we’re not following Darius. We think this is sorcery. And if you follow the trail...” she went on, watching Sophie.

Sophie looked down at the map. There was a trail, but it was not *just* a trail. It seemed to be a pattern. If Sophie wasn’t mistaken, it was more than just a pattern. A pose.

And it was a pose she recognized.

“Ridaln?”

Parvella nodded. “We haven’t heard anything from him in quite some time, but we suspect he’s responsible here.”

“Should we help?”

Parvella shook her head. “That’s not why I’m showing you this.”

“Well, I realize that you’re not showing me this because you want my help,” Sophie said, feeling a bit of irritation bubbling within her. She knew that she needed to control it but was having a difficult time with that. She understood how Parvella and the Raven Queen felt about Ridaln, but Sophie felt differently. He had helped. And though he might have abducted—or rescued—Dannith from the tower, he was also somebody who had taught Sophie from the very beginning, and she felt an obligation to try to understand what he was doing and whether there was anything more she could do to help him. “It’s just that if Ridaln is active against Darius, shouldn’t we play some part in that?”

“We could,” Parvella said, “if we thought that it was safe to do so. At this point, we are not convinced of that. But it’s more than just that.”

“What?”

“Whatever he’s doing, and whatever pattern he’s making,” Parvella said, looking up and locking eyes with Sophie, as if

testing whether Sophie would reveal that she recognized the pose, “we think it is getting close to completion. And we need to take advantage of that.”

“In what way?”

“To strip the Shavln away from Darius.”

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CHAPTER 2

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The air stank.

Lan remained crouched, trying not to draw any attention to himself, but it was difficult. He could feel the warmth radiating up from inside him, something that he still struggled to control, but he knew that he needed to get a handle on it. Otherwise, he would reveal his presence. It wasn't as if someone had to have magic to see Lan's magic glowing. It was apparent to everyone, which made it dangerous.

"Get moving," a soft voice said from behind him.

Lan glanced over his shoulder at Magnus. The massive man was crouched in the underbrush and had mud smeared over his cheeks to hide him even more. Lan found that amusing, as he doubted that it did much. However, Lan wondered what would happen if he were to smear some mud on his own cheeks. Maybe he wouldn't glow quite so much. He didn't think that he radiated past his clothing, but his exposed skin certainly did. Worse, anytime he unsheathed his sword, it glowed as well.

"Give me a second," Lan whispered. "We don't know what's up here, and we both agreed that I would take the lead on this."

"We're supposed to meet the squad by dusk."

Lan flicked his gaze up to the sky. They still had quite a bit of daylight left, though he didn't know how long this was going to take. He worried that if they took too long, they

would end up being late, which meant that the others would come for them.

That wasn't the worst thing in the world, but they were hunting elantars, massive creatures that had wandered along the border, and Lan worried that the others might not be nearly as capable of handling them. The only reason that he had brought Magnus with him was Magnus had the skill—and the size—to handle such things.

“We've got time,” Lan said. “If you'd like, you could return to the others, and I won't even say a thing.”

“I'm not leaving you here. This was my mission, in case you've forgotten.”

Lan looked back at him, arching a brow. “Yours?”

“Well, it was supposed to be mine. Then you come blasting in here with your glowing blade and your god gifts, and...”

Lan shook his head. Both of them knew that it was not quite so straightforward.

But neither of them argued with the necessity of the mission. They'd been tracking the elantars, knowing that there was something strange about them, and given everything that Lan had experienced with the thisten, he believed that tracking them might help him find something more. And that, more than anything else, was the assignment—to find out if there were other active gods.

It had taken him quite a bit of time to come to terms with what they had really been asked to do. Few Taihg had been willing to share, and it was only when Lan had refused to be a part of it that he had been taken aside by Magnus and the Taihg leader, the Th'lar, and told the truth.

“The Raven Queen herself wants us to search for god activity,” the Th'lar had said. “After your experience, she wants to ensure that the rest of the realm is quiet.”

“My experience?”

Magnus had eyed him with a strange expression, though that wasn't entirely unusual. “Don't pretend that you didn't

have some spiritual awakening.”

That was how Magnus referred to what had happened to Lan, though Lan viewed it quite a bit differently. He didn't think of it as a spiritual awakening so much as a gift. Even that might not be completely accurate. He had a mark. When he thought about it, he found himself looking down at his arm, at the cluster of freckles that he had always believed was a birthmark, but now he had been left wondering if it was truly the Mark of Odian, as the Heart of the Grove had claimed.

“I'm not pretending that I didn't have one,” Lan had said. “I'm just trying to see how this has anything to do with the Taihg.”

“If the gods are active, we need to ensure that our people are safe,” the Th'lar had said.

“And what do you think we can do?”

“I don't know. And at this point, I'm not so sure we can make much difference. We are to search. Follow anything, any lead that you think might make sense. You told us about those creatures that you were dealing with, and so we are going to chase down other creatures that have some magical tendencies. We have to see if they are connected to the gods.”

Lan had thought it all a bit ridiculous. The idea of tracking the gods, and maybe even finding some information about them, seemed impossible. But then, so too did what he had gone through, so perhaps he was the one who was being ridiculous about it all.

And so they had ended up here.

They were on the Reyashi border, near enough to a valley that separated Reyash from Lorant that Lan normally wouldn't even have bothered coming through here. But when they had caught sight of the elantars moving, they'd had little choice but to follow. The creatures were massive, and they were not supposed to be here.

That was all the reason that Magnus had needed to venture after them.

He still hadn't any good idea as to why they were here. They were known creatures, but certainly not known in this part of the world. Something had pushed them here.

The only thing that Lan could think of was that it was the Shavln power, which Sophie feared. There had been no further evidence of the Shavln—and from what he had learned from Magnus and the Th'lar, they had the Karell searching for any evidence and had not found anything—but creatures moving outside their natural domain might count as something.

“Just be ready,” Lan said. “I don't know how much farther we have to go, but I can feel something.”

Magnus locked eyes with him for a moment, but then he nodded.

Thankfully, Magnus didn't question Lan and his feelings. That had served them well over the last few days, especially as he had come to feel different things when it came to chasing these creatures. Lan had become increasingly aware of them, but he didn't know why. They pressed upon some faint and distant awareness that he had. Perhaps it was tied to the power within him, though Lan wasn't sure. And he didn't know who to ask.

Who does one talk to about a god power?

The Taihg had always viewed themselves as having a connection to the gods, and many Taihg had found a way to use that connection and try to serve the gods, which granted them additional power. Lan had seen it with Kragen at first, with his ties to Darish, and had known that Magnus believed he was marked by the gods and gifted with some power as well, though Lan still didn't know which god Magnus served—he only knew that Magnus, like all the high-ranking Taihg, maintained a connection to a god. These gifts allowed the Taihg strength and speed and fighting prowess, something that could only be obtained with enough time in training. That was what Lan had anticipated—and had wanted for himself.

Gaining control over the power had been impossible for him. As much as he wanted to better understand the kind of power that he now had access to, Lan didn't know anybody

that he could talk to. Possibly priests, but if he were to go to the priests, he would have to acknowledge aspects of the power, and aspects of himself, that he wanted to avoid. Lan had never really been a faithful or devout person, and he had never been bothered by that until he had been given this gift.

Darish curse all of this.

Even as he swore, Lan knew that it was probably a mistake. If he was right, then Lan had met Darish. The woodsman god might be the Hunter.

That seemed impossible, but what other explanation was there? He had never heard of Darish serving another god, and that was what had seemed to be the case when Lan had followed him, and the Heart of the Grove, but there were aspects of the gods that Lan had yet to understand.

Probably quite a few, he conceded.

He crept forward, sliding beneath the arms of a tree stretching just over his head, staying beneath the undergrowth. He crawled slowly, sweeping his head from side to side. He sniffed at the air. It did stink, but not the kind of stink that he would expect from elantars. It was the stink of...

Magic.

He raised a hand, motioning for Magnus to stop moving.

There was a distinct acrid odor to the air, especially when magic was used by the Karell. And that was what he detected now. Could the Karell be out here, active in some way, and searching for the elantars as well?

They had to know that the Taihg had been sent on their own mission, so why would they be out here?

He scooted back, sliding next to Magnus. "You smell that?"

"All I smell is our stench. Well, and shit."

"I don't think it's elantar dung," Lan said.

"I never said it was." Magnus flashed a smile. "What is it, then?"

“Karell magic. I don’t know why I smell it, but it’s out here. And it’s active.”

Magnus reached for his sword, unsheathing it and holding it out. He had a long, curved blade and was deadly with it.

“What is it?” Lan asked.

“That’s the other reason we are out here,” Magnus said.

“You’ve kept something from me?”

“I kept nothing, but there was that woman you met. You called her the Mistress of the Woods.”

Thea. Lan tried not to grant her a title, as that only empowered her, and he was not interested in doing that. But he had first met her as the Mistress of the Woods, someone with considerable power. Only later had he learned that she was a Karell and had served in Valan.

And she had betrayed them.

She was responsible for everything that had happened. She had tried to capture the Heart of the Grove, using the dark power of the Shavln to taint the streams that she had used to surround the Heart of the Grove. Were it not for Lan and Sophie, she might have been successful in acquiring the Heart of the Grove’s power.

And then what?

That kind of power would have been hers, and it would have been corrupted.

Lan didn’t really understand her motive, but he suspected that it was tied to a desire to corrupt the gods.

If she was here...

He reached for his own blade, pulling it from its sheath. Now he had to be especially careful, as he knew that the power that the Heart of the Grove had awoken inside him would stretch out from him and into the blade. Lan didn’t have enough control over it yet to keep it from straying beyond him.

“Just be careful,” Magnus whispered.

“I’m careful. But this might be more than you can manage.”

Magnus arched a brow. “I’m Taihg. There is nothing beyond what I can manage.”

Lan didn’t think that was quite true. He had seen the danger that Thea posed, and how easy it had been for her to corrupt others. If Magnus were corrupted...

Lan might be able to help him, but he didn’t want to have to. It would limit his ability to handle Thea. And it might put him into a dangerous situation on his own. That was something that Lan did not want to have to deal with.

Lan began to move forward, sliding across the ground, holding his blade, as he wasn’t sure whether there was going to be something dangerous here. He focused on the warmth inside himself, feeling that steadiness building, but even as he began to focus on it, he started to question whether the warmth was going to be of any use to him. If there was the danger of Thea—the Mistress of the Woods—then Lan had to be ready in a different sort of way.

Would the Heart of the Grove protect him?

Lan had gone back to her, or at least he had tried to, after he had gained his ability. He had tried to see if there was some information that she could offer him, and whether he would be able to learn to control the power that he now had blooming inside him. When he had gone back into the forest, he had not found her, though he had searched thoroughly. It was as if she had vanished.

Then again, if she was a goddess, then he should have expected nothing less. Why would she have lingered? The danger was gone, and Lan had dealt with the Mistress of the Woods, so there had been no reason for her to stick around, no reason other than to help Lan understand his new ability, and whether there was any way to control it.

“I just want to be ready,” Lan said. “You haven’t seen anything like this before.”

Magnus held his curved blade out, making it seem as if the grass parted around it. “You don’t know what I’ve seen, Lan.”

He moved forward, and Lan followed.

They reached a ridge looking down into a small valley. A stream ran through the center of the valley, and trees lined the stream, though they were strange weeping willows that Lan had not seen before. Vines dangled down toward the water, and the lush grass that spread out from the stream had an unusual appearance. Flowers dotted the meadow leading up to the stream, but there was something else about the valley that bothered him.

The ruins of some stone structure loomed off in the distance, with the stone piled and cracked, much of it looking as if it had long ago crumbled into nothingness. There were places like this dotted all throughout the kingdom, though Lan had not encountered all that many.

And then he recognized what was troubling him. Something of what he saw down in the valley, and what he felt down there, pressed against him, and the warmth within him, in a way that left Lan unsettled.

He held his hand out, and Magnus glanced in his direction.

“Caution,” Lan said, flicking his fingers in the Taihg sign language.

Magnus glanced at Lan’s fingers before frowning. He nodded, though.

Lan wasn’t sure that it made sense for him to talk, especially as he felt something pressing against him, and he wasn’t sure what was down there. There was no sign of the elantars that they had come to search for, and the valley itself should not be intimidating, but for whatever reason, there was something about it that struck Lan as unusual, and unsettling. And that, more than anything else, was the reason that he wanted Magnus to pause—at least until they had a better chance to understand what was here.

Lan slipped forward, gliding through the grass, feeling the warmth within him beginning to bloom. Not only that, but his

blade glowed softly, and as it did, he felt something more working through it. Power, but perhaps it was not the kind of power that he had any control over. Was the Heart of the Grove guiding him in some way?

Ever since he had been touched by her, and been given this gift, Lan had not felt the touch of her in any way. In all the stories that his nana used to tell Sophie—not that Lan didn't listen to them as well—the gods would only offer guidance when they had someone willing to serve. And then, once they had that person, they would push them, guiding them in a way that would force them to serve.

Was that what Lan would have to do now? He didn't intend to serve, but at the same time, he had been given this gift, and he couldn't deny that there was some part of him that was thankful for it, as he had seen how useful it was and had benefited from it. Not only that, but without this gift, Lan would not be the Taihg that he needed to be.

He moved forward, and as Magnus followed, Lan sprang to his feet, something inside him knowing immediately what he needed to do. He heard Magnus call out behind him. Lan ignored him, holding up his sword, and it blazed with a bright white light. He let the energy flow from him.

It struck the meadow in front of him.

It was as if the Heart of the Grove had guided the power out of him and poured it out into the meadow. Lan felt the strange surge of warmth, and then it began to spread, creeping over the meadow, changing the vibrant and warm grasses, the flowers, even the trees that dipped into the stream.

Everything disappeared.

For a moment, the scene flickered, but then, when it disappeared completely, Lan stood motionless, trying to make sense of what he had seen.

He didn't think that he had done this. He had only reacted to the power that was here, and his sword seemed to have known what he had needed to do.

Then he saw a figure near the stream.

The Mistress of the Woods.

Thea.

She turned her attention to Lan, bringing her hands together and pointing... a wand.

He brushed aside the risk of a dangerous attack and raced toward her, ignoring the fact that she had Karell magic, ignoring the fact that she was powered by the Shavln—magic that might be dark god power.

The only thing that Lan could do was deal with it. He raced ahead, holding his sword, holding the power within him, letting the warmth spread from somewhere deep inside him and out into the blade itself.

Then it burst from the end of the blade.

It arced across the distance between him and Thea, and it crackled.

When it struck, she seemed fixated, unmoving for a long moment.

Could it work?

Lan could feel some energy pushing against him. He thought it might be the Shavln, the dark magic that he had dealt with only one other time, the dark magic that he knew they needed to deal with before it began to spread. At the same time, he wasn't sure if the touch of the goddess was going to be enough to overpower it.

Then Thea moved.

The wand pressed forward, and power began to stream from the end of it.

Lan focused on the power inside him, trying to force the warmth through his blade.

It swept outward, crossing the distance, and slammed into whatever Thea was doing.

She had power, but he had the gift of the Heart of the Grove.

“Careful!” Lan heard behind him.

Magnus was calling to him, but what did he mean?

Lan felt something coming toward him, almost too late.

He spun, pointing his sword to the other side, dragging the arc of power that had been flowing from him and toward the woman, and struck a charging elantar.

The creature was enormous. It had massive horns curling from its head, and a long, tooth-filled snout. It looked something like a twisted wolf but was far larger than any wolf Lan had ever seen. It rumbled toward him, and as soon as Lan’s arc of power struck it, he rolled to the side.

When Lan spun, turning his attention back to the woman, she was gone.

He stood motionless, still filled with the warmth, letting it flow out of him, into the blade. His sword glowed, and Lan suspected that he glowed as well.

“You need to be more careful,” Magnus said.

“I don’t know if I can,” Lan answered. “It was the Mistress of the Woods.”

“I saw her Karell wand,” he said.

“She might’ve been Karell once, but I don’t think she is any longer,” Lan said. “And now she serves this Shavln, but...”

As Lan looked around, he could see that everything here had faded, all the vibrancy that they had observed from the ridge. Lan didn’t understand why it had changed, and he didn’t understand what was here, but there had been some corruption. Why, though?

“She was targeting something here,” Lan said, striding forward as he held his blade, but not dragging it.

But maybe he should.

When he had seen the Hunter the very first time, he had dragged his blade, and it had seemed to make a difference.

Lan tapped it on the ground and felt a flare of warmth through him. It was nothing that he controlled, as if the warmth burst from him, irrepressibly slamming outward and sliding into the ground. He felt the warmth flowing outward until it radiated through the earth, toward the stream, where he felt...

Something corrupt.

Lan hurried over to the stream and drove his sword into the water. He didn't think that it would make much of a difference, but he couldn't do nothing. Warmth flooded out of him, and as it worked into the water, he looked over to see Magnus holding his blade at the ready, but his eyes were closed, his hands pressed together on either side of the hilt, as if he were praying. Maybe he was. It was possible that Magnus was using the connection to his god, whatever that might be, to help.

"The stream has been altered," Lan said, waiting for Magnus to open his eyes and address him. "The Shavln used this technique before."

"We should follow it," Magnus said.

"And then what do we do? We aren't strong enough to overpower the Shavln." At least, most of the Taihg weren't strong enough. Lan didn't know if he would be, though he would have to try.

"And then... I don't know."

Lan was tired, but he wasn't done with any of this. Whatever power Thea had intended to release, it was still here. And if they were not careful, it was going to continue to spread. Or worse, it would surround all of Reyash. And then it would isolate the country.

Lan didn't get into the politics, but he understood that this sorcerer Darius had intended to do something drastic by releasing the Shavln. It might have been more than just destroying the kingdom, though. Lan didn't know what the purpose was, or what he had to do to stop it.

“I think we need to report back to the Raven Queen,” he said.

Magnus frowned. “We report, but we investigate as well. This is our responsibility.”

Lan wasn't sure if that was true anymore. Not the part about the Taihg, but the part about this being their responsibility. It was *his* responsibility. The gift that the Heart of the Grove had given him made it his responsibility. But was it the Taihg's as well?

Those thoughts were troubling, especially as it left him wondering about his place and his purpose, something that Lan had not considered ever since joining the Taihg.

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CHAPTER 3

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SOPHIE

Sophie sat in the library, a stack of books towering next to her. It was one of the places that she most commonly visited while in Hester, but it was also a place where she felt a bit isolated. The library was quiet, as it should be, but in this case it was almost an unearthly quiet. It was so different from the library in Neylash, where she had gone to study and read and, when she was honest with herself, chase stories that might entertain her. Now she spent her time studying, researching, and she did not have the same opportunities to look for the entertainment of the stories that she knew she could find.

The library itself was a three-story structure situated at one end of the palace. The walls were curved, and the massive, towering bookshelves that lined them curved along with them. Enormous ladders stretched from floor to ceiling, and the librarians scurried up and down them, going after books that people might request or reshelving them. There was another way to reach some of the books—taking the stairs up to the second or the third story and following the narrow catwalk around—but the librarians preferred the ladders. Sophie first thought it was merely for show, then she saw how they pushed along the shelves, gliding on the rails that locked the ladders in place and allowed them to scurry like thieves up and down, faster than she could even follow.

The glow of lanterns cast everything in a soft light. Stained-glass windows offered some natural light, but it was all filtered and dusty and made it difficult to see much of anything. Sophie had questioned the reason behind the stained

glass and had been informed that it offered a measure of protection to some of the more ancient books.

“These are old works, Sophie Varison,” Harold, one of the old librarians, had said to her when she had first come to the palace in Hester. “And the sun does terrible things. There are reasons that we keep the sunlight off their bindings and off their pages. The Karell light is more than enough.”

He had waved a hand toward one of the lanterns, and Sophie had studied it for a little while, trying to make sense of the Karell lantern, but hadn’t really been able to determine anything. It was an unusual structure and design, and it used a different kind of power from what she used, though she suspected that the runic markings along the surface of the lantern helped blend the power it drew on.

“If they are so old, shouldn’t there be other ways of protecting them?”

Harold tapped his lips. “The Raven Queen has offered us her own protections,” he said, and he smiled as he spoke. “The library itself is sealed off, so there are measures here that can defend the library and what is found within it. Do not worry.”

Sophie wasn’t necessarily worried, but learning that the Raven Queen had placed her own protections around the library had been somewhat surprising.

Then again, shouldn’t she? She was the Raven Queen, and the kind of power that she possessed was unlike anything that any others in the kingdom possessed. In the time that Sophie had been around her, she had seen the Raven Queen use her power for other, similar effects, adding protections in some of the cities, over some of the buildings, and to some of the people that they had visited. It was something that the Raven Queen claimed Sophie would come to do at some point, once she fully mastered her sorcery.

For Sophie, it was a strange use of her power, but then again, she wasn’t the Raven Queen and didn’t have that near-mythical kind of magic. She was still studying and had only known that she was a sorcerer for a short while.

She pulled a book over to her, then leaned down and stared at the pages. There was something about the gods in this one, which was the reason that she had chosen it. It was what she had been researching ever since they had survived Thea's attack on the city. But Sophie had not uncovered anything useful. She knew there had to be something here, but every time she went looking for information about the gods, she found herself stymied.

Most of the stories of the gods were just that—stories.

What Sophie needed was something a bit more definitive.

And she had hoped that she might be able to track the stories of the gods to something more useful, and were she honest with herself, she had hoped that she might be able to find something about the Shavln while she was doing it.

But the Shavln had proved incredibly difficult to uncover anything about. Though Sophie knew that it was real, having faced it—and having released it, to a certain extent—it seemed as if no one had ever documented anything about the power. It left her wondering how Darius had even discovered that it was real.

She let out a heavy sigh and pushed the book aside. She had others that she could look through, and she needed to take some of these out of the library so that she could better study them, but anytime that she had asked to remove books from the library, she had run into resistance from the librarians. It was because she was not a known entity, from what they had told her, though Sophie questioned whether there was something more to it. She had been tempted to sneak something out of the library, but she knew that if she were to do that she would lose their trust. Given how many works were within the library, Sophie needed to have the librarians' help and their trust, so that she could find what she was looking for. Consequently, she used as much time as she had to keep reading and buried herself in the books when she was here.

A shuffling sound came close to her, and Sophie looked up.

A brown-robed man with a bald head leaned forward, holding something. He glanced up at her. “Sophie Varison?” the man asked.

Sophie sat up, nodding. “That’s me.”

“I have a message for you.”

Sophie shrugged. “Let’s have it.” It wasn’t terribly uncommon for Parvella to send a messenger into the library for Sophie, though given that Parvella knew where Sophie was, and could easily have waited, it was unexpected—especially since she had not really elaborated much on what they were going to do to deal with the Shavln while Ridaln had Darius preoccupied. She suspected that Parvella didn’t know. And it was frustrating, because if Parvella didn’t know, that meant that the Raven Queen didn’t have a plan. They just assumed that they could deal with the Shavln.

That was something that Sophie had been struggling with ever since she had joined the Raven Queen. All the stories about the Raven Queen had spoken of her power and her abilities, but they hadn’t mentioned that she was not much of a planner.

In the stories that Sophie had learned when she was younger, the great sorcerers always had a plan. Actually, in most of the stories, everybody had some sort of plan, as it was necessary to ensure that a character’s goal could be accomplished. But with the Raven Queen, either she had a plan, and she didn’t reveal it to Sophie, or she didn’t have a plan, which was even worse.

The messenger handed a piece of folded paper over to Sophie and then strode away. Sophie looked down at it. The writing on the paper was in an unfamiliar hand, and it scrawled out her full name. She flicked her finger underneath the wax seal and unfolded it.

Then she started to laugh.

She covered her mouth, realizing that she was being too loud inside the library, and knowing that she needed to be careful not to upset Harold or any of the other librarians. Such

noise was considered uncouth, but more than that, it was considered disruptive, something that Sophie could not be.

The letter was from Lan.

It surprised her that he would send her a letter, of all things. Her brother had never been one to write, and to be honest, she hadn't even known if he had the skill. She hadn't seen him in the better part of a month. His time with the Taihg had kept him preoccupied and away from Hester, though there weren't many Taihg who came to Hester. She was thankful to get word from him, and as she skimmed over the letter, she found herself smiling even more.

Lan was coming here. She could see her brother.

He had changed so much from the boy that he had been when they had left their home. He had become a powerful soldier. And then he had changed again, becoming something more. Sophie wasn't entirely sure what Lan had become, but he had been given a gift of power that had unlocked something inside him that might have always been there. When she looked at him, when she saw that glow inside him, she found herself feeling there was something familiar about it, as if she should have always known that it was there.

And now she could see it again. She could see *him* again.

She just had to wait a few days.

That wasn't so bad. A few days until her brother came gave her something to look forward to, but a few days while trying to plot what she was going to do when it came to Darius and the Shavln was an eternity, in her mind.

She turned her attention back to the books. If nothing else, Sophie thought that she could throw herself into her studies and find more about the gods that would help her understand how to contain the Shavln. That was the assignment that the Raven Queen had given her, wanting Sophie to focus on that goal, as if Sophie's experience was enough that she could somehow do something that the Raven Queen could not.

And maybe I can.

But it probably wasn't going to be Sophie that could do it. Given the gift that Lan had been given, Sophie had to believe that he was far more capable, and far more equipped, to be able to handle anything from the gods. The Heart of the Grove, assuming that she was one of the gods, had given him that gift, and Sophie thought that it had to be enough to help him deal with the threat of the Shavln.

She sorted through several more books and got down to the bottom of the stack, finding a small, thin book.

Sophie almost dismissed it, but she pulled it close to her and began to thumb through the pages. The storybook was simple, and she didn't really expect to find anything of consequence in it, but maybe there would be something entertaining. Given that she was now thinking of her brother, she found her mind wandering, and perhaps a bit of entertainment would be helpful. Besides, Sophie missed stories.

She felt childish when she thought like that, as stories were really for children, but her nana had always shared them with her, telling her that there was always more to a story than its plot. In this case, it was a children's fable about a monster in the forest. Sophie found that amusing, until she remembered that she had asked Harold for anything that he could find on the Devlar Forest, which suggested that he had brought her this because it concerned that particular forest.

The monster in the forest turned out to be a bear. And given her experience with the thisten, Sophie was left wondering if perhaps it wasn't really a bear, but a thisten that had been seen as a bear. Those massive creatures were certainly enough like a bear that she could easily imagine others making this mistake.

She read through the book, taking in the story, until she found that there was a powerful hunter who took down the bear, leaving the forest safe again for others to pass through.

That couldn't be a coincidence. *The Hunter?*

Sophie had never seen the Hunter, but Lan had mentioned that he had dealt with some being of power by that name—and

from what Sophie had inferred, Lan believed that it might have been Darish. Then again, she had never heard of anybody who had seen any of the gods. It would be surprising for him to have been given that opportunity.

But he had seen the Heart of the Grove.

Sophie didn't know anything about the Heart of the Grove, though. She didn't know how real she was, and she didn't know whether she was a god, a powerful sorcerer, or maybe even a Karell, given the fact that Lan's newfound power did seem to be akin to Karell power, and that Lan had some tendency toward Karell power as well. When he was younger, he had been a much better weaver than Sophie. Given what Sophie now knew about the Karell, and how their power was tied to weaving, she had to believe that Lan's predilection for weaving suggested that he had potential as a Karell.

But if that were all it was, she would have expected Lan to have learned the Karell techniques before now.

She closed the book, leaned back in the chair, and stared at it.

In the time that she'd been researching the gods, the Shavln, and everything that she thought she needed to understand, she had been focused on researching what other scholars might have known about the gods, but that had always turned into more of a religious approach than a scholarly one. When it came to depicting the gods, too many were afraid of humanizing them. And from what she had heard from Lan about the Heart of the Grove and the Hunter, they were more human than not. So perhaps she had approached this the wrong way.

What if she instead went looking for stories?

It seemed like a ridiculous way to go about learning anything, but stories had power in them. Sophie had always believed that, and her nana had made it clear to her that stories had meaning and purpose and passed on information. And some of the stories were older than the scholarly articles that she could find.

The hard part would be in digging through the meat of the story to try to make sense of it. But as she looked at the book, and as she thought about the bear in the forest and how the hunter had come through and saved the people from it, she found herself wondering whether there might be something more to the stories that she had heard—and that she could find.

She got up from the desk and wandered around the library until she reached Harold scrambling up a ladder to the second story. He moved quickly and fluidly for a man his age, a large leather satchel slung over his shoulder, filled with books that probably weighed him down. When he reached the section of shelving that he needed, he grabbed one of the books out of his satchel and shoved it onto the shelf. He slid along the tracks, positioning himself so that he could get closer to another section, and scurried farther up the ladder.

Sophie left him alone as he worked, until he finally looked down and noticed her standing there. Harold frowned for a moment and then slid down the ladder to land next to her. He held one hand on the satchel, as if afraid that Sophie—or somebody else—might dip her hand into it and take books from him.

“What can I help you find today, Sophie?” he asked.

“This one should be easy,” she said. “I’m looking for any storybooks you might have.”

“Storybooks?” He arched a brow at her as he spoke, then shook his head. “I’m afraid that this is the Library of Hester. There are no storybooks here.”

But there *had* been one—unless he hadn’t known it was there.

“There has to be something,” Sophie said.

“We have scholarly works. We are one of the largest and most respected libraries in all the land. We would not keep storybooks here.”

“But there has to be—”

Harold raised his hand, cutting her off. “There is not. If you are looking for stories, there is a children’s library out in the city that you might be able to visit, but unfortunately, I don’t have anything here for you.”

From the tone of his voice, she could tell that it was not unfortunate—at least, not for Harold.

Sophie realized how ridiculous the request was, and she knew that it didn’t really make much sense for the library to have storybooks. But...

His idea of going to a children’s library made a certain sort of sense. She could easily imagine finding something of use there. It might be a bit more difficult, and she might look a little strange there, but where else could she go where she would find a massive collection of storybooks? And she knew just where to find the children’s library. She had passed it several times during her time in the city.

She smiled. “Thank you. It’s for a project that I’m working on for the queen,” she said.

Harold frowned at her. “The queen has you looking into storybooks?”

“It’s complicated,” Sophie said. “I just thought that if you had something here, it would simplify my search, but you’re right. I shouldn’t have expected that you would keep anything like that here.”

“I could inquire at the children’s library and have certain volumes brought here, assuming you know what you’re looking for,” he said, speaking slowly and arching a brow at Sophie. “It would be a bit unusual, but I have relationships with most of the local librarians and can put in the request.”

Sophie considered this for a moment. It would certainly be easy enough for her to have Harold bring the books here, but she didn’t really know what she was after. And the hard part was that she didn’t even know if it would make a difference. She wanted information, but she didn’t know if the kind of information she was searching for was something that she

would find without trawling through the shelves herself and gauging whether anything sparked something for her.

“Thank you, but I think that I can visit the library myself. I appreciate your willingness, though. I might have a request for you later.”

“Of course, Sophie.”

He stood for a moment, watching her, seeming to wait for another request, and when she didn't have one, he scurried up the ladder and resumed his work.

Sophie lingered for a few moments, debating what she was going to do. She could sit and continue her studies, but at this point, she wasn't sure that she was going to find anything more than she already had. She didn't know if there was anything in the library for her, at least not now that she had started to question whether storybooks might be the way to learn more about the gods.

But what she could do was acquire one book on the gods and then use that. She had several to choose from and had even spoken with a few local theologians on the differences between the gods, hoping to find something that would make sense, but so far, she had not uncovered anything.

She grabbed one book, sliding it across the table before slipping it into her pocket. She had to be careful, as Harold would obviously know which books he had gathered for her, and probably that she had taken one, but at this point Sophie didn't care. She needed the record, and given that she was working on behalf of the Raven Queen, she had to believe that she would not be questioned quite as rigorously as if she were doing something else.

She left the library.

The library had two main entrances. There was one that led directly out of the library and onto the palace grounds, though Sophie rarely used that one. It was more for the librarians themselves, so that they didn't have to traipse through the palace. Sophie had access to the palace, so she didn't have to worry about heading through it, nor did she have to worry

about disturbing anybody. As she entered the palace proper, she slowed, looking along the massive, wide hall, and tried to avoid a pair of servants who were scurrying out of the kitchen. The smells in the kitchen tickled her nostrils and immediately set her stomach to grumbling.

“You can go in there, you know,” a voice said from behind her.

Sophie spun to see Nevarn. She hadn’t even realized that he was there. He was seated on a bench next to the library entrance, his legs crossed, a book propped in his lap. His long sword was angled against the marble wall, still in its scabbard.

“What are you doing here?”

He closed the book, slipped it into his pocket—of course, Nevarn wouldn’t have any difficulty taking books from the library, because no librarian would question him—and he got to his feet. He was tall, a good hand taller than Sophie, and had a traditionally handsome face, with a bit of a beard growing now, which framed his jaw in a pleasing manner—not that she would tell Nevarn that.

“I was waiting for you. I heard that you had gone into the library, and I know how you don’t like to be disturbed.” He flicked his gaze toward it. “Though I was tempted to disturb you.”

“What do you need?”

There had been a time when she had felt closer to Nevarn, but ever since he’d been corrupted by Thea, Sophie had had a hard time connecting to him. Not that she was rude to him. He was the prince, after all, and she knew better than to risk angering the Raven Queen because of her irritation with her son, but their relationship just didn’t feel the same.

“I just thought that we could talk.”

Sophie frowned. “This doesn’t have anything to do with my brother coming to the city, does it?”

Nevarn raised his eyebrows, a mock seriousness in his gaze. “Why, Sophie, I am surprised that you would accuse me of such a motive.”

“So it does have something to do with Lan’s coming to the city. How did you hear?”

He flicked his gaze to where his blade was propped. “I still have sources within the Taihg,” he said, his voice trailing off a little toward the end.

“I know you do.”

“It’s not quite the same,” Nevarn said. “Ever since... well, ever since that,” he went on, and Sophie realized that he had a hard time acknowledging what had happened and his role in it, “I have been reluctant to dig too deeply into the Taihg. There just isn’t the same desire. And I don’t think that they trust me. For that matter, *I* wouldn’t trust me.”

“I doubt that it’s a matter of them not trusting you,” Sophie said.

He shrugged. “Anyway, my mother has been keeping an eye on me the last few months.”

Sophie just watched him. She had known that. She had asked about Nevarn, curious as to how the Raven Queen had treated him, especially given everything that had happened and how he had been drawn into Thea’s plan, but the Raven Queen had not wanted to share all that much. Sophie suspected some of it was her own worry about how Nevarn might still be corrupted, though Sophie and Lan had used their combined talents to heal him. Not only that, but she suspected that the Raven Queen had also contributed to his healing, and would have been able to do far more than Sophie and Lan had.

“What is it?” Sophie asked.

“Did he tell you why he was returning?”

“Well, I assume it has something to do with the Taihg,” Sophie said.

Nevarn shook his head. “Not with him. Not these days.”

Sophie frowned. “What do you mean?”

He glanced toward the kitchen just as the door started to open, and a pair of servants came out, both of them carrying

trays. He smiled as he turned his attention back to Sophie.
“Are you hungry?”

“I’m always hungry,” she said, before realizing how that sounded. She took a deep breath and glanced toward the kitchen. “I could use a treat, but not here.”

“Where, then?”

“I know a place—that is, if you are interested.”

“I could be interested.”

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CHAPTER 4

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SOPHIE

The pastry shop was situated in one of the dingier sections of Hester, though Sophie didn't really care about that. All she cared about was the quality of the baking, and Bryn was one of the best bakers that Sophie had ever found. She rivaled Oleda, which was hard for Sophie to acknowledge. Windows covered the front of the shop, letting in plenty of natural light, but there were several lanterns that glowed warmly inside as well. A massive hearth at one end of the room crackled with heat and flame, infusing the entire bakery with a comfortable warmth. Tables were situated around the hearth, with plush chairs that angled toward the fire itself, giving the establishment a cozy feel.

Sophie headed over to the counter, looking up at the young man with a flour-covered apron, who flashed a tight smile, which faded as he looked over at Nevarn. William was one of the more junior workers here, and Sophie had heard Bryn gossiping about him one time, about how he had lost his mother and sister to some sickness, so Bryn had taken pity on him. That fit with what Sophie knew of Bryn.

"Don't mind him," Sophie said.

William couldn't take his gaze off Nevarn. Sophie hated that about traveling with Nevarn—not that she had all that much experience of doing so, as she didn't go into shops with him too often. Still, she understood why many people had this kind of reaction, as Nevarn was the prince, and far too many people viewed that as a reason to bow and scrape. Maybe she

should do more of that, but she'd never really felt the pressure to do so.

"I'd listen to her," Nevarn said. "She's in charge here."

William turned his attention back to Sophie. "You're in charge? I didn't realize that you were nobility."

Sophie snorted. "I'm not, so don't start bending the knee to me. We just want a few pastries. Anything particularly fresh."

William glanced behind him. "I'm supposed to sell those that are here first."

"Sell the girl what she asks for," Bryn said, coming from the back of the kitchen, carrying a tray of steaming pastries. The golden delights smelled sweet, and two of them were topped with a white frosting that Sophie knew to be incredibly delicious. Most of the time, they sold out before she had an opportunity to get them.

"I'll take all of them," Sophie said, pointing to the tray that Bryn was carrying. She was tall, slender, and dusted with flour in the same way that William was. Then again, with William, it looked more intentional, as if he felt he needed to coat himself with flour to give himself an air of believability. With Bryn, it was more about her baking and seemed to be unavoidable. "And he's going to pay," she went on.

Nevarn shrugged. "I guess I'm paying. Do you have anything to drink?"

"Hot chocolate," Bryn said. "Or water."

"I'll take the chocolate," Nevarn said. "Well, I guess I'm taking two."

Bryn flicked her gaze past Sophie. "I'll carry them over to you."

Sophie smiled. "Thanks, Bryn."

They took a seat near the hearth, in a pair of chairs situated near a table that Sophie preferred. The shop was not empty, but it wasn't very busy. She was thankful for that. She didn't need other people looking at Nevarn and questioning why he was there with her. They sat in quiet for a moment, and when

Bryn carried over two plates, she set them down next to Sophie and Nevarn, nodding to Sophie before bowing a little deeper to Nevarn. She flashed a smile and then disappeared for a moment before returning with two mugs that steamed.

“Thanks,” Sophie said.

Bryn waited. Nevarn shuffled into his coin pouch and pulled out a stack of silvers, which Sophie thought was probably too much, but given that he was the prince, maybe it was every bit that Bryn deserved.

Bryn flicked through the coins before frowning. “This is too much.”

“Well, if your pastries are as good as Sophie claims,” Nevarn said, glancing over at Sophie for a moment, “then it’s probably just enough. And I’ll take a couple to go. Whatever you think she would like.”

Bryn glanced at Sophie, arching one brow. “Oh, I know what she likes. I’ll get them together.”

When she was gone, Nevarn chuckled. “This is an unusual place for you to choose.”

“Why would this be unusual? I told you that I’m picky when it comes to my pastries, so I found the place that has the best selection, and the best baker. Nothing more and nothing less than this.”

“There has to be another baker in the city closer to the palace.”

“There’s not. I looked.”

“Maybe my mother should hire her.”

“Don’t you dare,” Sophie said. “Bryn has owned this business for the last five years, and she’s good to the local community. The people need her here.”

“But if she’s as good as you claim...” He took one of the frosted pastries and held it up to his nose, sniffing, then took a bite. He closed his eyes and let out a soft moan. “Oh. She *is* as good as you claim.”

“Of course she is,” Sophie said. She grabbed her own plate, picked up one of the crescent pastries, and took a bite. It was fluffy, crispy, and just buttery enough that it practically melted in her mouth. It was part of the reason that she loved coming to Bryn’s shop. She couldn’t come too often. She was busy, and it was a long walk through the city, but it was worth it. Anytime she came here, she found herself enjoying the pastries more than she had ever imagined she would.

“Fine. I’m not going to have my mother hire her. But why did you want to come out here?”

“The food,” Sophie snapped, finishing the pastry that she was eating. “And that’s about it.”

Nevarn chewed slowly, working through his pastry. When he was done, he licked his fingers and then set his hands in his lap. “This doesn’t have anything to do with Dannith?”

Sophie shook her head, looking down at her plate. Rather than taking another pastry, she reached for the hot chocolate. It would be too hot to drink, but she could distract herself a little by holding the cup up to her nose and breathing in the sweet smell. “It has nothing to do with Dannith.”

“I remember you told me that you used to share pastries with him. And with him missing from the palace...”

“He was never missing from the palace,” Sophie said over the top of her mug.

“Fine. With him missing from the tower,” Nevarn said, dropping his voice. “I know the two of you were close.”

Sophie shook her head and took a drink. It was hot, but it had cooled enough that she could tolerate it. There were probably poses that she could use to protect herself from the heat, but that seemed to defeat the purpose. Instead, she enjoyed the way the hot chocolate worked its way down her throat, swallowing slowly. “We weren’t close. At least, not really. I think he had a soft spot for me, but then again, I had the same for him. He was kind to me when I was in the palace in Neylash. I didn’t know that he was the king, and...” There was no point in rehashing this story, as it didn’t change

anything for her. “Anyway, he’s not the reason I come here. It’s just good food.”

“What is it with you and good food?”

Sophie closed her eyes. “I used to bake with my nana,” she said softly. “I have those memories. Those, her stories, and a ring. It’s really all that I have of her.”

The ring was the only physical reminder she had of her nana. The memories meant more but there were times when holding the ring reminded her of when she’d still be around.

“So she left quite a bit for you.”

“I suppose.”

“And you still think that she was a Karell?”

Sophie hadn’t spoken about that in quite a while, so for him to raise that question now suggested that either he knew something and was trying to bring the topic back, or maybe he didn’t know something and was just probing. Either way, it wasn’t a topic that she wanted to speak about with him. If she had an opportunity to spend more time with the Karell—and unfortunately, she had as much time with them as she wanted—she might glean more answers, but the problem was that Sophie no longer trusted them.

“I don’t know,” Sophie said. “She was part of the Weavers’ Guild, and everything that I’ve learned about that guild suggests that it is tied to the Karell, but I don’t know anything more than that.” She set her mug down and glanced at the other pastries. “Tell me about Lan.”

“Well, I guess I assumed that you knew already.”

“Last I saw him was... well, probably about a month ago. And he was part of the Taihg still then.”

“I’m not sure he’s really left the Taihg,” Nevarn said, eliciting an arched brow from Sophie. “It’s just that ever since whatever happened to us in the forest, Lan has been different. I think he had a hard time with that adjustment, from all the reports that I’ve gotten.”

“Reports?”

“I know,” Nevarn said, raising his hands defensively. “Given what I did, and my role in what nearly happened in the city, it’s probably hard to believe that I’m still able to get reports, but I am still connected to the Taihg. I may not have their trust, nor my mother’s,” he added, his voice dropping a bit, “but I still need to be informed. And something’s going on with your brother. I don’t know what it is, but I have to wonder if it’s tied to the Heart of the Grove.”

That was the reason that Nevarn wanted to speak to Sophie. She could tell from the way that he leaned forward that he was mostly interested in the Heart of the Grove.

“Do you think I know some secret that I’m going to share with you?” Sophie asked.

“Well, it’s not that you know some secret. It’s just that—”

“It’s just that I don’t know what you’re looking for,” Sophie said. “My brother is Taihg. At least, as far as I know. And if that has changed, perhaps that’s the reason that he’s coming to see me and wants to talk to me. I don’t know anything else.”

“I’m sorry, Sophie,” he said, leaning back in his chair. He glanced toward the hot chocolate before seeming to come to a decision and lifting it, taking a quick drink. He jerked his head back, smacking his lips. “Hot,” he muttered.

Sophie snorted. “I could’ve told you that.”

“Anyway,” Nevarn said, “your brother has started to distance himself from the Taihg. Given what happened to him...”

“Others want to know why,” Sophie said. And she had a pretty good idea who those others were. If the Raven Queen wanted to know more about her brother, why wouldn’t she have just asked Sophie herself?

Then again, the Raven Queen wasn’t always in the city. It was the same as when Sophie had been in Valan. She traveled, though often when she traveled, Parvella went with her, so the fact that she was traveling without anybody accompanying her suggested that she was going to places where Parvella couldn’t

help, or perhaps she was doing something that she didn't want Parvella to know about. Or maybe she was just visiting other places within her realm and didn't need Parvella. Sophie didn't really know what the Raven Queen did when she was away.

“Others are curious. I know that you're looking into information about the gods, and that my mother hopes that we might be able to find something more about the Heart of the Grove and how she is connected to the Shavln, but I'm curious about whether your brother already knows.”

Nevarn never mentioned the Hunter.

Sophie didn't bring it up, either, as she didn't want to add additional issues to what her brother had dealt with, and it was partly because she didn't know if the Hunter *was* Darish, as Lan had suggested. If he was, that would mean that two gods had been seen—at least by Lan.

And if there were two gods...

Sophie had no idea what that meant. Not for her, not for her brother, and not for the realm. Maybe it was tied to the Shavln's release, but maybe there was another reason for it. From what she'd learned, the Taihg believed that they could connect to the power of the gods and use that power to strengthen their fighting skills and their abilities, but she wasn't sure if she believed that. Then again, Sophie wasn't Taihg and didn't know what they were capable of.

“I'll see what he knows, but I'm not going to push him, Nevarn. If my brother doesn't want to talk about it, I'm not going to force him to do so.”

“It's not a matter of forcing him to do anything. It's more about using your influence. You're a powerful sorcerer, and you have a rising prominence with my mother. That matters.”

Sophie snorted. “I think you also misrepresent what significance I have for your mother. I'm doing whatever I can to keep learning and training, and I'm searching on her behalf, but I'm not so sure that I am prominent the way that you think.”

Nevarn looked down at his hands. “Neither am I. And I’d like to be.”

“Then talk to your mother,” Sophie said.

“Oh, I’ve talked with her. She blames me.” When he looked up, his eyes had narrowed, and it seemed as if they were hollower than Sophie remembered. It reminded her of how he had looked when he’d been touched by the dark power of the Shavln—or whatever that power had been. “She claims that I should never have gone to Lorant when I did. But I’d gotten word that there was movement.”

“From Thea,” Sophie reminded him.

It had taken time for her to piece together everything that had happened. Thea had been Karell—probably still was—and had gone looking for the Shavln power. It had been intentional, not accidental. When she had gained access to some part of it, she had used it to influence the forest and had subsequently used it to try to influence Nevarn.

Thea had been behind it all.

She had blamed the Raven Queen for the loss of her family.

Sophie understood wanting to blame others for what had happened. She had lost her parents and then her grandparents, and she still didn’t know who was responsible for that, but she wasn’t sure that knowing would make a difference for her. She had to make her own decisions, make her own choices. It was something that she had told Nevarn, though he’d already been corrupted at that point. A person had to find their own path—and their own story.

“From Thea,” Nevarn agreed. “And you don’t worry about where she is?”

Sophie shrugged. “I worry, but there’s not a whole lot I can do about it. She was defeated, and she left the forest. She may still be corrupted by the Shavln, or perhaps *corrupted* isn’t the right word. Given what she was after, the fact that she seemed to be chasing that power, I’m not so convinced that she was actually corrupted so much as she was channeling the power.”

She frowned, looking down at her hands as she worked through this idea. “Anyway, she’s gone. We’ve seen no sign of her, nor any sign of additional attack. And if nothing else, Thea did raise awareness of the Shavln. For too long, your mother and others didn’t believe that it was a risk that they had to deal with.”

“But she got away,” Nevarn said.

Sophie didn’t say anything more, as Bryn strode over, carrying a napkin wrapped around a bundle of pastries. She handed it to Sophie, who took it, setting it on her lap.

“That should last you a day,” Bryn said with a smile. “Don’t be a stranger, Sophie.”

“Never,” Sophie said.

When she was gone, Sophie saw that Nevarn had been looking in her direction, shaking his head. “You get to know these people so well.”

“I find getting to know a person makes everything better,” she said. “And with Bryn, it’s pretty easy. We share a love of pastries.”

It was more than that, but she wasn’t going to tell Nevarn about everything that Bryn had been through. Sophie had a soft spot for those who had suffered, something that only others who had suffered had. It had taken Sophie a little while to learn about Bryn’s suffering, but she’d dug until she had uncovered her loss. Sophie thought that might be part of the reason that she felt drawn to Bryn—or maybe it was just that she loved her pastries.

“Is that all you want to talk about?” Sophie asked.

“I want to see you,” Nevarn said. “Ever since we returned from the forest, you’ve been distant. It’s like you don’t want to see me.”

“I don’t,” Sophie said.

“You don’t?”

She shook her head, resting her hands on the bundle of pastries in her lap. Sophie was going to have to figure out how

to slip the others that Nevarn had bought into this bundle, but it was already bursting. She supposed that she could take another napkin and wrap the remaining pastries up in it, as Bryn certainly wouldn't mind, especially since she would know that Sophie would return the napkin.

"I saw the way that you were," Sophie said.

"I was influenced by the Shavln."

"Maybe," Sophie said. She had taken time to come to terms with how she felt about Nevarn, and it had been difficult, something that she didn't want to tell him, but perhaps she owed him that much. She knew that he had been trying to see her, but she also knew that he had not really been as remorseful as she would have expected somebody like him to be, given everything that he had gone through. "I just had a hard time with it myself."

"You don't think that you can move past it?"

"I'm trying," Sophie said.

Nevarn looked around. "I understand. And if it takes buying more pastries to help you forgive me and move past what I did, then I'm going to do it. I'll buy you as many pastries as necessary. Gods, I might buy this entire shop—"

"Don't," Sophie said.

"I was just making a joke," he said.

"I know you were, but that's not the kind of joke that you should make. You can't buy your way past things. And I know that the issue is my own. It has nothing to do with you." At least, not anymore. It had involved him, but she no longer blamed him, as she knew that he hadn't been in his right mind when that episode had been going on. She knew better than to condemn him. "Thank you for the pastries. If you don't mind, I think I'm going to enjoy the rest of them, and then I have a few more things that I need to do today before I visit Parvella."

Nevarn scooted forward in his chair and grabbed the mug of hot chocolate, then drank the rest of it in one quick swallow. He set the mug down and glanced at the pastries. "You keep

the rest. If that bundle will only get you through a day, maybe the rest can last you two.” He spoke with a slight smile. When he got up, he strapped his sword back onto his waist and then tipped his head politely to William, and then to Bryn, before striding out of the bakery.

Sophie sat in silence for a long moment.

When Bryn sank into the chair across from her, Sophie looked up.

“Man trouble?” Bryn asked.

“It’s not like that,” Sophie said.

“I’ve seen the way that he looks at you.”

“You’ve *seen* it?”

“Well, I saw it. And a man doesn’t buy a woman pastries like that unless he’s interested in more than a pastry,” she went on, winking at Sophie. “So, what’s the problem? I imagine there are plenty of women who would throw themselves at the prince and would have no qualms about doing so.”

“I’m not like others, I guess,” Sophie said.

Bryn snorted. She grabbed one of the pastries off the tray—another frosted one—and took a big bite, chewing slowly. “No. I would say that’s true. Ever since you first came here, I’ve noticed that you’re nothing like most others. You know how long it took me to realize you live in the palace?”

Sophie shrugged. “I wasn’t trying to keep that from you.”

“I know. And I wasn’t digging—at least, not really. It’s just that I happened to see you making your way to the palace after spending an afternoon here one day.”

“Oh,” Sophie said, leaning forward, “you just happened to see that?”

Bryn took another bite, chewing slowly. “I have to know where my patrons are from, especially those who come in here often, have no trouble spending coin, and spend hours at a time just sitting and staring.”

“I’m not just sitting,” Sophie said. She didn’t know if Bryn knew that she was a sorcerer and wasn’t sure if she should tell her that she had been practicing poses most of the times that she’d come here. It was comfortable doing so in front of the hearth, having the pastries to sate her hunger. And there was no danger to anybody else, as she didn’t release any power. It was more about visualizing the poses.

“Daydreaming, then? Maybe a prince like that would get your mind wandering. I get it now.”

Sophie snorted. “That’s exactly what it is.”

“If you want to talk, I’ve got an open ear.” Bryn shifted the rest of the pastries onto Sophie’s plate, pulled a napkin out of her apron, and set it on the corner of the plate. “Take the rest. And bring those back, please. I can’t keep losing napkins.”

“I’ve always brought them back.”

“You’ve brought napkins back, but not mine.”

“I’ve tried to have them laundered,” Sophie said.

“And I thank you for it, but I have a soft spot for my own.” She nodded to Sophie before heading back behind her counter.

Sophie wrapped the pastries in the napkin, tying them into a neat bundle, while trying to decide what she was going to do. She needed to visit the children’s library. But now there was something else that bothered her.

What was going on with Lan and the Taihg?

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CHAPTER 5

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The journey around the perimeter of Reyash had gone slowly.

Lan and the other Taihg had continued their patrol, searching for any other sign of the Mistress of the Woods, and found nothing. Not that Lan had expected to find much of anything, as Thea had run the moment that she had seen him. And it was possible that she had already completed her task. They found another stream near the western border, also corrupted, and as far as Lan could tell, there was nothing he could do about it. The corruption had continued to spread through the water, and the dark energy flowed within it, something that he could not counter with his gift. He needed Sophie and her ability, but maybe even she wouldn't be able to do much here.

He looked over at Torthan, who had joined their patrol over the last week. He was thin, older, and heavily muscled. He was one of the other Taihg who had proven to have some connection to the gods, something that Lan still wasn't sure he understood.

"What are you thinking?" Torthan asked.

"I'm just examining this water," Lan said, driving his blade down into the stream again. Each time he did, he could feel the warmth flooding from him and flowing into the water, but it dissipated before it went very far. "I don't know if it's the Shavln or something else."

"We have called to the Raven Queen," Torthan said.

Lan frowned as he turned to him. “You have?”

Torthan shrugged. “There are certain things we are capable of doing, and certain things that we are not. It is sensible to ask for her help. This is her land, after all, Lan.”

“Has she ever been called in the same way before?”

In the time that he had been serving the Taihg, she had not been, at least not that Lan knew. Then again, he didn’t stay in one place for very long and didn’t have the opportunity to find out whether the Raven Queen was ever summoned, and more than that, whether she would even answer.

“She answers when she feels she needs to. I realize how that sounds,” Torthan said, waving a hand, “but it’s the truth.”

Lan looked at the others with him. They had a squadron of about a dozen Taihg. Most of them were advanced soldiers, men like himself, Magnus, and Torthan. Several of them had been with the Taihg for a decade or more, including Magnus and Torthan. A few were younger, newer soldiers, but all were incredibly skilled with a blade. Lan wasn’t sure if Magnus had chosen them because of that or because they had some potential to advance and develop something more.

“You need to get some rest,” Torthan said.

“I need to protect this land,” Lan said.

They were near the edge of the forest, though it was a different forest from the one in which he had found the Heart of the Grove. These were all pine trees, and their fragrance filled the air, leading to a soft bed of fragrant needles across the forest floor. They hadn’t gone very far into the forest before they had found the stream, which was even more worrisome for Lan.

“You’ve done everything you can, and probably more than that. I don’t know much about your connection to this Heart of the Grove, but I can tell you that if you push yourself too hard, you will overexert yourself, and it’s possible you will use too much of her connection.”

Lan had never pushed himself that hard, and he had never come to learn if there was a limit to how much power the

Heart of the Grove had given him. In the year that he'd had the power, he had come to rely upon it far more than he probably should. It had been useful more often than not, not just because it allowed him to deal with magical entities, but also because it added something to him. Strength. Speed. Recovery. All things that he needed as a Taihg.

“Just rest,” Torthan said.

Lan wanted to argue, but he just shuffled back into the camp and settled down.

They had made camp in a small clearing just inside the forest. Magnus had wanted to be inside the trees, partly because the forest provided some cover and partly because the Taihg were slightly removed from the stream here, but near enough that they could keep an eye on whether anything about it changed. A small fire crackled, and somebody had caught a deer and had it roasting on a spit—probably Torthan, as he had skill with such things, and he claimed that his god permitted it. The food smelled wonderful. It made Lan's mouth water.

He grabbed his waterskin and took a small sip.

Lan lay down near the fire, resting for a moment. He drifted, losing track of time, and when he opened his eyes, it was dark. The sound of voices murmuring excitedly near him caught his attention, and Lan sprang to his feet and reached for the hilt of his sword, already preparing for an attack, but it never came.

And he realized why there had been steady murmuring.

A lone figure stood at the edge of the forest, dressed in a heavy blue cloak, features obscured. Lan felt the distinct sense of power from them. At first he thought it might be the Heart of the Grove, or perhaps another god, but then he realized what he was feeling.

Sorcery.

It was not all that dissimilar to what he felt around Sophie. Her skill had improved, and anytime he'd been around her, he had been aware of the increasing amount of energy that she was capable of generating. But not only that—she was able to

do it without contorting herself into the strange postures that she once had. She had become quite talented.

He didn't know if the Raven Queen sent her out on missions, but he wouldn't be surprised if she did. Somebody like Sophie, with the kind of power that she obviously now had, would be beneficial on missions like this.

The figure stepped forward. She pulled the hood of her cloak back, and Lan saw the Raven Queen. Her eyes shone in the firelight, reflecting it in a way that spoke of an intensity and a great power. Lan didn't need to see her eyes to be aware of that power, though. He could feel it radiating from her. He tried to look for the telltale sign of movement, something that would suggest that she was using a pose to concentrate power, but he saw nothing. Maybe she had never needed to use movement.

Unlike Sophie.

Even when she had started to do poses mentally, though, Sophie had still needed some posturing, as that had helped her draw upon even more power than she had before. With the Raven Queen, though, Lan felt nothing more than the sense of energy that radiated from her in a way that filled him with awareness. There was something about it that struck him as similar to the Heart of the Grove's power, and he thought that it was tied to the power that the Heart of the Grove possessed. He didn't know if there was anything more to it, and he didn't know if it would even matter.

All around him bowed.

Lan realized too late that he had remained motionless, which was probably a mistake, as the Raven Queen should be acknowledged in such a way, but he stood transfixed.

She raised one hand, a gesture for the others to rise, and they did so slowly, with Torthan doing so last. She strode forward, turning to Magnus, who had stepped apart from the fire, bowing his head to her.

"Your Majesty," he said. "You honor us with your presence."

“It’s no honor,” she said, her words clipped and somewhat forceful, powerful in a way that Lan was once again reminded of the Heart of the Grove.

Maybe the Raven Queen was more than just a sorcerer.

His sister would probably know more of the stories of the Raven Queen, but Lan had heard enough from his nana to know that she was reportedly one of the most powerful sorcerers known.

“I have sensed the need for my presence.”

Magnus nodded, and he flicked his gaze to Lan. “He has been trying to cleanse the streams. He claims it’s the Shavln,” Magnus said. “I can’t say whether it is, but I trust him.”

The Raven Queen watched Lan for a moment, and then she nodded. “As do I.” She stared at Lan, the intensity in her gaze almost overwhelming. He wanted to look away, but at the same time, he didn’t dare do so. “Would you show me what you have seen?”

“Of course,” Lan said.

He started forward, and Magnus and Torthan moved to join him, but the Raven Queen shook her head.

“Only Lannerdon,” she said.

Magnus watched Lan for a moment, and he flashed a quick sign, a warning for Lan to behave himself with the Raven Queen. Lan started to smile before he realized that was probably a mistake. What was he going to do that would offend the Raven Queen, anyway? Magnus didn’t need to worry about him.

Torthan just stood, looking as if he was trying to decide whether he wanted to argue with the Raven Queen and push himself forward, but he changed his mind and shook his head, stepping back.

As Lan followed the Raven Queen into the forest, feeling the darkness swallowing him, he heard the murmured sound of the rest of the Taihg speaking behind him.

The Raven Queen stopped near one of the pine trees. She tilted her head to the side. “Men like to gossip. Almost as much as women like to gossip.”

“I wasn’t saying anything,” Lan said.

“And you didn’t need to, as I could see it in your eyes. Soldiers are almost as bad as the Weavers’ Guild.”

“My nana was part of the Weavers’ Guild.”

“I know,” the Raven Queen said. She started forward again, and now Lan hurried after her for a very different reason.

He was curious. He had not learned anything about his nana and her connection to the guild, but the fact that the Raven Queen knew something left him thinking that perhaps he might be able to find the answers that he had been seeking for longer than he cared to admit. They were answers that he wanted, but they were also answers that Sophie wanted.

Maybe she already has them.

Sophie was certainly much closer to the Raven Queen than Lan was, and she would have had an opportunity to ask those questions.

“The stream is up here,” Lan said.

“I’m not as concerned about the stream,” the Raven Queen said. “I’m more concerned about Thea.”

Lan hurried to keep up with her. She was moving quickly, practically gliding across the ground. If he hadn’t known better, he would have said that she was using some sort of spell to help her move this way, as if she were drawing upon power to float in some fashion. He felt the warmth within him beginning to bloom, gliding up within him as he followed her. It was unintentional, though these days, much of the warmth that he drew upon was unintentional. If he had any measure of control over it, he would have tried to use it, as he didn’t want to make the Raven Queen think that he was trying to draw upon power around her that he shouldn’t.

“Don’t fight it,” she said, pausing to look over at him.

“I didn’t realize I was fighting anything.”

“I can see the way you resist. I don’t know who she is, so don’t ask, but I do know you shouldn’t fight that power. Your sister told me all about your experience in the forest, and this mysterious Heart of the Grove who gifted you power. I suspect she truly is a goddess, though there are many gods that once served this land, all of which we thought had disappeared for good.”

Her voice trailed off a little as she spoke, leaving Lan realizing something.

The Raven Queen was worried.

“What happens if this power is dangerous?” Lan asked.

“Does it feel dangerous?”

“I don’t know. It just feels... well, I don’t know how it feels. Warm. Comfortable. But sometimes comfortable is dangerous.” He felt foolish talking like that to the Raven Queen, but at the same time, he might as well share his concern with her, because if there was anybody who might be able to help him and guide him on what he had, it would be a sorcerer of her renown. “When I was first training—”

“With the Taihg or otherwise?” She glanced in his direction, and there was that intensity in her eyes once again.

He wanted to look away, but at the same time, he wasn’t sure it was safe to do so.

“Otherwise,” Lan admitted. “I know that those lessons might not be ones that the Taihg are happy that I had, but they were still good lessons,” he went on. “And they taught me that sometimes comfortable means complacent. And when you become complacent with something, you might find it even more dangerous than something that you are wary of.”

He felt strange talking to her about strategy and fighting, as this was the Raven Queen, and this was somebody who had a different way of handling such threats, but maybe he shouldn’t feel this way.

“Complacency *is* dangerous,” the Raven Queen agreed. “It is something that I have often struggled with myself. But I don’t think you are complacent. If you fear this power, it won’t make you complacent. It merely makes you... human.”

“Why do I get the sense that is potentially dangerous?”

“Not dangerous.”

The Raven Queen stopped. They had reached a small clearing where the ground sloped down, and a pile of boulders and debris surrounded them. There was something to the boulders that felt off to Lan, though he wasn’t sure what it was. Maybe it was just that they were arranged in something of a pattern, or perhaps it was the moss that covered them, leaving them almost slick underneath his boots.

“It’s just unusual. Foreign. Alien.” She glanced over at him as she spoke. “And it’s something that I do not have enough experience with. I have some of my best working to find answers, but answers are difficult. Which is why I have come to you, Lannerdon.”

He wasn’t sure how he felt about the Raven Queen using his full name, but at the same time, he wasn’t about to correct her on it. “What do you need from me?”

“I need you to serve.”

“I am serving. As a Taihg. I’m hunting—”

“I don’t need you to hunt as a Taihg,” she said, cutting him off. “I need you to serve in a different way. You have been touched, gifted, by one of the gods. That matters, and we need to understand why, and what it means.”

Lan found himself rubbing at his arm where the birthmark was, wondering whether there was something that the Raven Queen could tell him about it. He didn’t think so, but he wouldn’t be surprised. The Hunter and the Heart of the Grove had both known that he was marked in some way. Both of them had mentioned it immediately. Not only them, but Thea—the Mistress of the Woods—had mentioned it as well. There must be something within him, some part of him, that reacted to them, and to the power of the gods that flowed.

The Mark of O dian.

He'd not heard anything about this O dian and had not been able to find out anything more. Lan was no scholar, but he understood how to ask scholars and query them about what they knew of the gods. So far, none of them had known anything about O dian.

"You want me to try to reach the Heart of the Grove," Lan said.

"I think it's important that you try, so that you can see what she knows—if anything. Perhaps the Heart of the Grove will help us deal with the Shavl n."

"From what I understand, the gods don't think the Shavl n power can be contained again."

The Raven Queen turned to him, frowning. "I had not heard that."

"I told Sophie. Or maybe I didn't." Lan frowned. He tried to think of all the things that he had told his sister, and he realized that perhaps he hadn't spoken to her about what the Hunter had said about the Shavl n power. Once it had escaped, it wasn't easy to place back in containment. And that, more than anything else, was the problem. Without the ability to contain it, they had to try to fight it.

"The Heart of the Grove told you this?"

"Not her."

"Ah. I see. Your sister mentioned this other one you saw. I believe you thought it was Darish."

"I think it's possible," Lan said, and he felt even more ridiculous now that he admitted this, but he wasn't going to say anything differently. "I don't know, though."

"The stories about Darish are just that—stories. Most believe that he is the woodsman god, and I suppose that is nearest to my experience as well."

"You know Darish?"

“If you spend enough time out in the forest, you can commune with some of the gods. At least, those who have an affinity for such places. The gods are ancient powers. Some doubt their existence,” she said, and the darkness in her eyes suggested that she had once been one of those people, “until they have an opportunity to see and feel their power themselves.”

“I’m a Taihg,” Lan said.

She chuckled softly. “Just because your comrades feel that they have a connection to the gods doesn’t mean that you have to feel that way. But it’s probably for the best that you do, given that you have been chosen.”

She paused, spinning to him faster than he thought possible, and she grabbed his hands, twisting them so that his forearms were facing upward. Light bloomed, and at first he thought that it came from him, as it so often did. Instead, he felt the warmth pushing outward, surging through him, but he didn’t glow.

Something that the Raven Queen did to him seemed to contain the glowing inside him. He couldn’t see what she was doing, not in the way that he could see the power that Sophie used, but he could feel it.

“The gods usually come when you’ve been marked,” she said. “But I don’t see any marking.”

“They said that I was,” Lan admitted. It was better to tell her the truth.

“Did they say which god marked you?”

He hesitated. “O dian.”

The Raven Queen released his hands, taking a step back.

“Do you know who O dian is?” Lan asked.

“One of the oldest,” she said. “Stories of O dian are... well, they are terrifying. If you have been marked by O dian, then perhaps we must believe that the old gods have begun to stir.”

“Old gods?”

The Raven Queen strode forward, forcing Lan once again to keep up with him.

“Darish and many of the other gods are younger,” she said without looking at him. “But there are older gods. O dian is one, and there are several others.”

“The Shavln?”

She glanced at him. “The Shavln may have been another,” she said. “Everything I’ve been able to find in the records suggests that. But unfortunately, scholars have never studied such things in a rational way. Religion has always been the focus. And the priests do not like to speak of the gods in such a factual manner. They would prefer to believe the gods are infallible.”

“And you don’t?”

“I understand that the gods have their own motivations and their own purposes, and I recognize that we sometimes get caught up in machinations that we should not be a part of.” She took a deep breath, and Lan felt a strange wave of energy flowing out from her.

“Are you treating the water?”

She waved a hand. “I did that before I even came to find you,” she said. “It was difficult, but I don’t think Thea used all that much power when she tainted it. Either she was unable to use much power, or she was only trying to draw our focus. I suspect the latter, though if that is the case, I don’t know why. I don’t know what she hopes to accomplish.”

“Then why did you come to talk to me?” Lan had assumed that she had come because she wanted to see the tainted stream, and maybe wanted his help, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“I came to you because I thought that the two of us needed to speak. With your experience, and with everything that you have encountered, I thought that you would benefit from such a conversation. Do you feel otherwise?”

Lan shrugged. “I don’t really know what I feel.”

“I suppose that is a reasonable answer.” She turned to him. “You have served the Taihg well, Lannerdon. I think it’s time you served in another way.”

“How would I serve?”

“There has been movement along the border, though it’s more than just Thea.”

“She was near the ruins of some ancient structure,” Lan offered.

The Raven Queen regarded him for a long moment. “Could that be it?”

“Could what be it?”

“I don’t know what they are after, but this isn’t the first time I’ve heard such a thing. Have the Taihg continue to search, and if you find anything similar, I will need you to report back to me in Hester.”

“Are all the Taihg to return?”

“No,” she said. “Just you, Lannerdon. The others must serve in a different way.”

“In what way do I have to serve?”

“Why, you must serve the gods, of course. Because like you—and your sister, I suspect—I am also god-touched.”

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CHAPTER 6

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Lan sat in the forest for a long time after the Raven Queen left him, smelling the fragrant scent of the pine trees all around him, his heart hammering in his chest as the warmth continued to flood through him. He focused on the power, trying to see if there was anything that he might be able to draw upon—though ever since the Heart of the Grove had given him this power, he hadn't managed much control over it, as he had hoped he would. The warmth was there, pooled deep inside him, but it didn't spread like he wanted.

After a while, Lan heard a soft howl deeper in the forest.

He was tempted to ignore it, but given what they had found with the elantars and the Mistress of the Woods, Lan knew better than to ignore any strange sounds, especially since they had found tainted water.

But it wouldn't be tainted any longer, would it?

The Raven Queen had cleansed the water.

But why could *he* not have cleansed it?

He would have expected the Heart of the Grove to give him enough of this gift to handle such a task, but apparently not. He lingered for a few moments. He wasn't sure why the Raven Queen had come, but it couldn't have been only to speak to him.

Why not?

He was Sophie's brother, and more than that, he was the one who had been touched by the Heart of the Grove,

connected to a goddess. And if the Raven Queen was telling him the truth about herself, that she had some god touch as well, then it made sense for her to come to him to find out whether there was anything the two of them might be able to do to gain insight into the gods' plans.

After a while, Lan turned away, tearing his attention away from the depths of the forest, and he made his way back toward the Taihg camp. He paused at the edge of the forest, watching the campfire. The flames were crackling with warmth that seemed inviting, but given everything that he had been through so far, Lan no longer knew if it was quite as inviting as it once had been. There was some part of him that seemed different. Then again, maybe it had been different for quite a while. He had changed since the Heart of the Grove had touched him and given him her gift. Perhaps he never could return to the Taihg.

He breathed out heavily and then strode forward. He made his way past several other soldiers and took a seat next to Magnus. The larger man was cast in shadows from the crackling flames, and yet Lan could see the worry in his eyes.

"Get on with it," Magnus said. "I can see you have a problem. She said something to you. This is the Raven Queen, after all. Did she reassign you?"

Lan breathed out heavily. "Not exactly. I don't really know how much I'm supposed to share."

"It has to do with what happened to you a year ago, doesn't it?"

Lan nodded. There was no point in denying that, especially since he trusted Magnus as well as he trusted anybody in the Taihg. "She seems to have something in mind for me."

"She didn't tell you?"

"She told me, but I wonder how much of it is true."

Magnus started to laugh, a soft, rumbling sort of chuckle. "It's good that you question such things."

"You think I should be questioning our queen?"

“I think you should question everything, especially when you have been given the gift that you have and have seen the things that you have. You can’t just trust that things are going to work out the way that you want them to.”

“She said something to me about the gods,” Lan said.

“We don’t need to talk about it now,” Magnus said.

“Fine, though maybe we need to talk about the strange howl that I heard through the trees,” he said, shifting so that he could look off into the distance in the direction he had heard the sound. Lan wasn’t sure what the sound had come from, and though he could focus on the warmth inside himself and push it out to create a glowing ring of energy, there was no point in doing so here, not with so many Taihg near him.

Magnus sat upright and swept his gaze around at the darkness. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“Just a howl. Maybe a wolf.”

Magnus got to his feet, and he unsheathed his blade.

All around him, other Taihg did the same thing, including Lan.

“What is it?” Lan asked.

“Well,” Magnus said, not looking at Lan but keeping his gaze narrowed, “anytime we have a visit from the Raven Queen, we have to be careful, for others might be tracking her. It’s why she doesn’t stay in one place along the border for very long. It’s too dangerous.”

“I didn’t realize that.”

“There are many things that you learn while you are with the Taihg.”

“I’ve been with the Taihg for the better part of four years,” Lan reminded him.

“This is an advanced connection to the Taihg,” Magnus said. “We serve as a deterrent for others that follow.”

“Others?”

“Not the Shavln, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Magnus said.

Another howl echoed from deeper in the forest. It was a mournful sound and came from some distance, far into the trees. Lan stiffened, squeezing the hilt of his sword, and a bit of warm energy glowed through him, flowing out into his blade, causing a faint light to drift down it. The others looked toward him, and even Magnus frowned.

“You didn’t hear it?” Lan asked.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Magnus said.

Lan started forward, but Magnus rested a hand on his shoulder, preventing him from moving. Magnus was massive, strong, and it didn’t take much for the large man to keep Lan from going anywhere.

“We need to be careful. We have run into difficulty in the darkness before,” Magnus said.

“But we don’t have to be in the dark, do we?”

Magnus frowned. “We don’t have a sorcerer with us. Or a Karell.”

Lan stepped forward, holding his blade outstretched and letting the light continue to glow from the end of it and spread outward. It burst into an even wider sphere of power, so that more and more could spread. He held his blade upward, waiting for the energy to flow.

And then he saw dark shadows in the distance.

They were hunched and had strange, almost misshapen heads. Dark eyes glimmered against the brightness of the light that Lan radiated, and there was something else. Some sense of energy and power, and a sense of danger that Lan couldn’t quite gauge.

One of the other Taihg made a sound, and Lan heard a steady murmuring around him.

Nervousness.

“What are they?” Lan asked.

“Dangerous creatures of darkness,” Magnus said. “Hold the light.”

All around him, Lan could feel the other Taihg shifting.

He took a step forward. The others followed. He held his blade upright, and the energy and warmth within him continued to flow outward and create an even broader sphere of light.

Then Magnus whistled.

The Taihg surged forward.

All of them, acting as one, raced toward the creatures.

Lan followed. He wasn't sure what he was facing, but if these were some creatures of darkness, something that was contaminated by the Shavln—or something worse—then he wasn't going to let the others deal with them on their own.

When he reached the first of the creatures, he felt something pressing down upon him. It reminded him of how Thea had used her power on him. There was a tension that seemed to counter the energy of the light within him, something cold and difficult and heavy.

Lan had to fight it. It took concentration, which distracted him from fighting.

The creature swung one misshapen arm at him, the massive claws on its fingers raking at the air. Lan danced, spinning his blade, and he swept it toward the creature.

What if this was some sort of contaminated creature just like the thisten?

He didn't know if he would be able to help it.

Lan pushed outward with warmth and felt the same resistance he felt when trying to clean water, and when trying to help thisten. Dealing with this might be something that only a sorcerer could do.

He heard shouting, and he spun to see another creature pushing back against two Taihg. One of them had a bloody chest where claws had ripped through flesh, and another was

holding his arm up against his body, still trying to grip his sword. The two Taihg weren't enough for this creature.

Lan pointed his blade and readied an attack. Instead, a surge of warmth erupted from the blade, striking the creature in the head. Light surged, and the creature roared before staggering back. The two Taihg lunged forward, blades working, and they made quick work of ending the creature.

That worked.

And it had been far more effective than when Lan had faced the thisten.

He turned his attention back to the creature in front of him. He felt the warmth inside himself, and once again he pushed it out through his sword, using it like an arrow, and it burst out from the end of the blade and shot into the creature. The light forced the creature to back away.

Lan darted forward, jamming his blade into the creature's chest. He pushed another surge of warmth through himself. There was some resistance, but it wasn't at all like the resistance of the thisten. Then the creature roared before staggering back and collapsing.

Lan spun, looking for more.

Everything around him had fallen quiet.

Two other creatures had been killed. He found Magnus and Torthan standing near one of them. He saw another Taihg lying on the ground, clutching his belly as he stared blankly straight ahead.

Lan crouched next to a fallen creature. He couldn't tell what it was, but it had been powerful.

"Have you seen these before?" Lan asked Magnus.

"I have," he said.

Magnus turned his attention down to the fallen creature. He didn't get too close, which suggested to Lan that whatever it was, and whatever the creature represented, it had Magnus worried. And if Magnus was worried, Lan knew that he should be worried as well.

“Magnus?”

“I have served the Taihg for many years. When I was first promoted, and when I first made my connection to the gods, I was brought out on a mission along the border. It was a time long ago, before the war, before we lost so many, and a time when we still thought that we were doing all we could to help.”

Lan knew that Magnus had come from a place beyond Reyash, though he hadn't heard the details. The Raven Queen had brought him to serve, but Lan didn't know why or what she had thought he would do in her service.

“I still think I'm doing all that I can to help,” Lan said.

“But this is different,” Magnus went on. “And we were told about the dangers of sorcery. It was what I was trained to combat.”

He straightened and looked into the forest. For a moment, Lan had the distinct sense that he was glowing, though it faded. It wasn't nearly as potent as the glow Lan was able to produce from his connection to the Heart of the Grove, but it was more than what he had seen from Magnus before.

Magnus unsheathed his sword and stood with his hands crossed in front of him, but there was a worried tilt to his eyes. “We dealt with some of the sorcerers, many of them trained in ways that are different from what we see today. It is the reason that the Karell became powerful. There was a time when sorcery was far more dangerous than it is now. A time before the Raven Queen rose to prominence.”

Lan had not heard this story before. He could imagine Sophie appreciating such a story, as she loved all stories, even ones that involved danger, like this one.

“And there was a good reason for fear, as the powers that we saw, the powers that we experienced, had a different sort of danger from what we encounter these days.”

“Magnus, you're telling me a lot of information, but you're not telling me anything useful. I need to know what this is, and

whether we have to worry about it, and if we do, what we can do about it.”

Magnus shook his head. “There’s nothing that we need to do about it. There’s nothing that we *can* do about it.”

“Then what are these creatures?”

“Not creatures. At least, they weren’t creatures at one time. These are men. Or they *were* men. They trained as sorcerers, and they chased a dangerous power. And it changed them.”

Given that Lan had been touched by a god, or something that he thought was a god, was this going to be his fate?

As he looked over at Magnus, he saw the same question in his eyes.

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CHAPTER 7

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Sophie was growing agitated.

She plucked up at one of the pastries that she still had left, feeling a trembling in her stomach, though perhaps it wasn't hunger so much as nervousness. She really should stop eating when she was nervous, but working with her sorcery made her hungry in ways that her body couldn't otherwise keep up with. The pastries seemed to help her recover faster than anything else, and so she was more than happy to eat the sweet treats, even though she worried that doing so would end up giving her an upset stomach.

She was to meet Lan, but she didn't know when he was coming to the city.

Sophie was still surprised that he had sent her a letter. It was unusual for her brother. But it wasn't just that. There was the possibility that he was leaving the Taihg. Why had Nevarn mentioned that and then just let it go?

It was quite the comment, and it was not what she would have expected of Lan. Lan had wanted to be a Taihg for as long as she had known him.

That wasn't quite true. Lan had wanted to be a soldier for as long as she had known him, but the Taihg was something else. And it suited him, though it did so in a way that left Sophie feeling a bit jealous. She wasn't sure that sorcery fit her in quite the same way.

Maybe it should, as she truly had potential as a sorcerer and had begun to master aspects of the poses that she had

heard were far more complicated than most sorcerers were able to grasp. Even Parvella couldn't do some of the poses that Sophie was able to do.

At least, so far as Sophie had seen. When it came to Parvella, Sophie wondered how much she really knew about the woman, and how much the woman kept from her. Parvella had been the one who had taught the Raven Queen, and so Sophie suspected that if anybody knew strange uses of sorcery, it would be her.

It felt like there was a limit, though. Eventually, Sophie was going to run out of ways to improve, and she was going to need help to do so. Who was she going to go to? The Raven Queen might be able to help her, but the Raven Queen had to be willing to teach her. When she had stopped Thea, Sophie had believed that the Raven Queen was going to work with her. She had given her a few small pointers, nothing more than that, and then she had been gone for long stretches of time, leaving Sophie to work with Parvella and search through the library for additional sorcery journals.

She could learn quite a bit from the sorcerers' journals, but there were limits to how quickly she could learn things. Mastering a pose required time, and in the case of some of the more advanced poses, Sophie needed the help of somebody who had actually seen them before.

She paused along the street. She took another bite of the pastry and chewed it slowly. Sophie had the distinct sense that Nevarn was trailing after her again, though these days, it was not uncommon for him to trail after her. Since their meeting in the pastry shop yesterday, he had followed her. She wasn't sure if he was doing it because he thought it was cute—which it most decidedly was not—or because his mother had assigned him to keep an eye on her—something that Sophie doubted—or just because Nevarn was being Nevarn.

The latter was the most likely.

And she wanted to spin, call him out on it, but at the same time, she wasn't about to grant him the attention, so she went

about her business as if he weren't there. And in her mind, he wasn't.

She found the children's library near the outer rim of the central part of the city. It was a massive domed building and looked to be several centuries old, made of a gray stone and a pale blue roof, with stained-glass windows of the gods set around the perimeter of the building. She found that amusing, given the reason that she was here.

She hadn't visited the children's library very often, as this wasn't a place that she would generally frequent. A pair of children went in with their mother while another child came out, though this one was alone.

This was the kind of place where Sophie didn't really belong, not without a child, but at the same time, she thought that there had to be answers here. She had to push on and deal with the uncertainty, especially as she wanted to know whether anything here would help her understand the gods. She needed to do this before her brother got to the city, as once he did, she wasn't sure what she would end up doing.

And she would be distracted in the meantime. She needed to do this so that she could keep her mind off her brother and off what he might have been dealing with, all while she was here in the city, useless.

I'm not useless.

It was difficult for her to believe that, especially as she never felt she was offering anybody or anything any benefit. She had hoped that the Raven Queen would assign her something, but she had not. Sophie knew that she shouldn't be so bothered by that, but at the same time, she could be useful. She had made a difference in helping to defend Reyash as well, but apparently, that wasn't enough for Parvella or the Raven Queen. She shouldn't let her irritation simmer, she knew. She needed to speak up, to get a different assignment, to find some way that she might be useful.

That was something that Sophie was going to have to ask Parvella about. Maybe she would have to ask the Raven Queen

that question as well, but the Raven Queen had not been in the city for the last few weeks.

Sophie pulled away from the alleyway that she was standing in and had started toward the library when Nevarn strode toward her. He was dressed in formal clothing, an impeccable jacket and pants, both heavily adorned with the sigil of the Raven Queen, that of a raven surrounded by stars, and he even had his sword sheathed at his side, something that she knew to be ridiculous in the city. Still, there was no mistaking that he was the prince.

She considered hurrying toward the library, but if anybody were to see her doing that, it would only raise questions. Sophie didn't want to deal with those questions, but more than that, she didn't want Nevarn to have to deal with those questions. He had enough difficulty as it was.

Why am I even worrying about him?

She had to stop worrying, as Nevarn's problems were his own, and they were mostly self-inflicted. They were not her problems. She had done all that she could to help him, and anything else that happened was because of what he had been through and what he had done, and not at all because of anything that she had done.

Still, Sophie waited.

He caught up to her quickly. He flashed a broad smile and reached into his pocket, then pulled out a bundle of cloth. "I brought you some more pastries."

Sophie held out the pastry that she was chewing on. "I still have my own."

His face fell in disappointment. "Well, at least I can eat them," he said softly.

"What are you doing here, Nevarn? I know that you've been following me since I left the palace, and to be honest, it's getting a little annoying."

"You knew I was following you?"

“You aren’t that discreet. I don’t know if you were trying to be, but you obviously weren’t muting your footsteps, and you ran from one position to the next. For somebody who has trained with the Taihg, you don’t move that skillfully.”

“It’s different chasing after... well, after you than it is learning how to fight with a sword.”

“You don’t need to chase after me,” she said.

“I just wanted to see you. To talk to you. And I wanted to apologize,” he said hurriedly.

“Apologize about what, now?”

“I want to apologize about what I said yesterday. I realize that it was a little thoughtless of me, and you deserve better. That’s all I wanted to say.”

He watched her as if trying to gauge how she was going to react, and when she didn’t say anything, he opened his mouth again, then turned away and looked toward the library. “What are you doing out here?”

“I’m not permitted to wander out here? I didn’t realize I had to have permission.”

“That’s not what I was saying,” he said, holding his hands up and dangling the bundle of pastries in one hand. “I was just suggesting that it’s a little strange that you would be out here by the kids’ library.”

“I find the books here intriguing,” Sophie said, tilting her jaw and focusing on one of her poses. The prayer pose, of course. It was the easiest one for her, and she pushed just a little power out through herself and forced Nevarn back a step.

“You find kids’ books intriguing?”

“You know that I like stories,” she said.

“But the librarians in the palace can get you anything you want.”

“I know,” Sophie said.

She wasn’t about to tell him that she’d already asked them to help her find some books, and that she had generally been

dismissed, though not entirely. She supposed that she could push, but doing so was only going to end up with her having more difficulty than she wanted. So it was easier and better to just do this on her own, so that she didn't have to answer the kinds of questions that she didn't want to answer. Besides, she was also a little curious about the library itself. The palace library was massive, and the children's library was equally massive, so she was curious about how many books would be found inside.

"You mind if I come with you?"

"I thought you were trying to tell me that this was not the kind of place for me. So it would definitely not be the kind of place for you."

"Well, I am the prince, so every place is a place for me," Nevarn said, drawing himself up and stuffing his bundle of cloth back into his pocket. "But if you're offended by my presence, I can leave you."

He started to turn away, feigning irritation and disappointment. Or maybe it wasn't feigned. Sophie had no idea with him anymore.

"Come on," she said with frustration.

He flashed a smile and linked his arm with hers.

"Not like that," she said, using the prayer pose to push him away. It unlinked their arms. Nevarn flashed a sad expression, but Sophie ignored it, as she wasn't about to let him bother her like that. Instead, she hurried forward, reaching the entrance to the library. Nobody else had come out in the time that they had been talking in the street, and for that she was thankful. She didn't need to have people questioning what she was doing in the library, and with Nevarn, in a city like Hester, she doubted that it would take much for stories to spread. Stories spread everywhere.

That was the nature of stories, after all. That was something that her nana had told her. A good story, especially one that had some general appeal, would travel quickly, especially if people wanted to hear it and others wanted to

share it. Stories about a prince speaking to a young sorcerer in the street, and arguing in front of the children's library, might draw some interest.

At least, it would have drawn her interest if she had been younger.

When she stepped inside the library, Sophie paused.

It was massive. The curved walls arched overhead, reaching toward the dome, where light spilled in. She hadn't expected the skylights to cause blue-hued light to stream inside. Light filtered through the stained glass around the walls of the library as well.

The palace library was quiet, calm.

This one was anything but. Children talked loudly, laughing, giggling, and pointing at various things. There were sculptures shaped like strange animals. Paintings hung on walls, and some of the tables had paint and paper for the children to work with. There were quiet places, of course, where children were tucked into corners or into booths, but for the most part, the energy of the library was one of vibrancy. This suited Sophie much better than the library inside the palace. Not that she would ever tell anybody in the palace library that, as she wouldn't want to lose her access, but she didn't mind a little noise and chaos.

"There are so many children here," Nevarn said, wrinkling his nose.

"Oh, you have a hard time with kids?"

"I don't have a hard time with kids," Nevarn said hurriedly, and he shook his head before looking over at Sophie. "It's just that... well, there are just so *many* of them."

Sophie started to laugh. "This is a children's library, after all, so you should expect there to be some here."

"Care to tell me what you're after?"

Sophie debated how much she was going to share with him. She suspected that he had shared with her news about Lan because the Raven Queen had wanted her to know. As far

as she knew, the Raven Queen was using Nevarn to pass on information. Maybe Sophie needed to do the same thing.

Not that she didn't have interaction with the Raven Queen, but perhaps the interaction was different.

And maybe Nevarn had another way of reaching her that Sophie didn't know, which she suspected was incredibly likely. The Raven Queen probably communicated with her son even when she wasn't here, and made sure that he knew what she was doing and where she had gone.

"Your mother asked me to try to understand what happened with Thea."

Nevarn shivered, and he turned to look at her. "She still blames me?"

"I don't think your mother blames you. I think your mother understands that the Shavln, whatever that power is, is responsible for what happened to Thea, but she also wants to understand what my brother did to help stop it."

"The gods," Nevarn said, nodding. "That's why you're here." He frowned. "Why here and not at the palace library? It seems to me that you'd be able to find quite a bit more there. And if not there, you could go to one of the temples. I'm sure the priests would be more than happy to talk to you about the gods."

"I've gone to the temples. The priests are more than willing to talk to me about the gods, but at the same time, their experience with the gods is one of celebration," she said, frowning as she spoke. "Maybe that's not quite the right word, but it's one of reverence. What I need is something that speaks of the gods in different terms. I need to have something more practical."

"So you came here for children's stories."

"Stories have a foundation in truth," Sophie said.

"And you need help finding stories about gods. And then what?"

“Then I’m going to see if I can puzzle through the stories and find anything that might make sense of what we have experienced.”

“Where are you going to start?”

Sophie didn’t have any idea. The library was massive. In many ways, it rivaled the palace library, which would make it very difficult to find anything easily. She could certainly grab books off the shelves, and she would undoubtedly enjoy what she would read, but that wasn’t the purpose of her being here. She had come with an intention, and she needed to find out whether there was anything to this theory of hers.

Thankfully, there were no ladders to scramble up and down, as she suspected that would be a fall risk for the children, but she didn’t see any librarians. There had to be someone here that she could ask. As far as she could tell, the children here wandered freely, roaming the library, shouting, screaming, and laughing, all unaccompanied.

That didn’t make any sense.

When she started toward the shelves, she realized something.

It wasn’t nearly as open as she had thought. A low barrier worked its way around the inside of the library, keeping the children from reaching the books. Behind the barrier, she saw librarians in brightly colored clothing reaching for books, handing them to parents, in exchange for something.

“What are they trading?”

Nevarn shook his head. “Only some identification, so that they know who is taking out the book. Or maybe they’re paying for it. I don’t really know.”

That wasn’t how libraries worked—at least, not in Sophie’s experience. But this was a different kind of library, and perhaps this was going to be a different type of experience.

She worked her way toward the front of the line, and when one of the librarians turned to her, she flashed a smile. He was an older man with deep green eyes and shaggy gray hair. Tufts

of eyebrows pressed toward his forehead. He was dressed in a garish combination of green and purple, and he clasped his hands in front of him as he watched her.

“Where is the child?” His voice was hoarse, but there was a hint of amusement to it.

“No child. Just me.”

He frowned, and some of the twinkle left his eyes. “Is this some sort of prank?”

“No,” Sophie said. She glanced over at Nevarn. “I’m here looking for anything old that you might have about the gods.”

“Old?” He shook his head and looked along the barrier before turning his attention back to Sophie. “This is a children’s library, not an archive. And it’s not a temple. For what you are looking for, you should go to one of the—”

“I already have,” Sophie said. “I’m not really looking for anything scholarly. I’m looking for old stories.” She flashed another smile, thinking that she could disarm him in some way, but this librarian struck her as somebody who wouldn’t be so easily disarmed. “Do you have anything old that involves gods?”

He took a deep breath. “It’s an unusual request, but...” He tapped on one of his full lips. “I suppose that I might have a story or two that might appeal to you. You don’t take the books out of the library, and seeing as you don’t have any children, you will need to pay for access.”

Sophie glanced at Nevarn. “It’s a good thing you’re here.”

The librarian turned to look at Nevarn as if seeing him for the first time. His eyes widened slightly. “Prince Nevarn,” he said, bowing his head. “Why, I didn’t even know that you were here. Is this your request?”

Nevarn flashed a wide grin. If there was anything that Nevarn was good at, it was disarming people with his smile. That hadn’t changed, despite how much else had for him.

“Not mine, but my mother’s. She is hoping to collect some stories for children that are visiting the palace, and she wants

something new and exciting,” he said, spreading his hands. “Sophie here decided that new and exciting meant old and intriguing. Who could argue with that?” He grinned. “She’s partial to stories of the gods.”

“The queen?”

“Oh, of course not,” Nevarn said, shaking his head. “Sophie. We humor her as much as we can. But seeing as she’s going to be the one telling the stories to the children, we had better let her pick whatever she is interested in.”

“Of course, of course. I will see what I can find. I have a specific collection that is rarely touched, mostly because it’s a little older, and the stories tend to be a bit more frightening than most children like, but perhaps you can pick out some of the tales and make your own story.” He looked over at Sophie. “Do you like to tell stories?”

“I love to,” Sophie said.

As much as it pained her to admit it, having Nevarn here was far more useful than she had expected.

The librarian scurried away, and Nevarn leaned on the barrier, glancing at Sophie. “That was interesting. What do you think you would’ve done had I not been here?”

“It sounds like he was going to get me some books anyway,” Sophie said.

“Well, he’s going to get you some books, but do you think he would’ve gotten you the same books?” He nudged her with his elbow. “I think you owe me for this one.”

“Of course,” Sophie said, shaking her head. “The great Nevarn. You deserve all of my respect and admiration.” She gave him a mocking bow. “Is that better? Your Highness? I know how you like it when women fawn all over you, and—”

“Stop,” Nevarn said, looking around before reaching for Sophie. “You’re embarrassing yourself.”

Sophie got up, and she saw several children looking in their direction. She smirked at them before turning her attention back to Nevarn. “Am I embarrassing myself, or am I

embarrassing you? I thought you liked it when people bowed and scraped like this.”

“That’s not what I like, and you need to stop. Besides, your librarian is coming back, and look at what he’s got.”

The librarian was carrying a stack of books. There had to be at least twenty of them. They were all thin. Most stories like this would not take very long to get through, but by the look of the darkened and faded bindings, they were all incredibly old. Maybe having Nevarn here really *was* helpful.

“Some of these are old, as you requested, and some of these I’ve never even read myself, but I thought that if you were curious about some of the older works, I should give you a selection. This is all of them that I could gather quickly, but if you’d like, I could keep looking for others.”

Nevarn glanced at Sophie as if waiting for her response.

Sophie nodded. “I would like that,” she said.

“Anything for Prince Nevarn,” the librarian said.

Sophie took the books and looked around the library, ignoring the way that Nevarn was grinning at her. She found a quiet table in one corner, where the children didn’t seem to be quite as rambunctious as those in other parts of the library, though there were several that had piled up books on the tables around them.

Nevarn followed her, chuckling. “Anything for me,” he said.

“I told you, I can bow and scrape if that’s what you want.”

He breathed out heavily. “Now what? You got your books. And it’s a little loud in here. Should we go somewhere else? I could take you back to the bakery, and we could get more pastries, though I do have several that your friend sold me fresh this morning.”

“They don’t let us take the books out of the library,” Sophie said. “So we’re going to sit over there, and we are going to see what we can uncover. Now, do you want to read a story with me?”

“I thought you were telling the stories.”

She glowered at him. “The last time I told you a story, you were too thickheaded to figure it out.”

“I’ll do better this time.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

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CHAPTER 8

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They cleared a section of the forest and created a large pyre, then placed the bodies of the creatures on it and burned them. Magnus had claimed that burning the bodies was the only way to ensure that whatever darkness was in them was removed entirely, though Lan wasn't sure if that was true. There was a possibility that whatever had been in them had died with them, and even if it hadn't, without any access to power, there was no way that it would be able to do anything to them. Still, he wasn't about to challenge Magnus when it came to something like this.

Lan found himself troubled in ways that he had not expected to be.

His mind kept working back to the creature that he had faced. It had looked at him with rage and had attempted to rip him apart, no differently than the thisten had. The thisten had been salvageable, though. Lan was certain of it. He had helped save several of them. Sophie had saved several of them.

Why couldn't they help these creatures, then?

He stood near the tree line, staring into the darkness, arms crossed over his chest, thinking.

He had not heard about anything like these creatures, but then there might be stories that he had not yet heard, stories that he still had to find.

Sophie would love that kind of story, though she loved any kind of story, especially ones that dealt with magic. She had always believed there was more to the world, something

beyond their mundane life. And she had been right. That was something that Lan had wanted to tell her the last time that he had seen her, to let her know how right she had been.

Magnus joined him. "You did well."

"I can't shake the feeling I could have done more," Lan said. "It feels like... well, I don't know what it feels like, but whatever these creatures were, and whatever happened to them, they were still men. Or had been."

"Not all can be saved," Magnus said. "That's the challenge of being a soldier, especially a Taihg. We've seen great darkness. Some men are just tormented, and the only way to help them is to give them that final release."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Tell me what you've seen in the time that you've been a Taihg."

How could he explain to Magnus that his perspective had started to change ever since he had encountered the Heart of the Grove? He had seen things and done things and felt things that were entirely different from what he had encountered before. And these possibilities, these changes, had opened up more for Lan, making him question his own purpose, and making him question what he could and should be able to do.

"I've seen a lot in the time I've been a Taihg," Lan said, "but over the last year, I've started to question some of the things that I've had to do."

"Any man who has encountered the gods would do that," Magnus said.

"Is that how you feel?"

Magnus shrugged, and he turned to stare at the funeral pyre. "It's one of the difficult things we've had to do. I have seen darkness in the world, Lan. I have felt it. I have felt the way the gods want my influence. And I feel like this is what they ask of me."

"And you are so certain that the gods are real?"

Magnus turned to him, smiling slightly. “From somebody who was touched by one of the gods, I find that a strange question.”

“But you are trusting that I actually was touched by one of the gods, and that I wasn’t simply telling you some story.”

Magnus chuckled and turned his attention back to the fire, staring at it for a few moments in silence. “Do you really believe that?”

“I know what I believe,” Lan said.

“And I know what I believe. The gods are real, Lan. When you first came to us, I sensed your reticence. I think that was why you had a hard time finding your way to the truth of power. You had potential. We were able to tell that about you early on. And you had skill. You gained skill so rapidly,” Magnus said, shaking his head. “It’s as if you were born to it. But it took time for you to see the world in the ways that you needed to. It took time for you to see the potential that exists, and for you to recognize that the power of the gods is out there. All you have to do is be open to it.”

Lan was silent. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do or say to help Magnus. At this point, he didn’t even know what he wanted to say.

“What were the gods like in your home?”

“My gods are your gods,” Magnus said.

“I don’t think they are,” Lan said. “Because the stories that I grew up with are wholly different from the stories that you grew up with.”

“I think you need to find your own stories,” Magnus said. “Much like you found your own connection to the gods.”

Lan thought about what Sophie would have said, and she would probably have told him the same sort of thing. She would want him to understand the gods, but then again, she probably had a dozen different stories for him about the gods, and how he fit in with them. Lately, he found himself missing Sophie more.

“The queen wants me to help her with the gods,” Lan said.

“Then you must do so.”

“You don’t even know what I’ve been asked to do.”

“What does it matter?” Magnus turned to face Lan. “Your queen asked you to serve, so serve you must. If it involves working with the gods, trying to make sense of them, then that is the kind of thing that you need to be a part of.”

“I miss the simpler times,” Lan admitted.

“All men do,” Magnus said. “And sometimes we’re called to do things that are hard, and it’s those who are the most resistant who often have the greatest roles to play. In your case, whatever the queen has asked of you must be significant. And for that matter, whatever this Heart of the Grove has asked of you must be significant.”

“What if I can’t learn what I’m supposed to do?”

“Pray on it,” Magnus said.

Lan watched him, thinking that he was making a joke, but there did not seem to be any humor in his eyes, nor in his tone. Lan wasn’t sure what to do about that, but at the same time, the idea of praying on anything seemed impossible.

Lan headed deeper into the forest, wanting some solitude.

In the months after he had connected to the Heart of the Grove, he had often gone into the forest in search of her and had not found her—or the Hunter—ever again. He hadn’t even seen any sign of the thisten, though he had felt them.

What did the Heart of the Grove want for him now?

Maybe what he needed to do was exactly what Magnus had suggested. Maybe he needed to pray, but Lan didn’t know if he had the necessary faith.

He stopped on a small ridge, reminded of where he had gone with the Raven Queen, looking out into the darkness. Faint moonlight drifted through the tops of the pine trees that towered high overhead. Their branches swayed with a gentle breeze that he didn’t feel. He focused on the warmth inside

himself, and then he thought about the Heart of the Grove. She had been in a different forest, in a different place, and in a different land. But maybe she would still hear him. Maybe she could still answer.

He was still connected to her power, so he assumed that she was out there.

“Why did you choose me?” Lan asked, his voice drifting off into the darkness and fading quickly.

He felt foolish speaking aloud, but at the same time, he felt as if this was something he needed to do. He needed answers, and the only way he thought he was going to get answers was to speak the questions aloud. Maybe he would find something more than what he had already encountered. He waited, but there was nothing. Nothing from the goddess, nothing from the others around him, and nothing from the forest itself.

“Why?” he asked again.

Once again there was nothing more than the drifting of energy around him, an emptiness that seemed to have spread. He focused on the warmth instead. Maybe there was an answer there.

In the time that he had had access to this power, Lan had not managed to control it in a way that had been meaningful. He had thought that he might find some answer, some way to control it, but he had never found anything useful.

Unfortunately.

The power was definitely useful, as his fight with the strange, twisted creatures had proven, but it was not at all like what Sophie had, the way that she was able to control poses and call upon specific purposes. What he had was simple power.

Then again, Lan was a soldier. Wasn't that all he needed?

A fighter.

Did that mean that he was some sort of fighter on behalf of the gods?

Like some sort of warrior priest.

That thought brought a smile to his face, as he did remember a story of a warrior priest that his nana had told him, though it had been so long ago that he had forgotten about it.

He remembered sitting in their small cottage, before the fire, listening to the sound of rain pattering on the rooftop. Lan had been by himself, trying to pretend he wasn't paying any attention to the story that his sister had asked about, but he had listened in, as he had always listened in. He had wanted to hear the stories as much as Sophie had, but at the same time, he had never been eager to appear to want the stories.

"Tell me again about Jamintar," Sophie said.

Nana was sitting in front of the fire, in her favorite chair, working at her weaving. At least, she always called it weaving, working with a loom and yarn, though her hands worked in strange patterns that seemed to create confusion more than anything else. Then again, Lan had been able to follow the patterns, much better than Sophie had. He hadn't told his sister that, but anytime he had woven with his nana, he had been able to replicate many of those same weaves.

"Jamintar," Nana said, glancing over at Sophie.

Sophie was young then, probably no more than seven or eight years old, and her hair was braided on either side, tied off with slips of yellow ribbon.

"I like that story. And look at Lan," she said, winking at him. "He's listening, and I think he wants to hear it as well."

"Perhaps he is listening," Nana said, pausing in her weave to look at him, her gaze narrowing ever so slightly as she studied him. "And it is the kind of story that your brother would appreciate. It's not one I like to tell, though. I'm not a fan of such fighting."

Lan shifted forward in his chair and rested his elbows on his knees, watching his nana with her weave. He could follow the pattern and thought that he might be able to copy it. He didn't want her to know that he was trying some of the more complicated patterns, as she would only chastise him for

making mistakes, but then again, he snuck away needles and yarn and practiced in the dark at night.

“Fighting?” he asked.

“Well, Jamintar was a warrior priest. He served one of the new gods,” Nana said, and she smiled slightly. “They called him Raegal, and he was said to be quite powerful. Jamintar had fallen in with him and served him.” Nana began her weave again, her words falling into the steady rhythm that they took on when she told her stories.

Lan leaned back, listening, his mind wandering. He didn’t remember a story about Jamintar, though Sophie obviously did. But then again, Sophie knew most of the stories by heart and had taken to asking for specific stories when she was sitting with their nana.

“Jamintar served his god well. When the Verdant Horde invaded his land, Jamintar led a thousand soldiers against them.”

“What’s the Verdant Horde?” Sophie asked.

“Oh, we don’t go into that,” Nana said. “Because there are so many things about them that are incredibly dangerous.”

“Well, I just want to know about what they are and what they look like, so that I can visualize them in my mind.”

“It’s a horde of monsters,” Lan said, “and that’s what I look like.”

Sophie turned, sticking her tongue out at him. “You don’t know what they look like, either, so don’t act like you do, Lannerdon.”

“The two of you don’t need to argue, or I’m going to cut the story short,” Nana said.

“I just asked about it so that Lan could hear about a warrior priest,” Sophie said. “Not because I wanted to hear about it. If you’re telling stories, you could tell me about the Pale Princess again.” She leaned forward and smiled at Nana.

Nana paused in her weave to peer at Lan. He looked through heavy lids and was trying to ignore his interest in

Jamintar, the warrior priest, but was having difficulty.

“Perhaps I will tell the story another time,” Nana said, “when Lan is more eager. For now, I can tell you about the Pale Princess.”

And that was the last time that Lan had heard anything about Jamintar, the warrior priest. It was a disappointment to him now, as he wished that he had more memories of his nana, and the stories that she had told, as those were a part of her. Sophie had learned the best stories and had always requested them from their nana, and they had absorbed her far more than Lan. Maybe he had missed an opportunity.

Not maybe. I definitely did.

Lan had always been so preoccupied, though he had enjoyed his grandmother’s stories. It was too bad he didn’t remember them as well as Sophie did. If he did, he might have learned something. He might have something to give back. Maybe to his own children, if he ever had children.

A sound down the valley caught his attention, and Lan’s eyes snapped open, his hand going to the hilt of his sword. He focused on the warmth inside him, but he didn’t push it out, not wanting to draw upon too much, though he started forward nonetheless.

He slipped through the undergrowth, stepping over the vines and brush and brambles that all tried to snag at his pants and boots, moving as quietly and quickly as he could. By the time he reached the bottom of the small valley, his heart was hammering, and sweat beaded on his brow. He was tempted to push out some of the warmth, to let the glow radiate, but he didn’t want to reveal himself.

Instead, he gradually slipped his sword out of its sheath and crept forward, sliding one foot after another. He was worried about making any additional sound. He steadied his breathing, and he silently focused on a word of prayer to Darish before realizing what he was doing and almost laughing aloud.

Darish wouldn't help him. Or maybe he would. Maybe Darish was always with him, as Darish might be the Hunter, and might want to help him, because Lan served the Heart of the Grove.

Regardless, Lan moved as quietly as he could, carefully picking his way across the ground, until he found a section of disturbed earth.

He froze.

Something had come through here.

Maybe another of those creatures.

Lan moved forward, focusing on the warmth.

He heard a crack.

Lan looked up at the ridge.

He didn't move. He didn't do anything. He just held his blade. He didn't think that it was glowing enough that anybody up on the ridge would be able to see him, but as he stared, a shaft of moonlight streamed down, and he saw a lone figure standing up there, holding...

A wand.

Karell.

Lan whistled two times in quick succession. And then he held his own weapon up, focusing on the warmth, and it blazed brightly suddenly.

He started up toward the ridge.

If it was one of the Karell that served the Raven Queen, then there would be no problem. If this was another Karell, somebody like Thea, then Lan wanted to be ready.

He reached the ridge and saw nothing.

He didn't have to wait very long for others to join him.

Magnus was the first, holding his own wickedly long blade, and he looked around. "What happened?"

"I saw a Karell."

Magnus breathed out a heavy sigh. “So far from where they should be,” he said softly. “There is too much activity. Far too much.” He swept his gaze along the ridge, and for a moment, Lan was again convinced that he started to glow. Then it faded. “I suppose it’s time for us to investigate what the Raven Queen wants you to know.”

“The ruins,” Lan said.

Magnus shrugged. “Maybe, but what do you think she hopes we will find?”

“She didn’t say. But I got the sense that she was concerned by them.”

“And if she is concerned, then we should be concerned.”

Unfortunately, Lan felt the same way.

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CHAPTER 9

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Lan crept forward through the darkness.

He didn't like moving at this time of the day, but moving in the open daylight had become increasingly dangerous, to the point where neither time of day was preferable. The rest of the Taihg were arranged behind him, with Magnus just near his shoulder, staying close as they inched forward over the uneven terrain. Nobody spoke, and the Taihg were masters of moving silently, so he wasn't worried about detection through natural means.

These days, though, it wasn't natural means that he feared.

Ever since the Raven Queen's visit, Lan had been on edge. There had to be something out here that would explain why she had come all the way out to the border of her realm to visit him. Not that he was going to turn down an opportunity to speak with the Raven Queen, as such opportunities did not come around for somebody like him all that often.

Not like they do for Sophie.

Lan wondered what it would be like to live inside the palace, as Sophie did. Then again, ever since they had left their home, Sophie had lived a very different life than he had. Hers was one of luxury, whereas his had been one of difficulty. Not that he had complained about it. He had learned to be a Taihg, a soldier, what he had always wanted to be, and had even been touched by one of the gods. Shouldn't that have been worth the struggle?

“I don’t hear anything,” Magnus said, dropping his voice to a whisper. He was holding on to his sword, and when Magnus moved carefully like this, he looked as dangerous as a bear. “Are you sure you saw something?”

“I saw it moving through the trees,” Lan said.

He had been out on a scout. These days, he had taken to scouting on his own, ignoring the normal chain of command within the Taihg, though Magnus and the other Taihg didn’t seem to mind much, partly because many understood that something had changed for Lan over the last year. Most of them had seen him glowing and noticed that something about him, and about his connection to power, was different from even the most powerful of the Taihg.

However, if that had been all it was, Lan wasn’t sure that he would have been given such freedom. It was that Magnus deferred to him, as much as anybody like Magnus could defer to somebody.

Given Lan’s recent communication with the Raven Queen, Magnus had elected to defer even more to Lan than he had before.

“Do you know what it was?” Magnus asked.

Lan glanced over. It might be his imagination, but it seemed to him that Magnus glowed slightly. He knew that Magnus had a connection to the gods, though it was faint, the way that most of the Taihg connections were faint. Not at all a connection like Lan’s. And certainly not direct magic, like that of the Karell or the sorcerers. Regardless, it was something, and it was that something that made the Taihg formidable soldiers, and deadly warriors.

“Not human,” Lan said.

“Those creatures?”

Lan hesitated. He had not seen the thisten ever since the Heart of the Grove had disappeared on him. He still wasn’t sure what they were, but he had heard them described in various terms, and none of them provided him with an answer as to what they were, other than powerful, connected to the

gods, perhaps. And given that he and his sister had helped them, freed them from whatever influence they had been under, Lan did not know whether they were an enemy, an ally, or perhaps some combination of both. Until—and unless—he had an opportunity to spend more time around them, he wouldn't be able to learn more.

“I doubt it,” Lan said.

“Doubt, but you don't know. If we encounter them—”

“If we encounter them, we are not going to attack.” Lan paused near a tree, looking back at the rest of the Taihg, arranged behind him. He hadn't drawn his sword, not wanting to draw the glowing light around him, as he feared what would happen if he were to reveal their presence before anyone was ready, and before they had any idea as to what they might have to face. “They are not our enemy.”

“That's not the way it sounded.”

Lan clenched his jaw. There had been too many reports of the thisten attacking throughout the city and tower. That had been difficult for him to deal with. And yet Lan and his sister had dealt with them, or so he had thought. It should have bought them time, and it should have given him an opportunity to ensure that others did not fear the thisten, but how could they not, given how dangerous those creatures obviously were to somebody who did not have the abilities that Lan and Sophie possessed?

“Let's just keep moving,” Lan said.

He crept forward. He had been following the trail, and though the footsteps were enormous, and looked something like what he would expect from a thisten, now that he began to think about it, they weren't exactly the right shape. They certainly weren't human, though. They had long, irregular toes, and there was something odd about them. Maybe they belonged to the same strange creatures they had encountered in the forest before.

They had moved from where they had encountered the Raven Queen, continuing their patrol along the border. It

should be boring. Most of the time, Taihg patrols were boring. It was unusual for them to encounter any real onslaught of danger, though it was also unusual for the Raven Queen to visit them.

They reached a small rise, and from there, the forest thinned out. Lan thought that they were still in the Raven Queen's lands, but he wasn't sure if they were. It had been difficult to identify the border, and out in this part of the world, the border tended to move from time to time, shifting based on whoever believed they had control over it, especially since the Raven Queen didn't make an effort to secure it with any real magic. Lan suspected that she had the ability to do so, given what he had seen from her.

He turned again, motioning to the Taihg.

They had uprooted the entire camp. Nobody was staying behind, because nobody wanted to risk being trapped. And given that they didn't know if there was anything dangerous to worry about out beyond the forest, Lan had agreed that the entire Taihg contingent would come with him.

Stone protruded from the ground in the distance.

Ruins.

Lan had seen the ruins of temples many times along their patrol. Surprisingly—or perhaps it wasn't surprising, given that this was the Raven Queen's realm—these surrounded Reyash and created something of a boundary demarcating her land. This one was a bit more intact than the last one they had encountered, and Lan moved carefully, flicking his gaze around as he searched for any signs of movement.

There was nothing.

A single sharp whistle sounded.

It carried into the night, drifting around them, and all the Taihg would know what it meant.

It was the signal to spread out.

Lan gripped his blade, glancing over to where Magnus marched forward next to him. They were no longer under the

cover of the trees, and both realized that they could not linger out in the open for too long. Otherwise, they would risk a confrontation with whatever Lan had seen. Still, as he made his way toward the ruins—as he suspected that whatever he had seen would be found near the ruins—he didn't see any sign of what had drawn his attention in the first place.

“I don't like it,” Magnus said.

“I don't like it, either,” Lan admitted. “It seems to me that there should have been some sign by now. The footsteps just ended.”

“Maybe they were using magic.”

Lan shrugged. “Probably,” he admitted. “But I didn't detect anything.”

Magnus arched a brow. In the pale moonlight, it was easy enough to see Magnus's features. A few clouds drifted across the sky, and the trees behind them sent shadows arching downward, as if to try to provide a bit more cover for them.

“Would you be able to detect anything?” Magnus asked.

Lan shrugged. “It depends upon the kind of magic and how they are using it. There are times when I can almost see things.” He strained, searching for any sign of the larger man's magic, his connection to the gods, but he did not see anything. “But it's inconsistent. I wish that the Heart of the Grove had given me a better understanding of this power.”

Magnus grunted with what Lan took for a laugh. “Of course you do. You are talking about the gods. We don't know what the gods ask of us, but when they do ask, we serve. It's no different from what we do when the Raven Queen asks something of us.”

“When I was younger,” Lan said, creeping forward and following Magnus while looking at the line of Taihg making their way forward, thankful that there didn't seem to be any other strange attackers out here, “my family celebrated several gods. Darish, mostly.”

“The woodsman god,” Magnus said softly. “A powerful one. One that many people serve, if they want to know what

the earth asks of them.”

Lan snorted. “That wasn’t exactly why. And I never really followed Darish. I always wanted to be a soldier.”

“And Darish brought you to that path.”

“Maybe,” Lan said. He kept his voice quiet, but now that they were out of the trees, and he was able to see everything around him, he no longer had the same concern as he had before. He had wanted to tell Magnus his experience with Darish, or what he thought was Darish. The Hunter had to be the woodsman god.

But that brought a series of questions that Lan didn’t have answers to. If that had been Darish, then why would he have been in the forest with the Heart of the Grove?

And why would he have revealed himself to Lan?

He had no answers. And to be honest, Lan wasn’t sure he could learn anything about the Hunter, not without talking to somebody who understood the gods better than he did. There were times when the Taihg reported back to a larger city, and Lan would visit the priests, but even the priests never had answers for him, though Lan had never been willing to reveal too much about the reason behind his questions. As he was a Taihg, many priests viewed him as closer to the gods than a common person, though Lan wasn’t sure that he felt that way.

“Why are you bringing this up?” Magnus asked.

“I suppose because...” Lan looked over at Magnus, and when he did, he saw a dark shadow rise up.

He whistled. This time it was three sharp bursts.

As soon as he did, every Taihg creeping forward unsheathed his blade.

Lan did as well.

As soon as he did, though, everything around him changed. Light burned from the end of his blade, flowing through Lan. He wished that he had some control over it.

“What is it?” Magnus hissed.

“I don’t know.”

He started to race toward whatever it was that had risen in front of them, but then he realized that there were more. Many more.

Somehow the Taihg had moved over the ground and missed this.

Creatures, as that was the only thing that Lan could call them, began to rise up from the ground all around them. They stood on two strange, spindly, long legs and had oval-shaped torsos and long, horrific arms with hooked claws on the ends. They had humanoid faces filled with massive jaws of fangs. Then they opened their mouths.

The sound that erupted was haunting and horrific.

And there was something about the call that tried to draw him in.

He wasn’t the only one. All around there were others who suffered.

The Taihg were being drawn in.

Lan didn’t know what was going on, and he had no idea if they would be able to withstand this power. They had to find some way, though. Lan could feel whatever it was that was calling to them, and he could feel the power, but...

When he squeezed the hilt of his blade, he felt the connection to the Heart of the Grove. There had to be something more that he could do, and he felt that his connection to the Heart of the Grove had to be useful here.

He raised his blade.

It felt foolish. It felt like the kind of thing that the heroes in stories that his nana used to tell him would do. Stories about men who would call soldiers to them, screaming before they began their race toward some inevitable demise.

Lan had no intention of dying here.

But he had no intention of letting whatever strange power he felt continue to call upon him and the other Taihg.

Light bloomed from the end of his blade.

It erupted in a band outward, and suddenly the strange, howling shriek of the monsters ceased.

But then they turned their attention to Lan.

“That was an interesting choice,” Magnus said.

“You don’t feel their call any longer,” Lan said.

“No, I suppose I don’t.”

“Any idea what these are?”

“We are around the temple,” Magnus said. “So probably barrow-wights.”

“I don’t know what those are,” he said.

“Not been seen for a long time. But you like stories. Certainly, your sister does, so I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s heard about them. They are creatures that shouldn’t exist.”

“What do we do to kill them?”

“Don’t know. No stories about that.”

“You know, I never thought that I would say this, but I wish my sister were here.”

Magnus chuckled. “She’s a sorcerer, right? I wish your sister were here, too. Plus she’s cute.”

“You’re old enough to be our father.”

Magnus chuckled. Then he raised his own blade and waved it while crying out.

Lan breathed out a sigh of frustration, but it was tempered by a hint of amusement. Then he darted forward.

He was still feeling the power glowing through him, warmth that filled him, and yet he wasn’t sure whether it was going to be useful in any way. He had to focus on what he felt, and with every passing moment, the heat that bloomed inside him, from the power of the Heart of the Grove, continued to build. Somehow that was significant, if only Lan could contain it, and if only he might use it. Unfortunately, he didn’t know how to. The power just existed in him.

He reached the nearest of the creatures.

But he soon realized it wasn't alone.

Two more rose up, on either side of it.

They were taller than Lan by half his height. They had a more horrific appearance up close, and they smelled of rock and death. One of them swung a strange-looking arm toward him, and Lan swiped at it. His blade carved through the arm, but it didn't kill the creature. Lan hadn't really expected it to, but he had been hopeful.

He twisted, following the training that he had received years ago, training that he still relied upon even now. He carved through the next creature's leg. The thing was tall enough that Lan didn't even have to drop into a lowered stance. The barrow-wight fell, toppling toward the one nearest him.

If nothing else, they seemed to slow.

"Any thoughts?" Magnus said, joining Lan.

"We cut them down, but I think they are already dead," Lan said. "At least, they smell like it."

And how did one fight something that was already dead?

The only thing he could think of was carving through it, trying to cut it into smaller pieces, so that the dark magic that had raised these creatures in the first place wouldn't be able to stitch them back together.

He fell into a rhythm.

Next to him, Magnus fought, and the two of them dealt with the three barrow-wights.

When they were down, they continued to crawl. Lan stomped on the skull of one, crushing it. It felt disgusting, but as soon as he did this, the entire creature stopped trying to move toward them.

"Looks like that's how we kill them," Lan said, motioning toward what he had done.

Magnus nodded, and he raced off, sending word out to the other Taihg.

Lan carved through two more barrow-wights and had to stomp on their heads much like he had with the first one. He didn't like it, as it felt as if he were having to channel some tormented side of himself in order to do it, but at the same time, if he didn't do this, he had no idea what would happen to him and the rest of the Taihg.

A few more barrow-wights rose up nearby, and Lan made short work of them. As he had discovered, they were slow, didn't seem to react to him quickly, other than to scream, and thankfully, his connection to the blade—and to the Heart of the Grove through the warmth that flowed through him—offered a measure of protection. Each time that he heard the barrow-wights cry out—and this happened several times—Lan would raise his sword, feel the warmth inside him, and push it out through the end of the blade, and an explosion of light freed his people from the creatures' draw.

It was surprising that it worked.

But even more surprising was that he would need to do it in the first place.

There had to be a reason that the barrow-wights had attacked.

But was it the same reason, and the same thing, that he had seen in the forest? What he had seen in the forest had moved quickly, but these creatures did not.

Which meant...

He whistled.

Magnus came running back to him.

"There's something else here," Lan said. "I don't know what it is, but I didn't see the barrow-wights in the forest. They are too slow and too dumb."

"What else could it be?"

"I don't know."

Lan left the Taihg to fight.

The barrow-wights really weren't all that difficult to deal with. When he began to feel any sort of pull on him, it was tied to their cries, which were easy enough to time. And when that happened, Lan would raise his sword, push out the warmth, and deal with it.

But there had to be something else here, something that he hadn't yet identified. Lan raced toward the ruins.

It was the only place that they hadn't examined. The barrow-wights' sudden emergence left him thinking that the creatures were meant as a distraction. But a distraction from what?

He raced forward, and when he reached the ruins, he felt something.

He still held his blade out, and he could still feel the power within it, but it seemed to him that whatever was up here was different from the barrow-wights.

A different threat. Perhaps a more dangerous one.

Lan moved slowly then.

When he reached the outskirts of the stone ring that formed the temple ruins, he slowed.

He saw legs.

For a moment, he was brought back to when his grandmother had been killed. He had seen her legs like this.

He hurried forward and saw an older woman, dressed all in green, holding something in her hand. He didn't need to bend down to realize what it was.

A wand.

Karell?

Why would one of them be out here?

It wasn't Thea.

At least, not the one who was dead.

But what if she was responsible for this?

The barrow-wights. Thea. The Shavln.

It had to be all connected.

They had been looking for evidence of what was going on and trying to make sense of what somebody like Thea would be after, even though Lan still didn't know if he had it right. Regardless, there was power here that he still did not fully understand, power that he was left feeling like he needed to understand, and...

He realized that he had overlooked something.

A darkness began to swirl toward him.

Lan rolled to the side, aiming his sword.

It was a foolish approach, he knew.

But as soon as he did, pale light shot out of the end of it. It wasn't something that Lan had intended, nor was it something that he had any control over, but as it spilled out from the end of the blade, he heard a scream.

He popped up to his feet, drawing upon his connection to the Heart of the Grove, thinking that if nothing else, he needed to have that power in him, but...

He didn't see anything.

That wasn't quite right.

Another body. Another Karell.

He didn't feel any strange pressure around him any longer, though. Whatever had killed these people—and there were three others, for a total of five Karell ringing the inside of the ruins—was gone.

He turned, looking for any trail, footsteps, or anything to tell him what had happened here, and how he was going to have to deal with it.

Nothing.

“What is it?” Magnus asked as he approached.

Lan motioned toward one of the fallen Karell. “I don't know. Somebody is targeting them, though.”

“Or they were just caught out by the barrow-wights.”

“I would say so, but it’s not the first time.”

“No,” Magnus said, frowning as he looked around. “I suppose that it’s not. What does it mean?”

Lan shrugged, sweeping his gaze around. In the distance, out in the night, the Taihg were finishing with the barrow-wights. They were not a dangerous threat. They were easily killed. They were a distraction.

A distraction from whatever had happened here.

“I don’t know, but I think it’s time I headed back to the Raven Queen.”

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CHAPTER 10

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SOPHIE

Sophie sat back, looking at the notebook that she'd been keeping. She found herself far more intrigued by what she had found in the children's library than she had expected to be, though perhaps she shouldn't have been surprised by that. The library had plenty of old stories—and many of them were so old that they were variations of stories that she had heard as she'd grown up, though not all of them. There were quite a few books that the librarian had brought her that were new to her. Not new in general. These were all incredibly old books, so Sophie knew that none of them contained new stories, but they were new to her, which meant that they gave her an opportunity to look into things that she had never even thought about before.

This was part of the reason that she had brought a notebook the second time that she'd come to the library. Sophie had needed to take notes, as she wasn't allowed to take the books out of the library.

The first thought that she had when going through some of these books was that her nana would have been thrilled to have an opportunity to come to a library like this and read some of the books here. She would have been amazed by how many stories could be found here.

The second thought she had was that it seemed impossible that there were so many stories.

The challenge that Sophie had was in piecing together what she uncovered, and discerning whether there was any way in which she might be able to use the information. There

had to be some meaning here, but every time she read a story, she realized it had only hints of a greater truth. Some of the older stories were just like the librarian had claimed—a little dark and a little scary. Sophie skimmed through those, looking for any reference to the gods, but she had found nothing. There were some that did reference gods, but not by name. They spoke about darkness. They spoke about the sun. They spoke about a mother. All of those were terms for gods, she had realized. Nothing used the names of the gods.

She leaned back, tapping her quill pen on her scroll. It was late, and she knew that it was getting close to closing time. This library wasn't open nearly as late as the palace library, not that she would expect late opening times for a children's library. The other librarians had come to learn why she was here and had offered their services, especially after Nevarn had spoken to them. It irritated Sophie that she would need Nevarn for such a thing, but at the same time, if he hadn't spoken to them, Sophie wouldn't have been given quite as extensive access as she had been.

“Are you going to keep sitting there?” Nevarn asked, leaning on his elbows. “I'm getting tired, and my eyes are burning, and the sound of these children screaming is just getting to be too much.” He lowered his voice as he said the last, sweeping his gaze around the library before he turned his attention back to Sophie. “And considering that we told the librarian that you were telling stories to the children later this week, we're going to run out of time here.”

“I keep thinking that we will find something,” Sophie said. “But...”

“But you've got a notebook filled with notes about random names of entities, but nothing that actually speaks about gods.”

She nodded. “It's incredibly maddening,” she said.

“What if your theory is wrong?”

“Maybe I'm going about this the wrong way,” Sophie said, clasping her hands over her stomach as she looked at the stack of books. All of them were thin enough that she could read them quickly. She'd gone through hundreds of stories over the

last few days, and none of them had revealed anything of use. Then again, she had enjoyed them. They were stories. That alone was enough for her to enjoy what she was doing. This was the kind of research that she liked, not what she had been doing in the palace. “We are looking for the gods, but maybe they aren’t going to be found in children’s stories. Maybe the right place for them is someplace else. Older kids?”

“You have these,” Nevarn said, motioning toward a stack of longer stories, but nothing there had really been of use, either. Sophie had skimmed through them, finding nothing.

“I know,” she said. “And maybe I’m failing here. I don’t really know if we’re going to find anything else, and if not, I suppose that I should just be thankful that I had an opportunity to come here and read some of these older stories.”

“That’s all that you care about?”

“Well, it has distracted me a little bit from my studies, so I suppose I’ve enjoyed it a little. I’ve been so focused on my poses and everything that Parvella has been teaching me that it’s nice to have a distraction.”

Nevarn leaned toward her, frowning. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on,” Sophie said.

“You need a distraction from learning sorcery?” He still kept his voice quiet, but he said the last a little bit louder than Sophie wanted. She was tempted to use the prayer pose against him and knock him back, but Nevarn had been helpful over the last few days, and she didn’t want to take her frustration out on him.

“I don’t need a distraction from it,” Sophie said, shaking her head. “It’s just that I kept thinking that I was going to learn something useful.”

“I would say everything that you’ve been able to do so far is useful.”

“It’s useful. It’s sorcery,” Sophie said, and she wrapped a bit of the gilán pose power around them, shielding them from anybody else hearing what they were saying, as she didn’t need any of the librarians or the children listening in on this

conversation. “It’s just that as I have continued to develop my sorcery and progress with my skill, I keep thinking I might be able to do something meaningful with it, but your mother hasn’t asked me to do anything.”

“My mother takes care of most things,” he said, waving his hand. He sat up and seemed to realize that she had placed a barrier around them. He frowned. “You did that without me even noticing.”

“Why should you be able to notice something like that?”

“I have been trained in some aspects of sorcery,” he said. “Remember when I taught you how to use the piasa pose on yourself?”

“How could I forget? You did it when I was nearly corrupted by the same power that had corrupted you.”

He frowned. “I didn’t know that I was corrupted. And I did help you, if that’s any consolation.”

Sophie nodded, and it did raise a question for her. She had used the pose on herself and had forced it outward. That power should have restored him at that time as well. Then again, Sophie might not have used enough power, and even if she had, he might have been too deeply corrupted for her pose to have been of much use to him.

“We can go,” Sophie said.

“Are you sure? I am perfectly happy to stay here with you as long as you need. Well, ‘perfectly happy’ might not be exactly right. I’m hungry, and every time I bring pastries out, the librarians get agitated. I’m the prince.”

“I think they don’t feel too strongly about you being the prince when it comes to following the rules of the library.” She looked over at the stack of books that she had not needed to pay for and realized that wasn’t exactly right. “Well, most of the time.”

She got to her feet, locked eyes with the librarian who was nearest her, and nodded. The man came scurrying over, looking at the stack of books piled on the table.

“Will you be needing these tomorrow?”

Sophie shook her head. “Thank you. We now have everything we need to help the children.”

He smiled tightly, looked over at Nevarn, and bowed his head more deeply. “Anything for the prince.”

Nevarn sniffed. “Anything but letting me eat pastries,” he muttered, though Sophie wondered if she was the only one who heard it.

The librarian scooped the books off the table and made his way back behind the barrier, leaving Sophie and Nevarn alone.

She packed up her notebook, slipped the pen and ink into her pouch, and looked around. The children’s library was comfortable, and it was nice enough that she had enjoyed the time that she had spent here, so it did feel a little strange knowing that she really wasn’t going to come back. At the same time, she wasn’t sure that she could return, and even if she did, she doubted that she would find anything of use. It was time for her to move on.

She couldn’t shake the idea that she was right about the stories, though. There had to be something there. It was just that whatever she could find out about the gods may not come through the children’s stories. There were some stories that were designed for older people.

And none of the stories had been like the ones that her grandmother had told her.

Maybe what I need to find is a Nana.

She smiled at that thought.

“What is it?” Nevarn asked as they stepped out of the library and into the street.

Daylight was fading, with the sun starting to set over the buildings in the distance. There was activity in the street, and music drifted from one section of the city. She smelled roasted meats and nuts and sweet treats.

A festival?

“I was just thinking that my nana might have known something, so it’s really too bad that I don’t have her to go to for help with this.”

“Well, if she was a Karell, maybe hers are the kinds of stories that they pass down.”

Sophie frowned. “I don’t really want to go to the Karell about this.”

“They aren’t all like Thea,” he said.

“I know,” Sophie said softly.

“Most of them are probably more like your nana. Or Oleda. You liked her.”

Sophie nodded. It was strange to have Nevarn bring up Oleda, partly because it was strange for her to talk to anybody about her. She missed Oleda. At least, she missed her when she thought about her.

But then again, she missed others that she had met in the palace what seemed like an eternity ago. Dannith. Ridaln, even.

So many that she had left behind. And Darius was still there, people that she had cared about, people that she had known, stuck under his rule. Was there anything she could do about that?

Probably not without having the Raven Queen’s approval. Sophie couldn’t risk herself, and even if she were to do so, she wasn’t trained enough to handle Darius. As far as she knew, Darius would recognize it the moment that she entered his land.

What she needed was help.

And knowing that Dannith was moving—and that Ridaln was with him—she wondered whether that was the kind of help that she needed.

She was bothered by all of this, but she wasn’t about to say that to Nevarn, especially since anything that she said to him would get back to his mother, and that was not something that

she wanted at this point—not until she felt more strongly about what was going on.

She made her way back toward the palace with Nevarn following. By the time she reached it, she still wasn't convinced about what she needed to do. She was supposed to find information about the gods and continued to fail, but she believed that there had to be something more to uncover, but it was too difficult for her at this point.

When she reached the main entrance of the palace, she froze.

“Lan?”

Her brother turned toward her.

He looked larger than the last time she had seen him. He had filled out.

Maybe it was more than that, though. It wasn't just muscle that she saw on him. It was also the energy that was within him. He was glowing. She marveled at that, especially as the last time she had seen him, he hadn't glowed quite so much.

“Sophie,” he said. “They said you were out, and they invited me in to wait, but I didn't want to. I figured I would wait for you out here. I hoped that I would see you, and...” He flicked his gaze over to Nevarn, his expression clouding for a moment. He bowed his head slightly. “Prince Nevarn.”

“Lan,” Nevarn said.

“If you don't mind, I would like to talk to my sister.”

Nevarn seemed to consider this for a moment, and given his comments over the last few days, Sophie wasn't sure if he was going to make a point of forcing Lan to let him stick around, but thankfully, he smiled at Sophie and tipped his head slightly. “I will find you later, Sophie.”

She nodded. “Thanks for your help today. Well, thanks for your help all week.”

“And thank you for giving me a chance.”

With that, Nevarn walked away, leaving Sophie with her brother.

Lan's gaze followed Nevarn as he entered the palace, lingering on the closed door for a long moment. He seemed to glow more brightly, and then, as he turned back to Sophie, the glowing faded ever so slightly.

"Would you like to walk?" Lan asked.

"I imagine you just got to the city," Sophie said. "And I can't imagine that you want to walk, considering you must have traveled quite a way."

He chuckled. "You know, you can just ask me where I've been."

"I will."

"You don't want to walk?"

"If that's what you prefer, but I do have this notebook and some ink, and I'd like to put them away."

Lan nodded, and Sophie considered whether she would run up to her room and leave her belongings there, but she decided against it. It was nice to see him.

"I got your letter," she said.

"Letter?"

"You sent me a letter telling me that you were coming to the city."

"How long ago?"

That was a strange question, but not one that Sophie was going to argue with Lan about. "Not long. I thought it strange you would send a letter of all things."

He snorted, before shaking his head. "And it wasn't even my idea, though I should be better reaching out, Sophie. We've been apart... well, far too long. With our family gone, we only have each other."

"So why *did* you write it?"

"At the queen's suggestion."

“The Raven Queen?” That seemed an odd thing for her to do, though there were many things that the Raven Queen did that seemed odd to Sophie. Though admittedly, Sophie needed Lan. Not as the Taihg soldier—there were plenty of soldiers around if she needed protection, something that was much less necessary these days—but she still needed her brother. They were *supposed* to take care of each other.

“That’s why I came to you,” he said. “I need your help.”

Sophie frowned at her brother before glancing up at the palace. “The Raven Queen has me researching some things, but she hasn’t involved me in anything. Are you sure that she wants me to be a part of this?”

“Not entirely, but seeing as the two of us work better together, I think it is wise that we do.”

“And you want to get away from the palace to talk about it,” Sophie said.

He shrugged.

Sophie sighed, clutching her notebook up against her. “Let’s walk,” she said. As she did, she formed the prayer pose and erected it around them. “We should be safe now.”

“Just like that?”

“Well, I could make it shimmer so that you can see it, if you’re worried about what kind of protection I’ve formed. Or perhaps you could use your own magic—that is, if you have any way of forming a barrier with it.”

Lan shook his head. “That’s not exactly how it works for me. I wish it did. I think that would be far more useful.”

Sophie started to laugh, and Lan arched a brow at her.

“I’m only laughing at the idea that you have a god-given power, and you talking about it being more useful is amusing to me.”

“It’s the truth,” he said. “I wish that I had a bit more control over what I have been given. I’ve been working with it, but unfortunately, I don’t have anybody to teach me. I’ve tried finding the Heart of the Grove, but…” He flicked his

gaze around as they walked into the city. They encountered a few people. It was still early, so it wasn't uncommon for people to be out, but near the palace, there generally weren't that many people wandering. Most who came to the palace had some purpose. "I shouldn't talk about it so openly."

"The barrier," Sophie said, stretching her hand up. It was nice that she could move while holding the prayer pose. It was a simple matter for her to hold it in her mind as she walked, but it did require some aspect of concentration and focus. It was part of the reason that she preferred the prayer pose, as it was one of the easiest ones for her to use in this way. She could maintain it while she walked, and there weren't too many poses that she could move with. "But if you're concerned, we can keep moving. I don't think you're going to have anybody following you." She regarded her brother. With him dressed in his gray Taihg uniform, with his scary-looking sword, she had a hard time thinking that anybody would bother him.

"There are certain things that I would prefer to talk about out of the range of prying ears."

She nodded. That was something that she could understand.

"Do you want to tell me where you've been?" Sophie asked.

Lan looked around before turning back to her. "Along the border. We had reports of strange creatures, and the Raven Queen assigned the Taihg to investigate."

That much, at least, was not uncomfortable for him to talk about, so what would be?

"Did you find these creatures?"

"Once," he said. "I don't really know what to make of them, as they are not native to this land, but they don't seem to be corrupted."

She almost stumbled. "You were worried that they might be?"

“That’s why we went,” he said, keeping his words soft. He flicked his gaze up, as if checking whether her barrier was still in place. For a moment, the glow surrounding him brightened. Then it faded again. “I found her, Sophie.”

He had already mentioned that he hadn’t seen the Heart of the Grove, so Sophie knew who he meant.

“That’s why you came back.”

“Not exactly.”

“Not because of Thea?”

He shook his head. “Not because of her.”

Sophie moved more quickly then. If her brother wanted to make sure there were no prying ears, she was going to hurry for him. They reached the edge of the city while making small talk, Sophie telling him about the libraries, but not really telling him much about what she had been researching, and Lan talking about the Taihg, mentioning that Magnus and Torthan were still doing well, along with what he had gone through with training some of the newer recruits. She had the sense that he was disappointed by his responsibilities, though he didn’t say so.

Only once they’d cleared the city, putting some space between them and the outermost buildings, heading toward a small grove not far from the outskirts, did Lan seem to relax. His shoulders slumped slightly, his hand going to the hilt of his sword, and the glowing that surrounded him intensified even more.

“What’s going on?” Sophie asked.

“I am really glad to see you, Sophie.”

She smiled. “I’m glad to see you as well, brother. But there is obviously something going on that you don’t want to talk about, and it’s more than just Thea. I thought maybe that was the reason that you wanted to head out of the city.”

“Partly.”

“Does it have to do with Dannith?” She glanced at the city before turning her attention back to her brother. “I know that

he and probably Ridaln are moving along the border of Lorant. Well, beyond the border. They are moving deeper into Lorant than that. I saw a map, and Parvella wasn't really clear about what they were doing, nor about where they were going. And to be honest, I don't know. It seems they are going to surround Neylash, which means that they may be making a run at Darius."

Lan looked at her for a long moment. "And you want to be a part of it."

"I..." Sophie wanted to tell him no, but lately she had been thinking that wouldn't be the worst thing, not only because Darius had harmed people that she cared about, but also because she felt an obligation to help Ridaln and do whatever she could to control the Shavln. "I feel like I need to be a part of something here, Lan. The Raven Queen hasn't assigned me any task, other than researching the gods. I've been sitting in libraries most of the time, and I even went so far as to search through the local children's library, thinking that maybe I would find something there. Let me tell you, while there are quite a few stories there, the library itself is a bit much after a while."

He smiled at her. When he did, there was something that reminded her of the brother that she felt she had lost years ago.

"I'm not surprised that she has you looking into the gods," Lan said.

"It's because of the Heart of the Grove," Sophie said. "And the Shavln, but I don't know how much the others believe that the Shavln is a god, and not so much some dark power that Darius encountered. And to be honest, I don't even know how I feel about it."

"I'm sure that it's a god," Lan said.

"Because the Heart of the Grove told you that?"

"No," he said. "Because the Raven Queen told me."

"Nevarn told me that you were no longer with the Taihg."

Lan's face clouded for a moment. "I'm still with the Taihg, but she has pulled me off on a different assignment. One that

is for her more than anybody else.”

“And what is the assignment?”

“To help her understand the gods.”

“I suppose you are well suited to it.”

“She wants me to help her understand them, because she’s like me.” He hesitated, and it took a moment for those words to sink in for Sophie.

“She’s been touched by a god,” Sophie said.

Lan nodded. “She doesn’t know which god.”

“Sort of like you don’t know who the Heart of the Grove is.”

“Well, I do have a name, which is more than the Raven Queen has.”

“So she wants you to find which god granted her power?”

“Not exactly. She wants my help with all of this, partly because she wants me to understand the gods and partly because she feels like we need to know if the gods are doing more than we already know. But she needed me to come to you.”

“Why? Because I’m now useful because I’ve learned some sorcery?”

“I think it’s a bit more complicated than that,” he said.

“How so?”

“She claims you’ve been marked, too.”

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CHAPTER II

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The night sky was dark, and Lan shifted, feeling a bit uncomfortable. All of this had felt uncomfortable. The journey to the city had been uneventful, though he hadn't expected anything less. Heading through Reyash had been easy. There had been no further signs of anything unusual, no further attack by so many creatures, and no reason for him to use his blade. All of that was...

Almost disconcerting.

After the last month spent chasing down creatures, encountering dangers, the measure of peace that he now felt was a bit unsettling. He wasn't going to be dismissive of an opportunity to have some peace, but at the same time, he was a soldier, wasn't he?

But he was also a soldier who had started to question what his role was supposed to be and had started to wonder whether he wanted to be a part of what the queen asked of him. And because of that, Lan found himself with a different sort of question. He found himself wondering if he should or could be doing something.

And perhaps Magnus was right in sending him back to the city so that he could see Sophie and talk about what he needed to be doing. And there was what the Raven Queen had told him.

It bothered Lan.

Perhaps it shouldn't, but it did. He wasn't at all sure why she had revealed such information to him, and he wasn't at all

sure what it meant, but his sister had also been touched by one of the gods.

What did that mean for him? A better question, he knew, was what it meant for both of them. How could the two of them have been touched by the gods?

Was it something that their parents had done?

Lan didn't have any memories of his parents. They had been lost when he was so young that he couldn't recall anything. And yet he had thoughts of happy times. He wished that he remembered what they had been like and how they had treated him, but nothing had stayed with him.

He had plenty of memories of his grandparents, though. Those *had* been happy times. That had been a time when he had come to know the world and had come to know himself, and he had come to grow and develop and be granted a measure of freedom. And somehow, in that time, Lan and his sister had both been touched by the gods.

Sophie stood across from him, watching him, and a question lingered in her eyes.

Unfortunately, Lan didn't have the answer to it.

She held his gaze for a long moment, and he had the distinct sense that she was holding one of her poses. She shifted that massive notebook that she had been carrying against her chest.

“What do you mean I've been touched by one of the gods?”

Lan pulled his shirtsleeve up, and he showed her his birthmark. “This,” he said, pointing to it. “When I first met the Heart of the Grove, and the Hunter as well, she spoke of me being marked. I didn't know what it meant until the Heart of the Grove mentioned it again. This was my marking. She claimed that I was marked by a god named Odian.”

“I'd never heard of an Odian,” Sophie said.

“Neither have I,” Lan said, and he shrugged. “Which doesn't change the fact that whatever it is, whoever that is,

must have marked me at a time when I didn't really know what was happening, and gave me... well, I don't even know what it is. Somehow this god gave me a marking that the other gods recognize, and then the Heart of the Grove took advantage of it."

"There aren't any stories like that," Sophie said.

"Why does it always have to come back to stories?"

"It doesn't always have to," Sophie said, shifting her posture and suddenly becoming defensive. "It's just that a lot of these things happen in stories. I would've expected us to have heard something, but there hasn't been anything like it, Lan."

"Anyway," he went on, "the Raven Queen claims that she was touched by a god, as were you. And me. It means that we are all somehow connected."

"So you have mysterious creatures, Karell, and Thea, all moving along the border. And more than that, it sounds like the Shavln was there, but the Raven Queen removed any influence of it," Sophie went on, and she wrinkled her brow as she spoke. "Which is a bit surprising, as I didn't realize the Raven Queen would get involved in such things. She certainly didn't get involved when Thea was active. Now, don't tell me that she didn't know about it, because she is the Raven Queen, and she would have been able to determine what was going on, if she'd had any interest in detecting it. The fact that she didn't, and that she didn't even try, tells me that maybe she isn't quite as infallible as we thought. Well, not quite as infallible as *I* thought."

Lan had been around Sophie long enough that he knew when she needed to just vent, and he had the distinct sense that this was one of those times.

"So... now we are supposed to do what? I don't think that she's in the city," Sophie said. "Even if she is, it's not like I have easy access to her. Well, maybe it's a little bit easier than it used to be, but I came to Hester thinking that she was going to be willing to teach me and help me understand what it

means to be a sorcerer like her, and all I've gotten is brief lessons and more time with Parvella.”

“Parvella?”

“You met her.”

Lan frowned, but then he remembered the woman that he had helped in the tower during the thisten attack.

“Parvella taught the Raven Queen, and now she's been working with me, but...”

“But you're obviously much more powerful than you were even a year ago,” Lan said. “I can feel it. I can't tell exactly what you're doing.” He could certainly see some of the power that she was holding, even if he wasn't sure what it was. Lan had never been able to see power quite so clearly. When he was around the Raven Queen, he couldn't see it around her, either. Why was it around Sophie that he could? That seemed odd to him, but perhaps it shouldn't. “I can see much more than I was able to when last I saw you, so your power and poses are getting better.”

“They are getting better,” Sophie grudgingly admitted. “But I was hoping... well, I guess I was hoping to be a part of whatever the Raven Queen is planning. I thought that I might be able to serve her.”

“I think that you will still be able to,” Lan said. He wasn't sure at all what the Raven Queen wanted from him, but he had come to believe on his journey back to the city that she wanted him to involve Sophie.

“Is that all?” Sophie asked.

Lan frowned at her. “I think I just told you quite a bit.”

“Well, you could've told me all that back in the city. My prayer pose is enough to keep us protected. I didn't realize that you needed to be so secretive.”

“I can never be certain who's listening,” he said.

Sophie looked down at her notebook. “I should get back. We can see what the queen wants from us, and I can talk to Nevarn and see if he might be able to get word to his mother,

and..." She wrinkled her nose. "You should take a bath. Do the Taihg have baths?"

Lan looked down at himself. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It just means that you smell. You've been on the road for a while, I guess, so I shouldn't be too hard on you, but you really *do* need to take a bath. And the palace has such nice baths, so if you don't have one in your barracks, feel free to come to the palace, and I'll make sure that somebody lets you into the bathhouse."

Lan wanted to argue with her, as she was focusing on the wrong thing, but at this point, he wasn't even sure what the right thing to focus on was. Maybe it was just focusing on what he needed to do and what his sister could do to help him, and maybe this was just her way of processing what he had shared with her. He had just informed her that she had somehow been touched by one of the gods.

He followed her back into the city. They spoke about little things. Sophie shared stories of her time in the city, and he tried to fill her in a little bit more on what he had experienced with the Taihg, but neither of them seemed all that invested in speaking about their experiences. Lan felt the power that she wrapped around him, some sort of barrier that she referred to as the prayer pose, and he could even see it shimmering faintly. He didn't focus on it too much, as he didn't think that she was doing anything to harm him. She was just using it in a way that was meant to protect.

He focused on the warmth inside himself as they walked, and when they reached the road leading up to the palace, Sophie gave him a quick hug, wrinkled her nose, and then stepped back.

"Get back to the barracks, Lan. Let's talk in the morning."

She turned back toward the palace and hurried away from him.

Maybe he *did* need a bath.

By the time he reached the barracks, Lan had decided that a hot bath would not be the worst thing in the world. Maybe his sister was right. There was something to be said about the comforts of a bath, soaking in the tub, feeling that warmth wash over him. And to be honest, he had been somewhat reluctant to rinse off during the journey, worrying about the possibility of contaminated water.

Once inside the barracks, he followed the main hall until he reached the bath. He didn't even bother going anywhere else. Sophie was right. A soak would do him good.

As he entered, steam rose, and he paused for a moment to wait for it to clear. He stood off to the side, stripped off his clothes, and set them down in a pile. He'd have to wash them when he was done, or find another uniform, though it was often easier just to wash the clothes that he had. He was careful with his sword, though it was a standard-issue blade. By the time he had undressed and climbed into the water, he was decidedly prepared for the comforts of the bath.

"I heard you had come back," a familiar voice said from the far side of the room.

Lan twisted in the tub. He pressed his back up against the wooden side and tried to peer out through the steam, finding it difficult. The warmth that flooded him was different from the warmth that the Heart of the Grove had given him, coming more from the heat of the water and the steam around him. Still, he recognized the voice.

"Jalyn?"

If she was here, and he was in the bath...

She stepped in. He didn't see her through the haze above the water, but he heard her splash down.

"I understand that you were out with Magnus," she said.

She slid close enough that he could finally make out her features. Her pale face and bright red hair seemed to glimmer in the hazy light. She didn't need a bath. He could tell even as she slid close to him that she smelled amazing, as if she were wearing perfume.

Still, that didn't stop her from plunging beneath the water, rinsing out her hair, and then resurfacing.

"You may not have wanted to get in the bath with me until the water was changed," Lan said. "I've been on the road for a while."

"And I'm going to rinse again," she said. "I just thought that we could talk. It's easier to talk in places like this, where there aren't so many people around and there are fewer prying ears. I would like to talk about what you and Magnus encountered."

"It was nothing," Lan said.

If she didn't know about the assignment, he wasn't going to be the reason that she learned about it. It wasn't his place to share.

"Always the good Taihg," she said, shaking her head and sliding closer to him. She was close enough that he could reach out and touch her hair. "I know that Magnus was assigned to investigate elantars and other creatures that have been prowling along the border, and I know that there have been sightings of Thea." She said the last in a whisper, keeping her voice soft, little more than the steady wisps from the heat that radiated and built around them. "I was hoping that you might share something with me so that I don't have to send out my own riders to get information from Magnus. I know he's now along the northern border, where he's chasing word of Karell."

Lan blinked. "You know all of that?"

"I said," Jalyn said, shaking her head, "you don't need to keep anything from me, as I am as connected as you. Well, probably *more* connected than you. If I need to help Magnus, then so be it, but something else is taking my attention, and I am trying to decide what I will do."

"And what is that?"

Jalyn leaned back, crossing her arms in front of her. The water pooled around her, and a bit of foamy soap bubbled along her neck and up into her hair. "Well, seeing as you aren't

terribly inclined to tell me about what you have been doing, maybe I shouldn't be inclined to tell you what I'm doing."

"I am not sure how much I'm supposed to share," Lan said.

Jalyn snorted. "I know the Raven Queen came to you."

He stiffened.

"And don't you want to know why I know that?"

Lan nodded. "I suppose you're going to tell me."

"I'm going to think about whether I want to share with you those details, as you've been a little stingy with what you share with me. I thought that after everything we've been through together, and everything that we know about each other, you wouldn't be quite so reticent. Stubborn. You're so much like your sister."

"I'm sure Sophie would find that no kind of compliment."

"And why would it be considered an insult?" Jalyn leaned closer to him, her face only a few inches away. "I know that the Raven Queen went to you because of something that she spoke to me about. And that's why I'm here. You are needed. Well, I guess we are both needed. We are going to take a little journey with her."

"With the Raven Queen?"

"Exactly. Most of the time, she travels by herself so that she can move quickly. She has magic that allows her to move faster than we can keep up with, but this time, she's asking for help. And I think it's because she must go a little slower, and considering the kinds of dangers that chase her, she needs soldiers."

"How many?"

"Not many," Jalyn said, her face souring. "Unfortunately, she's not willing to take as many as I want her to. I suggested an entire squad, but she tells me that she's to move quickly, and that a squad won't be able to do so. But she was willing to bring a few that she trusts. Apparently, she trusts me, and she trusts you. That's about it."

“Two soldiers?” Lan asked.

“Well, she’s going to bring one more, and you’re probably not going to like it.”

“Let me guess. Nevarn?”

Jalyn brought her face even closer to his.

“What about my sister?”

“What about her?”

“I have a feeling that the Raven Queen wants her involved, though I’m not entirely sure how or what she will ask of her.”

“You’re probably right,” Jalyn said. “But I am not the one to involve her. So if Sophie is going to come with us, the Raven Queen is going to have to ask her herself.”

“When do we leave?”

“Soon.”

“And then?”

Jalyn leaned back, and Lan tried to hide his disappointment. “And then we do what we’re supposed to do, Lan. We’re soldiers.”

Lan had a sneaking feeling that this was about more than just being soldiers. And he had a feeling that it had to do with more than what Jalyn was sharing. More than that, he suspected that Jalyn knew that as well. Why wouldn’t she share it, though?

Probably because she knew that he was keeping things from her. And he was. But that didn’t change the fact that all of this felt too fast, and too much. All while there were other things taking place, things that he thought he needed to be a part of, and yet...

If this was about the gods, then shouldn’t he be around those who were also god-touched?

CHAPTER 12

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SOPHIE

Sophie was disappointed that she hadn't spoken to Lan the way that she wanted. She should have been nicer, as he had certainly come a long way to see her, and she had certainly wanted to see him as well. She'd been worried about him. It was just that when he had disclosed the revelation that she had somehow been touched by a god, Sophie hadn't known what to do or what to say, and even now, she wasn't quite sure.

What did it matter that she was somehow touched by a god?

She tried to tell herself that it didn't, but she couldn't shake the feeling that maybe it did. And maybe there was more to her—and her ability with sorcery—than she knew. Perhaps Ridaln had known about it. Maybe that was why he had chosen her in the first place.

She breathed out, moving around her room in the palace. It was well appointed, with a massive, plush bed covered by the thickest and the silkiest blankets that she'd ever slept in, along with a washbasin and running water, which seemed impossible to her. She scrubbed at her face and then looked at her reflection in the mirror. She looked disheveled.

Nevarn would probably have said something about her appearance, but thankfully, Nevarn was not here. *Why am I thinking about Nevarn again?*

She had to stop thinking about the prince, as he was stubborn and frustrating and annoying, but at the same time,

he had continued to prove useful.

And more than that, she suspected that he was *supposed* to be useful to her. She ran a comb through her hair, trying to smooth it out, while thinking back through what her brother had told her. He had been dealing with some dangers and had encountered Thea again. It bothered Sophie that her brother had been there, and she had not. She wished that she had been the one given the opportunity to go after Thea, especially given the way that she had betrayed everyone and attacked Lan.

But then again, Lan was capable of protecting himself, especially now. He might claim he wasn't able to control the power of the Heart of the Grove, but he obviously had some measure of control over it, as he hadn't been glowing nearly as brightly as he had the last time she'd seen him. His power was unlike anything that Sophie had ever experienced. But if she was touched by a god, did she have the same power? And if she did have that same power, maybe she could do the same things as Lan could.

A knock came at her door, and Sophie turned. She was half expecting it to be some palace servant, maybe Parvella, but when the door opened, the dark-haired woman who entered left her frozen in place.

Sophie bowed her head politely, though she wasn't sure that was quite the reaction that she needed for the Raven Queen.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," the Raven Queen said, striding into the room and closing the door behind her. She didn't even move her hand, but the door came swinging shut.

It was sealed with power that Sophie could feel, though she wasn't at all sure what kind of power the Raven Queen used. Sophie wished that she could fully understand the things the Raven Queen was able to do, and the poses that she used, but the Raven Queen was far more skilled with sorcery than Sophie was.

"You can disturb me anytime you like," Sophie said, bowing her head more deeply, knowing that was expected of

her.

The Raven Queen chuckled, and she paused, sweeping her gaze around the room. “I haven’t visited you nearly as often as I should have, I realize, but now isn’t really the time for pleasantries, unfortunately.”

“Because my brother has come to the city?”

The Raven Queen tipped her head. “I’ve been waiting for his arrival,” she said.

“Why didn’t you let me know you went to see him?”

“Did I need to?”

Sophie knew that she had to be careful here. She didn’t want to anger the Raven Queen, but she was tired of being kept in the dark about things. “Why didn’t you let me know you thought that I was god-touched as well?”

The Raven Queen’s mouth twisted in a slight frown. “Well, I wasn’t entirely sure. I’ve been searching for understanding and answers, and I’ve asked you to look into certain things, thinking that perhaps you might find something that would help illuminate all of this for me, but I suspect that you’ve had the same difficulty that I have.”

“In that there are no stories of the gods.”

“There *are* stories about the gods, but the difficulty is in knowing which are stories and which are not,” the Raven Queen said. She clasped her hands in front of her and turned to face Sophie.

Sophie was completely aware of the fact that she was standing in her nightgown, with her hair a mess and water still dripping off her face, and she wished that she had a pose that would help her with her appearance. Unfortunately, nothing came to mind. Maybe there was something she could have used if she had studied for just this circumstance.

“I went to the children’s library, thinking that maybe we would find something there,” Sophie said.

“An interesting idea, but I don’t think that children’s stories are going to help us with the gods. They are not the

kind of stories that I'm looking for."

"Well, one of the librarians did suggest that more mature fiction might be helpful," Sophie offered, though she wasn't even sure if this information was going to be of much use. She hadn't had the opportunity to look, partly because her brother had arrived and partly because she wasn't even sure how to begin looking for such stories.

"It's an interesting thought," the Raven Queen said. "If we had time, I might even entertain the possibility of pursuing that lead, but unfortunately, we do not have time."

"Why not?" Sophie asked.

"Because circumstances have continued to change." The Raven Queen glanced at the door, and then she turned in place, pointing her fingers out as she did, which Sophie thought was odd at first, until she realized that the Raven Queen was creating a pattern of protection around the entire room. She layered considerable power around them, far more than Sophie would have been able to manage with a similar movement. It was some variation of the prayer pose, but it wasn't one that Sophie recognized. "You know about Dannith and the movement around the border?"

"I know that Ridaln is probably a part of that," Sophie said. "I saw the pattern."

"Very good. I'm glad you recognized it, as I wasn't sure that you would. I certainly did, but it took me longer than I would've liked. Had I known that you had such an affinity for Ridaln's form of magic, I would've drawn you in sooner."

Was that actually an admission that she should have been including Sophie more? That was surprising, especially coming from the Raven Queen.

"Anyway," the Raven Queen said, "I have begun to detect different aspects of influence around the realm."

"Is that what you have the Taihg doing? Lan mentioned that there was an attack along the western front, and then something along the northern border... and now that I'm thinking of it, I suspect that was where you were."

The Raven Queen nodded. “That is where I was, but for a different reason. And I have not only been in Reyash.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that we are going to have to go beyond the borders. And I need you to come with me. You have continued to progress in your skill, and—”

“It has more to do with the fact that I’m somehow god-touched, doesn’t it?”

The Raven Queen tilted her head in a quick nod. “It does. I wouldn’t take you with me if it wasn’t necessary. Much like I wouldn’t take your brother with me if it wasn’t necessary. There are certain things I don’t ask of others, because they are too dangerous.”

“Why do you bother going beyond the border, then? If this is your realm, and it’s outside of your realm—”

“Because it will eventually come to my realm. It will come to all realms.”

“The Shavln?”

“Perhaps,” the Raven Queen said. “I’m not sure if it is the Shavln or if it’s some other power, but whatever it is has begun to trigger something I have felt buried for a long time. And it’s dangerous enough that I can’t ignore it. It’s why I must go after it. And it’s why I must have you come with me.”

“Who else is going to go?”

The Raven Queen nodded. “A good question. We’re not going alone, if that is your fear. You aren’t going to be unprotected. I have asked some Taihg to join us, along with Nevarn.”

“Are you sure it is wise to take Nevarn?”

“Have you considered why Nevarn was targeted by Thea?”

Sophie frowned. “Not really.”

“There’s a reason that Thea was able to use him. A reason that he was targeted by her. Then again, I suspect that if it

hadn't worked with him, she would've moved on to somebody else. Perhaps your brother. Perhaps you."

As she spoke, Sophie started to piece together what the Raven Queen was getting at. "You think that Nevarn is god-touched as well."

"I don't just think it. I know it," the Raven Queen said. "That is my gift." She spread her hands, and power flowed from her. Sophie could almost see it, as it worked in an almost translucent wave that rippled away from her. "I can detect those who are god-touched. The ability isn't perfect, and it doesn't ever help me understand what the god-touched can do, but it is how I have solidified my hold on this part of the realm. It is why I founded the Taihg. Have you even considered what they are?"

Sophie really hadn't considered it, but if it was tied to people who had some affinity for the gods, that made a certain sort of sense. Hadn't Lan said that most of the Taihg, especially those who had served for a long time, had a form of magic that they attributed to the gods? And if that was the case, then it would make sense if they had some sort of god touch.

"I guess I haven't," she said, feeling a bit foolish.

Sophie should have considered such a thing before, but the idea that people had that kind of power left Sophie surprised, and she didn't know what to make of it. She wasn't even sure if the Raven Queen knew what to make of it, as increasingly, Sophie questioned whether there was something more that the Raven Queen wasn't telling her, that she was keeping something from her.

"What do you intend us to do?"

"I intend us to take a journey," the Raven Queen said, "as I have detected something, and it is something I think we need to uncover. It is not far from here. I need those who are gifted."

She left unsaid what she considered gifted and how she considered Sophie to be one of them, though at this point,

Sophie understood that the Raven Queen believed that Sophie was god-touched in some way. Because of that, Sophie, along with her brother, would be a part of whatever the Raven Queen had planned—even though Sophie wasn't exactly sure why or what her involvement meant.

“Make your preparations. And be ready.”

The Raven Queen turned, and with a wave of her hand, whatever protection she had placed over the door disappeared, leaving Sophie in the quiet of her room.

She stood in her nightclothes, and she found herself sweeping her gaze around her room, her mind wandering, unable to come up with any explanation for what might be going on. Right now, the only thing that she could think of was that the Raven Queen had called upon her, but for what?

Sophie didn't like the fact that she simply did not know what was happening.

She wasn't going to sit back and just wait for answers to come to her. Sophie was going to get them for herself.

She grabbed her cloak out of her wardrobe and slung it over her shoulders, wrapping it tightly around herself, then strode out of her room. She paused in the hallway. A servant at the end of the hall cast one nervous glance in her direction before scurrying away. Maybe the servant was concerned because of Sophie, but more likely, it was because the Raven Queen had just been in Sophie's room, and then Sophie had come running out.

She started quickly down the hallway with irritation filling her. By the time she reached Parvella's door, she had no way of suppressing her frustration, and so she pounded on the door until Parvella pulled it open.

Parvella looked out, rubbing a knuckle into her eyes.

“Sophie,” she said, still working out the sleep from her eyes, blinking as if the light in the hall was too bright. There were only a few lanterns lit in the hallway, so not enough that it should upset Parvella. “What are you doing?”

“I want answers,” Sophie said.

“I’m afraid that now isn’t the best time for me. As you are probably aware, we will be departing in the morning, and I am going to need some sleep.” She shook her head, and then she leaned out of the doorway to look along the hallway. She pulled her head back and glowered at Sophie. “I believe that the Raven Queen has already spoken to you about what you’re going to be doing and what we need from you.”

“She has. She also spoke to me of...” Sophie took a moment to form the prayer pose, and she let some power flow out and around her and Parvella.

The suddenness of it caught Parvella off guard, and the other sorcerer cast a frown at Sophie, as if she was surprised by the way that Sophie was using her power. Then she shook her head.

“She mentioned god power,” Sophie continued.

“Of course she did.” Parvella motioned for Sophie to come into her room. “There is only so much power in the world,” she said as soon as Sophie closed the door.

Sophie was still holding the prayer pose and keeping herself—and Parvella—wrapped inside it, though she was not at all sure how much Parvella would admit to her. At this point, Sophie just did not know whether Parvella was keeping things from her, the way that the Raven Queen had been for what seemed like the entire time that Sophie had been working with her.

“The different powers are all tied to different gods,” Parvella went on. “Even yours.”

Sophie frowned. “I’m using sorcery.”

“And what do you think sorcery taps into?”

“I guess...”

Sophie frowned to herself, and at that moment, she realized that she had been foolish. She hadn’t even considered the possibility that her sorcery was touching upon something deeper, more powerful and more potent, but at the same time, should she have? The kind of power that she was reaching was considerable, and it wasn’t something that just anybody could

do. She had known that she was gifted from the moment that she had begun working with Ridaln, something that he had made quite clear to her by the fact that he had not been willing to work with just anybody. And he had said that he had attempted to work with others, but not many others had the same gift that Sophie did, nor did they have the same potential. The fact that she had that potential, and that she was able to do the things that she was able to do, was the reason that Ridaln had wanted to work with her and had been willing to take the time to help her.

“I can see from your face that you are coming to terms with it,” Parvella said, waving her hand and motioning for Sophie to sit. “And that perhaps we should have been more upfront with you in the past, as you obviously don’t know some of the things that you should.”

“I should’ve known that I have been touched by one of the gods?”

“You should have known that there is a greater power in the world,” Parvella said, taking a seat across from Sophie and pressing her fingertips together, using a bit of the maris pose to crush the prayer pose that Sophie was holding. The suddenness of it was almost alarming to Sophie, as she had not been prepared for it, and her prayer pose shattered, releasing its power. Parvella then let her own power erupt around her, sweeping it over Sophie. The control that Parvella demonstrated was significant, far more than what Sophie had. “The kind of power that we access is tied to something more. And I thought that you understood that, but...” She shrugged. “Perhaps your ignorance should’ve been corrected. And I suppose that is my fault, as much as it is the Raven Queen’s fault. Well, our and Ridaln’s fault.”

“Why isn’t she going after Ridaln?”

“Because Ridaln is not doing anything to harm us,” Parvella said.

“But Ridaln—”

“We don’t have to worry about Dannith, Ridaln, or anything that they are doing. That is not our concern. We can

let them deal with whatever they need to in that country, as they are not causing us any difficulty. In fact, the distraction is probably for the best, because it is keeping Darius from focusing on what we are doing.”

“And what are we doing?” Sophie asked. It bothered her that she had this ignorance.

At the same time, shouldn't she be blaming herself?

The ignorance was her own fault. She had not pursued this knowledge, this information that would have helped her understand just what she was doing. She had chased down information about the poses and ways of using them, but she had never really pursued the reason behind her power, nor had she pursued her potential. The only thing that she had really done was try to find more power.

That made her not all that different from Darius.

That was a painful thought. She didn't want to think about it. She didn't want to think about the possibility that she was more like Darius—and even Thea—than she cared to admit.

“We're following the Raven Queen and what she's able to track,” Parvella said, and there was a measure of frustration in her voice. “Unfortunately.”

She leaned back, pressing the tips of her fingers together, and once again Sophie recognized the pose that she was forming, even though Parvella wasn't pushing out power through it. Sophie was simply aware of it and could feel the energy, but nothing more than just that.

“Are you god-touched as well?”

Parvella smiled tightly. “Now you begin to ask better questions. It's a shame, really, that we have not had an opportunity to talk, but perhaps it was necessary that we took the time to gather what we needed, and for you to gain the insight that you needed.”

“I would've liked to know more,” Sophie said.

“You still can,” Parvella said. “The key for you, as I see it, is to gain insight by asking the right kinds of questions.”

Pushing yourself. And probing. You've been studying, trying to gain access to poses, but is that all that you need to do?"

Parvella leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. Some of the tiredness had finally left her eyes, and she looked at Sophie with an expression of...

Was it irritation?

Parvella had always been stern and had never been the warmest of people to Sophie, but at the same time, Sophie believed that Parvella was willing to work with her. At least, she was willing to work with her because the Raven Queen had directed her to do so. And Sophie was curious as to whether Parvella would continue to be willing to work with her if the Raven Queen did not direct her to. What would she have done if Sophie had just been some other sorcerer?

Maybe she would not have chosen to work with her.

"Get some rest, Sophie. It's going to be a long journey, and I don't know how much we're going to face or what you will have to deal with. But I do know that you will need to be ready. Bring whatever books you need to be prepared, and then we will take the journey," she said, shrugging slightly. "And perhaps we will all be ready for such a journey."

She waved her hand, releasing the power that she had held around them. Sophie hadn't even realized that she had placed another shell around her. Parvella had made it clear that she wasn't all that potent, but at the same time, Sophie knew that she had a measure of control she did not have. Parvella may not have the same strength as some of the other sorcerers that she claimed to have trained—including the Raven Queen and Sophie—but she certainly had the skill that was necessary to offset that.

Sophie got to her feet and watched Parvella for a long moment. "I appreciate your insight," she said.

Parvella snorted. "Don't try to flatter me. It won't work."

With that, Sophie headed out of Parvella's room.

She paused for a moment with the door closed. The hall was empty, and there was no sign of any servants here. Maybe

that was because Sophie had come storming out of her room, or maybe it was because the Raven Queen had been there, but there was something unusual about the feeling in the palace. It was possible it was tied to everything else that they had been encountering, and everything that Sophie had been doing, but she wasn't sure if it was tied to anything more than that. Maybe the Raven Queen had instructed the palace to calm, given the fact that she was going to be leaving and taking others with her.

Sophie debated what she was going to do, and then, making a decision, she strode down the hallway, heading to a different room. She knew that now was not a time for impulsivity, though that was often her initial response. She decided that she wanted to take a tactful approach. And given everything that Nevarn had done for her over the last couple of days, she thought that tactful was probably the best strategy. She knocked, and it only took a few moments for the door to open, and Nevarn stood in front of her. He was dressed in jacket and pants, as if he had been waiting for some assignment. He frowned at Sophie, looking her up and down, and then he started to laugh.

“Are you barely dressed underneath that cloak?”

Sophie flushed, and she looked down at herself before glowering at Nevarn. “What are you doing looking at me like that?”

“You came to my door,” he said, raising his hands defensively. “And... wait. What are you doing here, Sophie?”

“I wanted to talk to you about what your mother intends.”

Nevarn shook his head. “You're asking the wrong person,” he said.

“But she has to have told you about what she plans and where she intends to go and everything that she wants to do.”

“You would think so,” Nevarn said, and he glanced along the hallway, much like Parvella had, before pulling his head back and looking at Sophie. “Unfortunately, my mother has her own set of plans, and I'm not always involved in them.

She told me that I was going to be coming on this journey and that there were certain things that I needed to be a part of, but she wasn't willing to tell me much more than that. I understand you are coming, though."

There was a hopeful note in his voice, something that surprised Sophie. Maybe it shouldn't, as she knew that Nevarn was sweet on her, even though she was frustrated by him, and had been frustrated by him ever since the attack on Valan.

"I'm coming. Lan is coming. Parvella is coming. I don't know who else."

Nevarn nodded. "My mother usually takes a large contingent of soldiers when she takes a journey like this, but in this case, I am not getting the sense that she's going to do that. I don't know what she's planning, but I think we need to be ready for something dangerous," he said, dropping his voice to a whisper.

Sophie didn't know if it mattered that he whispered, as she suspected that there was nobody around to listen. And though she hadn't placed a prayer pose, she wondered if perhaps there were other protections around Nevarn that would offer him a measure of privacy.

"Thank you for your honesty," Sophie said. She was tempted to ask Nevarn if he knew that he had some god touch, but she decided against it. At this point, all that mattered was that she needed to do what the Raven Queen wanted, and she needed to find answers. Even though she had been trying, she still didn't know enough answers to make a difference.

So she nodded to Nevarn, and then she turned away and strode down the hall.

When Nevarn called after her, she glanced over her shoulder. "I will see you in the morning."

Nevarn watched her go until Sophie reached her door and stepped inside.

She didn't know what she had gotten herself into, but at this point, the only thing that really mattered was that she was

a part of it. Increasingly, Sophie felt confident that she should take a more active role.

She was a sorcerer, wasn't she?

What did it matter whether she believed she was god-touched, as the Raven Queen believed. What did it matter if Lan most definitely was?

And others?

There was more going on than Sophie understood, but she needed to make sense of the situation, so that she could know what role she was going to have in it.

More than ever, she wished for her nana. Her nana would have known the stories, and she would have known how to help Sophie. She would have known some answer that would have helped her. More than ever, Sophie missed those that had cared about her.

But now she was going to have to do this on her own. She was going to have to find her own story.

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CHAPTER 13

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Lan looked around his room and realized that he didn't have anything here that even mattered. He had no belongings and had not intended to have anything here. This was just a waypoint on his journey, and though Lan had spent quite a bit of time in Hester, he had never really made a home here.

Ever since he had joined the Taihg, there had not been a chance for him to make a home anywhere. Now that he was a soldier, was that going to be his fate?

Of course it is.

He grabbed his pack and then headed out of his room.

The barracks were quiet. Most of the Taihg that were assigned to Hester were lower-ranking and would probably be out on patrol, making sure that the city was safe. There were other soldiers assigned to the city, but most of them were common soldiers, not Taihg. He didn't even know how many soldiers were going with the Raven Queen on this journey. Jalyn had made it sound like it would be a small party, but he had a hard time thinking that it would be that small.

"I always feel a sense of loss when I leave a barracks. It's just a strange thing," Jalyn said, joining Lan in the hallway. "Maybe it's foolish and a bit sentimental, but I always feel like there is a part of me that needs to not be wandering. Maybe when things are a bit more settled, I'll be able to stay in one place." She frowned at Lan. "Don't tell anybody that I said that."

“I was actually just having the same thought,” Lan said.

“I feel like you’re mocking me,” she said.

Once they got outside, they headed to the stables, grabbed Joralt while Jalyn secured her horse, and then led them toward the palace. Lan took the opportunity to ask Jalyn the question that had been bothering him.

“You know about the goddess that has touched me,” Lan said, and he watched her for a moment. “I’m wondering about ___”

“Don’t,” she said.

“You don’t want to talk about it?”

“There are certain things that don’t make sense for us to talk about. As much as I like and respect you, there are things I’m not going to tell you.”

Most of the Taihg were willing to talk about their faith and the connection they had to whatever god they followed. Jalyn was different.

“What has the Raven Queen asked of you?” Lan asked.

Jalyn looked over as they led the horses through the city. The palace was clearly visible through the streets. It was early enough that Lan didn’t expect to run into anybody, and he was thankful that the streets were generally empty.

“Is that your way of trying to find out more about me?” she asked.

“The same way you were trying to find answers last night.”

“I think it’s only prudent, don’t you?”

“I suppose so.”

“I guess I’m a bit defensive, because of how I came to the Taihg in the first place. So many can’t look past my background.”

“And what background is that?” Lan asked.

“Ridaln,” she said, shrugging. “Thankfully, I don’t have the same connection to sorcery as Sophie does. If I did, then perhaps I would be her, and maybe... well, maybe she would be me.”

Lan smiled at that thought, the possibility that his sister might have been a soldier, and the smile quickly faded. His sister was stubborn and strong. It wouldn’t be totally surprising to hear of her becoming a soldier.

“Not everybody has the opportunity to use sorcery,” Jalyn said, shrugging. “I can’t say that I understand why, or what it means for me, or what it means that I don’t have that potential. Maybe I could use more power if I took more time, or if I were more patient, but...”

“I’ve always thought that the Taihg were more connected to the Karell.”

She frowned as she looked at him. “Why would you think that?”

“Well...” Lan tried to phrase his thoughts in a way that wouldn’t be strange, and he realized that it was difficult to do so. “When I was younger, I tended to have an affinity for my grandmother and her weaving,” he admitted. “I know how that sounds. I wasn’t a weaver, and I never joined the guild—”

Jalyn raised her hand to cut him off. “You think that I’m going to make fun of you for having an affinity for your grandmother’s weaving? When I was younger, I used to spend quite a bit of time in the kitchen with my grandmother, and so I understand what it’s like to want to be with those you care about.”

Lan looked around again before turning his attention back to Jalyn. “I don’t even talk about this with my sister.”

“Don’t you think that your sister would want to know? I know she misses your grandparents. She’s spoken about them a few times. Not only with me but with others.”

Lan smiled to himself. “Sophie just enjoys the stories, not much more than that.”

“And she enjoys the stories because they connect her to the person that she used to be,” Jalyn said. “Much like I suspect that you think about weaving because it connects you to the person that you used to be.”

“Sophie told me that weavers were tied to the Karell,” Lan said. “When she was in the palace in Neylash, the weavers were the ones who were training to become Karell.”

Jalyn frowned. “I think there are many ways to become a Karell, and weaving is only a part of it. I’m not entirely sure about all the approaches, but they do try to identify those with magical potential. To understand more, you are going to have to ask a Karell.”

With that, she turned away and continued leading her horse forward.

When they reached the palace, Lan had given up on the hope that Jalyn might share something more with him. There was a little activity within the palace. Soldiers lined the path leading out of the main entrance, and Lan realized that none of them were Taihg. They were all part of the queen’s personal guard.

It didn’t take long for the door to the palace to open, and the Raven Queen came out, followed by Sophie, Parvella, and Nevarn. Sophie had a massive pack slung over one shoulder, and Lan suspected she had it filled with books. Nevarn had packed light, much like Lan. And as much as it pained him to admit it, Nevarn could probably have been a Taihg soldier, especially if he was god-touched as well. He probably would be able to gain enough control over the blade, and his connection to the gods, to be useful to the Taihg, if he weren’t the prince.

And Parvella?

Lan didn’t know her very well, but he had helped her during the attack on the tower in Valan. She strode forward, carrying herself much like the Raven Queen did, striking him as a powerful sorcerer.

Sophie didn't speak of Parvella very much, only mentioning that she trained her. It struck him as odd that Sophie wouldn't talk about her, but he suspected there was some reason behind it. Maybe she didn't like Parvella.

Horses were led forward by stable hands, all of them much nicer than the ones that Lan and Jalyn used. One of the stable hands helped the Raven Queen into her saddle. Sophie required very little help, and Nevarn needed even less. Parvella required two stable hands to help her into the saddle, and she lingered there unsteadily, as if she were unable to ride.

That's going to make for a long journey.

The Raven Queen looked at him, then Jalyn, and without a word, she started off, heading through the streets and away from the palace.

Lan hurriedly climbed into his saddle and kicked Joralt into a quick trot. The horse could be headstrong, but seemed to sense his mood today and remained calm. Lan caught up to Sophie, who looked tired.

"How are you this morning?" he asked.

"Frustrated," Sophie admitted.

That wasn't surprising. Sophie was often frustrated. "Why now?"

"Because I am not at all sure what we are doing here, and I'm not at all sure what role I'm supposed to play. She has me... I suppose it doesn't matter *what* she has me doing now, does it?" She said the last mostly to herself before falling silent.

They reached the edge of the city, and Nevarn kept looking in Lan's direction, as if he wanted to say something, but he never did.

Jalyn seemed to recognize that there was something going on, and she guided Nevarn off to the side, giving Lan and Sophie a chance to talk. The other sorcerer, Parvella, stayed up near the Raven Queen.

Lan was surprised by the small size of the party.

“Are we protected as well as we need to be?” he asked.

Sophie looked over at him. “Aren’t you Taihg?”

“I am, and Jalyn is, and Nevarn might as well be,” he admitted, shrugging, “but three soldiers—”

“And three sorcerers,” Sophie said. “That’s got to be enough.”

“Do you really believe that?”

Sophie frowned to herself, as if she wasn’t sure what to make of the situation. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “And I don’t even know what we’re going to do. She’s after something, but she won’t tell me what it is.”

Lan found himself riding alongside Sophie in silence, his mind churning through everything that he had experienced. They had creatures moving along the border, attacks on ancient ruins, and dead Karell.

What did the Raven Queen know that she wasn’t sharing?

The journey outside the city was quiet, though Lan found himself watching the Raven Queen, wondering if perhaps she might tip her hand about what they were doing. At one point, Lan found Nevarn riding awfully close to Sophie, and he must have grimaced, or made some other telling expression, because Jalyn chuckled.

He turned his attention to her. “What?”

“Just you. I never took you for the overbearing brother type.”

“Who says that I am overbearing?”

“Nobody has to say it. I can see it in your body language. You don’t like that she is talking to him.”

Lan couldn’t tell what Sophie and Nevarn were saying, but every so often, the prince would speak quietly to her. He had bundled some pastries up in a napkin, and he pulled one out and handed it to Sophie. Knowing Sophie’s sweet tooth, Lan wasn’t terribly surprised that his sister willingly took it from him. He was, however, surprised by the expression in her eyes.

And maybe he shouldn't have been. He had seen Nevarn with Sophie before, and Lan had not given it much thought, had not considered the possibility that Sophie and Nevarn had forged a friendship.

What if it was more than a friendship?

Lan didn't know if he had any reason to be upset by that, as his sister certainly had every right to make connections that she thought were necessary. And she was a grown woman now. It was difficult for him to acknowledge that, to see his sister in that way, but it was the truth, after all.

Nana and Papa would have wanted him to look after her.

When he was younger, and when they had first left their home, Lan had believed that he could become a soldier, and in doing so, he could learn enough that he would be able to protect his sister. He had never really considered the possibility that she wouldn't need protecting, but that was definitely the truth. Sophie may simply not need him the way that he had once thought she would.

"It's not that I don't like that she's talking to him," Lan said hurriedly, but even as he spoke, he couldn't shake the memory of what it had been like when Nevarn had turned on them under Thea's influence. "Fine. I don't like it."

"She is a grown woman. And she's quite powerful in her own right," Jalyn said.

"I know," Lan said softly.

She had become a powerful sorcerer. He didn't know all that was involved in what Sophie had learned, but seeing her holding up some sort of protection around them as they had walked through the city had left him with an awareness of just how talented his sister had become. He should be pleased by that, he knew, and part of him was pleased, but another part of him recognized that her progression with magic and sorcery meant that she had become a target.

Then again, she had already been a target.

With everything that they had been through, and all that they had seen and done, how could she not be?

Dangerous sorcerers had targeted her from the very moment that she had left Halith. One of them might have taught her, and Lan had no idea what Sophie would have become without that sorcerer, whether she would ever have gained the knowledge and skill to become the sorcerer that she was now, but that person had still manipulated her to a certain extent. Sophie might not see it that way—though Lan thought that she did on some level—but she had been used.

Was that what the Raven Queen was doing with her now?

He didn't like that idea, but at the same time, he did not know. If the Raven Queen was using his sister...

There might be nothing that he could do about it. There might be nothing that he wanted to do about it, either.

He breathed out, turning his attention to Joralt, patting his horse on the shoulder. It felt good to be riding again. His return to the city had taken some time, especially because he had gone on foot. It would have been easier on horseback, but these days, Lan didn't need Joralt in order to travel as quickly as someone on horseback. The gift of the Heart of the Grove had given him abilities that he wouldn't have otherwise. He didn't fully understand them, not yet, though Lan wondered if he ever could fully come to terms with the gift that she had given him.

The day passed, and when they camped for the night, Lan went over to his sister. They were situated off the side of the road, in a small grove. It was safe enough, and with three sorcerers and two Taihg, Lan had a hard time thinking that anybody would bother them here. Still, when he approached his sister, he debated what to say to her. At this point, he wasn't sure if he had anything to say to her, as she certainly didn't seem to be concerned with him.

Still, she surprised him. She kept looking over at the Raven Queen, but she was also watching the other sorcerer, Parvella.

"How are you?" Sophie asked.

Lan smiled. “We’ve been traveling this whole day, and that’s the question that you have for me?”

“Well, I thought that it was a reasonable question.”

“It was reasonable,” he said. “It’s just... well, it’s not what I was expecting.”

“I suppose I could ask you about what you think about all this business with the god-touched, but I don’t know if there is anything that you could say that would really make a difference for us.”

“Perhaps not,” Lan said.

Sophie looked down at his arm. She knew where his birthmark was, and she knew what he had been told about the Mark of Odian, even though there wasn’t much more about it that he really understood. “She needs to tell you more about your mark,” she said, flicking her gaze over to where the Raven Queen was talking with Parvella and Nevarn.

“I don’t know if she has anything to tell me about it. She doesn’t fully understand it.”

“So she says,” Sophie said, shaking her head, almost in irritation, though maybe that wasn’t the case. Lan simply did not know whether his sister was upset by all of this. “She’s keeping something from us. Well, she keeps things from me more often than from you, but in this case, I can’t help but feel as if what she’s keeping from you is also something she’s keeping from me.”

She crossed her arms, a gesture that Lan knew all too well. He found himself smiling, though maybe that was a mistake.

“I just want...”

“It sounds like you are the one who needs to ask questions,” Lan said.

Sophie breathed in heavily. The night was cool, and when she let out her breath, it puffed in the air. Lan was thankful for his cloak and the small fire that Nevarn had started to build up. Jalyn glanced back at the fire, frowning, but they were so close to Hester that Lan had a hard time thinking that they were in

any danger. There might be others traveling the road, but nobody that passed through here would harm them, not when their party comprised two soldiers and Nevarn, whatever he actually was, and three sorcerers.

He had no idea if there was any way for Sophie to use her magic to offer a measure of protection, but he suspected that there was. In the past, she had demonstrated her sorcery, but Lan simply didn't know the extent of her capabilities and what was permanent or transient, based on what sort of pose she was holding at the time.

"I need to ask them," Sophie said, and she let out a soft, frustrated sound.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she snapped.

"You can say it," Lan said.

"I don't really know what to make of it, as I don't know the depths of what the Raven Queen is after. This is unusual, Lan. All of this. Her leaving, her taking us with her, you being here, and—"

Lan held his hand up, cutting her off. "I know it's bothering you. I don't understand what she wants from us, as she hasn't shared it, but..."

"Shouldn't we be worried about that?"

Lan shrugged. "You know, maybe I should. I'm Taihg, so I'm used to not questioning things, but maybe that's a mistake."

He started toward the Raven Queen, and Sophie caught his arm.

"I didn't mean that you should do it now," she hissed.

"Why not? Should we wait until we are attacked, or until we get too far from Hester to be able to turn back? All of this is..." Lan shrugged. "It's time for answers. And I know that you want them just as much as I do."

Sophie looked as if she wanted to argue with him, as if she wanted to open her mouth and say that she didn't necessarily care, but he knew better. He could practically feel her desire for answers, and he recognized the expression in her eyes, even though they had not spent that much time together over the last few years. There were certain things that one learned growing up around a person, certain ways of reading them and recognizing the tells of their emotions.

As Lan approached, Parvella frowned at him. "Yes?"

"I would speak to the Raven Queen," Lan began.

"I'm afraid that we are in the middle of—"

"It is all right, Parvella," the Raven Queen said, looking up at the other woman and resting her hand on her arm. "He has questions." She frowned at Lan. There was something about her expression that left him troubled. He wasn't sure why that was, nor was he sure what he saw in her gaze, but it struck him as powerful.

He hadn't spent much time around her, though every time he saw her, he felt the distinct energy of strength that radiated from her. Lan did not know what that meant, but it seemed to him that a special sort of power came from her. She was the Raven Queen, after all.

She was the kind of person that stories were told about. He had heard many of them himself, mostly from his grandmother, and she would share stories about the exploits of the Raven Queen. Some of them seemed impossible, because they seemed to have happened ages ago, so the stories left Lan wondering if perhaps the title of Raven Queen was one that had been handed down, one that came from sorcery rather than any sort of inheritance.

"You don't seem to mind that I have questions," Lan said.

Sophie stayed close to him, but she was behind him. That didn't fit with what he knew of his sister. She was a strong young woman.

A strong young sorcerer.

"Why should I mind? I came to you with a revelation."

“It wasn’t so much a revelation as it was a statement of fact. You were asking me about my connection to the gods. Well, one god in particular,” Lan said.

She flicked her gaze to his arm. “And you think that the Heart of the Grove has gifted you with something that makes you somehow useful.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“You were useful even before you had that connection to the Heart of the Grove, as you call her.”

Lan was left wondering what the Raven Queen might call the Heart of the Grove, but he wasn’t about to ask her, nor was he about to question what sort of information she might have about the Heart of the Grove. She knew something about the gods, though.

“Because I have this Mark of Odian,” he said.

Parvella was watching him, but she didn’t say anything.

An energy came from her as well. Through his connection to the Heart of the Grove, Lan could feel it, and he could feel the heat that came from her. It was not at all dissimilar to what he felt from the Heart of the Grove when he drew on her power. It was not at all dissimilar to what he had felt from the Hunter when he had been around him.

“Perhaps.”

“I’d like to know where you intend to take us,” Lan said.

“And your sister isn’t able to tell you?”

Lan looked back at Sophie, but she was quiet. He hadn’t considered the possibility that she knew more than she had shared, as this was Sophie, and she was always so eager to share things with him. Why would she have remained tight-lipped this time?

When he turned to her, Sophie shook her head. “I don’t know. She’s been talking about gods, but she also spoke of Ridaln and Darius and... Is that what this is about?”

“Something along those lines,” the Raven Queen said. “Darius continues to move, and we have been tracking his flow, such as it is. It raises questions, and those questions are ones I don’t have answers to, but I fear that we need to know before he manages to succeed in his plans.”

“I’ve been offering my help,” Sophie said, and she looked over at Lan. “I’ve been offering.”

“You have been quite useful,” the Raven Queen said.

“Useful? You’ve had me tracking down information about the gods, and training with Parvella, and—”

“All of that is quite useful,” the Raven Queen said.

She turned, looking off into the darkness. There was a heaviness all around them, and Lan thought that it came from the emptiness of the night, the coolness to the air, but maybe there was something more that he hadn’t been able to pick up on quite yet. Whatever it was, it surrounded him, and it filled him. It gave off an energy.

“You were the first one to raise the specter of the Shavln,” the Raven Queen continued. “I didn’t know what it was at the time. I knew it by another term.”

“But I told you from the very beginning what it was,” Sophie said.

“I understand,” the Raven Queen said.

There was a different tone to her voice now. Was it regret?

She breathed out heavily. “I should have included you sooner, and I should have been working with you sooner, but those lessons will all pay off soon enough.”

Lan could sense his sister’s frustration.

“There have been no lessons,” Sophie said.

“There have been many lessons,” Parvella said.

Sophie looked as if she wanted to argue, and it was Lan’s turn to lay a hand on her arm, wanting to calm her down. When he did, he stepped closer to her and then nodded to the

Raven Queen. “If this is about a sorcerer, then it seems to me that you should have included more of the Taihg.”

“You don’t think that the Taihg that we have already included,” the Raven Queen said, sweeping her gaze behind her, toward where Jalyn was stationed, quietly standing guard, “are enough?”

Lan snorted. “Considering that we have three sorcerers here, I would hope that the three of us,” he went on, nodding toward Nevarn, who was sitting near the small but crackling fire, “are plenty. But if you are going to take on a sorcerer of some power, then it would be beneficial to bring more Taihg with us.”

“Oh, he is more than just a sorcerer of some power,” the Raven Queen said.

“Do you have any idea where he is traveling?”

“No.”

“Then what are we doing?” Sophie asked.

“Testing a theory that I have,” the Raven Queen said.

Sophie looked over at Lan, frowning more deeply than she had before.

Finally Sophie turned and waved a hand. “I’m going to see if I can detect anything. I suppose that’s what you want me to do, anyway.”

“Be cautious,” Parvella said. “We don’t know what’s out there.”

“What do you think I might find?”

“As I said,” Parvella said, “we don’t know what’s out there.”

When Sophie left, Parvella followed. This left Lan and the Raven Queen standing alone. It reminded him of when she had come to the border and spoken to him there.

“You haven’t asked me about what I saw after you left,” Lan said.

“I have a pretty good idea of what you experienced.”

“Because I reported it?”

“Not you, but others did,” the Raven Queen said, and she turned back to him. “Don’t think that I am disappointed by that. You did what you needed to. You, and the others, searched for answers. And unfortunately, answers have been difficult to come by. I thought that this was all about corrupting this realm and that it was a matter of trying to distract me, but perhaps that is not all it is.”

“The creatures that have been released?”

The Raven Queen smiled tightly. “Another difficulty. More distraction, I suspect.”

“And the dead Karell?”

She hesitated, taking a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “That one is a bit more troublesome. I suppose that it bothers you as well.”

Lan shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t have any real attachment to them.”

“We both know that isn’t true,” the Raven Queen said.

“You mean my nana?”

“Whatever she was,” she said.

The way that she phrased this left Lan wondering if there was more to Nana and Papa that she knew, especially considering what Sophie had said about the purpose of the weavers and how they set out to determine those who had Karell potential. But Lan had a hard time thinking that his nana had any sort of connection to the Karell, or that kind of power.

“Did you know her?” he asked.

“I know those like her,” she said.

“That seems unnecessarily vague,” Lan said. “Have you had this conversation with my sister?”

“No, but I don’t think I need to.”

“I wonder if perhaps she might feel a little better if you did talk to her about what you know, or what you suspect.”

“There are many things that I suspect, Lannerdon. Such as a young boy and girl who lost their parents when they were quite young, were brought under the protection of what I can only assume was a particularly powerful Karell, only to lose their protectors’ right as they gained the attention of those who had the ability to train them.” She turned to Lan. “I suspect a hand in all of that.”

“Really?” He wasn’t sure what to make of this.

“Do you understand the role of the Karell?”

“I guess I always thought that they were some sort of magical protectors, but to be honest, I don’t really know much about them. Stories, mostly. And those stories came from my nana.”

The Raven Queen’s mouth curled into a tight smile. “I’m sure they did. Most of the Karell would tell you stories.” She glanced over to where Sophie was talking with Parvella.

Lan followed the direction of her gaze, and he realized that Parvella and Sophie must be working on sorcery, as Parvella corrected something that Sophie was doing, though Lan couldn’t quite tell what had upset the woman.

“Something that your sister would appreciate, were she willing to pay attention to it.”

“What did Sophie do?”

The Raven Queen shrugged. “She has issues with the Karell.”

“And you don’t understand why?”

“Oh, I understand why quite well. But she has failed to take an opportunity to learn and understand and has failed to gauge what missing out on an opportunity to understand more has done. There are others who could have told her stories, others who know things, if only she had been interested in looking for them.”

“Were you testing her?”

“Not exactly,” the Raven Queen said. “I was hopeful that she might be willing to listen to others. And she was, but she went to more traditional sources.”

Lan snorted. “And so what you really wanted was for Sophie to go looking for the Karell to see what stories they might be able to share with her about the gods.”

“It would be better than if I were to go to them.”

“But they still serve you.”

“They serve all the lands,” the Raven Queen said. “They serve magic. They serve as a measure of protection. That is something that your sister needed to learn, and unfortunately, she did not.”

“What were you hoping she would learn, then?”

“I was hoping that she would find an opportunity to understand what the Karell have been keeping from us. They are the keepers, of secrets, of magic, and of many other things.”

“And the fact that some were killed?”

He hadn't had the opportunity to talk to the Raven Queen about this part of recent events yet, and yet he suspected that she knew something.

“Somebody is targeting them,” she said.

“Thea,” Lan said. He wasn't about to call her by the title that she had given herself, especially because he didn't feel she deserved a title, to be feared.

“Perhaps,” she said. “She certainly would know their strengths and their weaknesses, as she sat among them for many years. But I worry that it is another.”

“Darius, then. This sorcerer that you fear. The one who released the Shavln.”

“Again, perhaps.”

“And if not him, then who?” Lan asked. He looked around, and he realized that his sister was watching him. “It's the reason that you're out here, isn't it? It's not this Ridaln. If you

were worried about him, you wouldn't have allowed Dannith to escape.”

She smiled slightly. “Perhaps not.”

“And you didn't really fear him at all. You feared Darius, and I'm not even sure if you fear this Shavln power.”

“Oh, I do, Lannerdon. As should you.”

“Why?”

“The very same reason that the Karell do. The reason, I suspect, that they were found in those ruins that you uncovered.”

“And what reason is that? I thought the ruins were just a way to power.”

“Not exactly,” she said. “It is a way to destroy power. And that, Lannerdon, is what I fear most of all. Now, there is something I must test. You may all stay here.”

Before anybody could say anything, she strode away, leaving them at the camp.

Lan started after her, but Jalyn caught his arm, shaking her head.

“She can't go off on her own,” Lan said.

“She is the Raven Queen,” she said.

“But she should still go with protection,” Lan argued.

“I don't think my mother needs protection against much of anything,” Nevarn said. “Well, maybe if she encounters some powerful sorcerer, but she would know if there was something out here.”

“Would she?” Sophie asked.

“You know that she would,” Nevarn said. “There are only certain powers that can overpower her.”

“What about the Shavln?” Lan asked, looking over at Jalyn and then his sister. They were both quiet. “And whatever has targeted the Karell?”

“The Raven Queen will have no difficulty with it,” Parvella said. “You must trust.”

Parvella glowered at him, and there was a darkness in her eyes. He noticed a bit of power blooming from her, though it did seem to be a little different from the power that bloomed from Sophie and the Raven Queen, when he was able to see it. At this time of night, with the darkness deepening around them, he found it easier to see power and recognize the way that it was spreading out from Parvella.

It seemed to build from some place deep inside her, in a way that Lan had not seen in another sorcerer. Maybe her god touch was a bit different. Or maybe the kind of power that she had access to was different. Whatever it was, Lan decided that it didn't even matter. At this point, the only thing that mattered was making sure that the Raven Queen was not going to be harmed by whatever action she took.

He wasn't going to be the Taihg that was responsible for something happening to the Raven Queen.

He stayed on the edge of the campsite and looked out into the night. As he did, he focused on the warmth inside him, letting the connection wash through him, and he felt a faint glowing. He tried to harness the energy to make sense of how he could control it.

“You don't have to stand guard,” Sophie said from behind him.

He ignored his sister and the sense of the protections that she sent flowing out. This was the Raven Queen, after all, but after what he had encountered with the Taihg, he couldn't help but feel there was some greater danger for the Raven Queen.

He had to be ready.

Only he wasn't sure what he had to be ready for. It had to do with the gods, but Lan didn't know what it might be, and he didn't know how he was supposed to deal with it when it came.

Maybe the Heart of the Grove would give him answers when he needed them.

And if not, he wasn't sure what he would do.

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CHAPTER 14

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They came across a stream. As soon as they reached it, the Raven Queen climbed down from her saddle, and she crouched for a moment, trailing her finger through the water. There was something about the movement that struck Sophie as a pose, but it was also strangely rhythmic. No pose moved quite like that, but it certainly seemed to carry the power of one.

Not that Sophie was ever going to challenge the Raven Queen on what she was doing or how she was using her power, but she couldn't help but feel there was something unusual to the way that the Raven Queen was using it.

Parvella stood off to the side, watching, but not helping. Sophie found that strange, as Parvella had trained the Raven Queen, supposedly. There were times when Sophie was left thinking that Parvella had a different role. Occasionally Sophie felt Parvella was the Raven Queen's mentor, her instructor in all things magical and controlling the sorcery that she possessed. At other times, though, Parvella watched the Raven Queen as if she were in awe of what she could do.

That was a sentiment that Sophie understood.

Then again, given what most people said about the Raven Queen and the power that she possessed, why wouldn't Parvella stand off to the side and be amazed by what the Raven Queen could do? It made sense, didn't it? There was immense power to the Raven Queen, much more than so many others possessed.

“What is she doing?” Jalyn asked as she pushed her horse closer to where Sophie was still seated on hers. “Is she testing the water?”

“I suspect she’s cleansing it,” Sophie said, though she wasn’t quite sure if that was the case. It certainly felt that way to her. “She is using some part of her magic to do so, but...” She shrugged. “Again, I don’t entirely know. This is the Raven Queen, so it is possible that she is just testing it.”

Jalyn snorted. “So you are telling me that you really don’t know anything more than I do?”

“Not really,” Sophie admitted.

“Great. Well,” Jalyn went on, “why aren’t you helping, then?”

“There isn’t much that I can do to help,” Sophie said.

“No? I thought you were some sort of powerful sorcerer as well.”

“I’m not as powerful as the Raven Queen.”

“Not what your brother says,” Jalyn said.

Sophie looked over to where Lan was seated, looking at the Raven Queen. He’d been quiet ever since the two of them had spoken the night before, though Sophie suspected that the Raven Queen had shared more with Lan than she ever had with her. Increasingly, though, Sophie thought that she was going to have to come to terms with that, partly because Lan had a different sort of power than she did. She might be a powerful sorcerer, but was she god-touched the way that her brother was?

“What does Lan say about me?”

“Only that he thinks that without you, we would have lost to the thisten—that’s what they’re called, aren’t they? And we would’ve lost Nevarn. I don’t know if I believe all of that, as to be honest, your brother can be a bit of an exaggerator.” She chuckled as she spoke, as if that were some great joke. “But again, seeing as this is your brother, it is entirely possible that he is telling the truth.”

“I’m not more powerful than the Raven Queen,” Sophie said.

“Good,” Jalyn said. “I would hate to be the weakest one here. Well, other than Nevarn, and to be honest, I’m not exactly sure what he’s capable of. He might be some sort of sorcerer as well.”

“I don’t think so,” Sophie said, “but it’s possible that he knows some aspects of sorcery. He knew enough about it to guide me when I was struggling.”

“See,” Jalyn said, just as the Raven Queen stood and began moving away from the stream. “Another person who is incredibly powerful. I might be better with the sword than your brother, but I’m left with questions about whether he could use his strange magic to overpower me. Gods,” she muttered, “one more thing to question.”

It sounded as if she were making a complaint, but Sophie realized that she was just making conversation—and a joke, she thought.

The Raven Queen nodded, pointing to the stream. “We can refill our waterskins now.”

“Are you sure?” Sophie asked, kicking her horse forward. “We know what happens when the Shavln infests the water, and I don’t have any interest in getting contaminated by it again.”

The Raven Queen nodded, and she crouched down, cupping her hands into the stream, before standing and looking at Sophie. She took a long, steady drink.

As soon as she did, Sophie tensed.

She knew that she shouldn’t, and she knew that it wouldn’t make a difference, much like she knew that if the Raven Queen had decided that the water was safe to drink, she had probably already done the necessary tests to make sure that any contamination had been removed, but there was still something about the way that she had drunk the water, and about what she had cleansed from it, that left Sophie uncomfortable.

“If she’s drinking it, I suppose it can’t be all that bad,” Nevarn said, and he hopped out of his saddle and hurried over to begin filling the waterskins.

Sophie didn’t move.

She knew that it wouldn’t be harmful, and she began to question whether she was overreacting, but at this point, she wasn’t sure if there was a good reason for her to react this way. She wasn’t about to take any risk. She knew better.

She watched as the others gradually began to fill up their waterskins, and finally Sophie took a long drink from her own waterskin before climbing out of the saddle and filling it up in the stream. As she did, the Raven Queen watched her, the expression in her gaze one of amusement more than anything else.

“You don’t trust me?” the Raven Queen asked.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” Sophie said. “It’s just that I know what the Shavln can do. That’s what you were trying to cleanse from the water, I’m assuming. And if the Shavln is contaminating the water, I don’t want to be the first person to test it and taint myself with it.”

“Then test me,” the Raven Queen said.

Sophie breathed out heavily and wondered if this was some sort of test for her.

Maybe it was a matter of trying to determine whether Sophie was comfortable enough, or was there something else to it? Maybe it was a test of Sophie’s comfort with letting the Raven Queen make her own choices, and her own mistakes, or maybe it was a test for whether Sophie could detect something of the Shavln. Or maybe it was none of those things, and perhaps the water truly had been cleansed of the Shavln—or it had never been contaminated in the first place. Sophie simply didn’t know.

She hurried over to the Raven Queen and focused on the piasa pose, the one that she knew would cleanse if it worked effectively.

“I’m sorry if this hurts,” Sophie said.

“I have experienced pain before,” the Raven Queen said. “You do not need to fear harming me.”

Sophie looked up, locking eyes with her, and then she held her pose.

When she did, she felt...

Nothing.

Power began to build within her, the same way as it always did when she focused on a pose, but in this case, when she pulled upon it, she let it sweep away, and...

There was nothing.

The Raven Queen smiled at her. “Do you detect anything, Sophie?”

“No,” Sophie snapped. “And you knew I wouldn’t, didn’t you?”

“I knew that it would be unlikely for you to detect anything, but I was perfectly willing for you to see if there was anything there, as I would also not want to be contaminated by the Shavln. Then again, I doubt that it would simply contaminate me.”

“What would it do?”

The Raven Queen smiled tightly. “Something much worse.”

She climbed back into her saddle and motioned for them to get moving.

About midday, they reached a strange ancient stone ruin, into which Lan and Jalyn hurried, leaving the others behind. Sophie had expected the Raven Queen to hold them back, but she did not, which made Sophie question what Lan knew about this place, if anything at all.

He investigated before returning and nodding to the Raven Queen.

“What is that about?” Sophie asked as he climbed back into his saddle. She had been surprised that he had gone on foot, but then again, with the power that he obviously had—

power that Sophie could feel when he was up close to her—he may not need a horse. He could certainly walk faster now. “She had me looking into ruins like that before as well. What did she have you doing with them?”

“Probably the same thing that she had you doing,” Lan said. “And I can only hope that you did not find the same thing that I did.”

“What did you find?”

“Dead Karell.”

Sophie almost said, “Good,” but she didn’t. She looked over at the Raven Queen and decided not to say anything at all. The Raven Queen already knew how Sophie felt about the Karell, and Sophie knew how the Raven Queen felt about them. She obviously felt that they served some purpose for the realm, even though they were unaffiliated with it. She still didn’t understand why the Raven Queen offered them so much leeway. Sophie certainly wouldn’t have.

“How many places like this have you visited?”

“A couple,” Lan said, guiding Joralt toward her. “I was chasing dangers along the border. Thea was by some ruins, but I only found her one time. And I found a few other places like the stream that we passed a little while ago, places that looked as if they were contaminated. I tried to cleanse them, but it really took the Raven Queen’s presence for them to be fully cleansed.”

“She came out and cleansed streams?”

Lan nodded. “She came herself, though I suspect that she knew more about what had happened, and why there was danger out there, than she let on. She seemed willing to remove the danger and instructed us to keep hunting for other things like...” He nodded toward the ruins. “Sort of like that.”

The Raven Queen looked as if she wanted to ride around the ruins, but Sophie was curious.

Considering the Raven Queen’s curiosity about the gods, and what she had instructed Sophie to go looking into, she

guided her horse over to the ruins, climbed out of her saddle, and guided her horse closer.

The stone here had collapsed ages ago, leaving little more than a pile of debris. There was some memory of what this once had been. Sophie could imagine it being a large rectangular structure, perhaps with a dome, or perhaps it was an open-air temple, like the ones Nana used to tell stories about. She smiled at the thought. She didn't think about her nana nearly as often as she once had, but once she did, it always brought a smile to her face, thinking about the way that Nana would have been amazed—and possibly even amused—by Sophie's changes. And how could she not be? Sophie certainly had changed over time, gaining more skill, power, and becoming the kind of person that the stories her nana used to tell would be about.

“Do you detect anything?” Nevarn asked, guiding his tall black stallion toward her. Of course it would be a stallion, Sophie had thought when they had first left the city, thinking that Nevarn would not want a gentle gray mare like the one that she rode. He offered her a pastry, and she took it without thinking.

Where had he gotten them?

Better yet, how many had he brought with him? Each day that they had traveled so far, he had offered her another treat. She wanted to say no, but...

Well, to be honest, Sophie didn't really want to say no. She wanted to say yes, because the treats were delicious. They had stayed fresher than she would have expected, and she found herself trying to ignore his obvious attention, knowing that she was struggling mightily. Every day she traveled with him, Nevarn kept talking with her, and she found herself losing the frustration that she had with him more and more. Maybe that was his intention, or maybe it was even the Raven Queen's intention. Sophie could imagine that she wanted Sophie to work with Nevarn, and Sophie was beginning to think that she probably should, as he was the Raven Queen's son.

“I don’t detect anything. Is there a reason that your mother brought us over here?”

Nevarn looked over at the Raven Queen, where she and Parvella were waiting near the road, with Lan and Jalyn alongside them. It was just Sophie and Nevarn. They didn’t seem to be concerned at all about the fact that she and Nevarn were here and not following. Sophie wondered why but decided that it probably didn’t matter. If the Raven Queen wanted her to spend time with her son, then she would.

“I don’t know what reason she might have,” Nevarn said, shrugging. “Again, though, this is my mother, as you know, and she has very enigmatic reasons for doing things at times. I stopped trying to figure her motives out a while ago.”

“Why?”

“Oh, just because she tends to be a bit vague and makes it difficult for me to follow what she’s doing, or to even know if she wants me to follow what she is doing.” Nevarn shrugged. “Your brother came over here first. You know why?”

Sophie glanced at Nevarn, and the familiar flare of suspicion surged up inside her, as she didn’t know how much she should reveal to Nevarn, but at the same time, if anybody was going to help her understand what was going on, and her role in all of it, it might be Nevarn.

“He said that he encountered ruins like this on patrol, but he also said that he found some dead Karell in them.”

“That’s terrifying,” he said.

“Is it?”

“Of course. It means that somebody is targeting those with magic. What happens if they come after you?”

Sophie snorted. “I think it’s a little late to be worried about that. We know that they are already coming after us, and that it won’t be very long before Darius makes his move.”

That is, if he hasn’t already.

If he had, she might be a target. It was hard to believe, and harder still to imagine, that she could be targeted by anybody.

She had never been a threat to anyone.

But maybe she had been. Maybe there was nothing else for her.

She made her way through the ruins, picking her way past some piles of debris, looking down. She felt...

Sophie wasn't exactly sure what she felt. She paused for a moment, focusing on the prayer pose in her mind, and let energy flow out from her. As she did, she picked up on an obvious sense of power here. She didn't know what it was or why she should feel it so strongly, but there was something here.

After making her survey of the ruins, Sophie guided her horse back over to the others and climbed into the saddle once more. Nevarn did the same, joining Sophie, and said nothing. He just handed her another pastry, which she took without any argument.

Lan watched, and she saw the disapproving look in his eyes.

Let him disapprove.

They rode off.

As they did, Parvella moved closer to Sophie. "Did you feel anything there?"

"You knew?"

"I sensed you using the prayer pose," Parvella said softly. "And I wanted to know if you were able to detect anything. Did you?"

"I don't know. I felt something," Sophie explained, "but to be honest, I just don't know what it was. It left me with this sense of pressure, if that makes any sort of sense. It didn't have any distinctness to it, so if you thought that I should be able to feel something obvious, then I didn't. Maybe I'm letting you down."

Parvella arched a brow at her. "When have I ever made you think that I was disappointed?"

“I don’t know. I just... I don’t know. You’ve only been willing to teach me certain things, and I know that you must have taught the Raven Queen much more than you have ever taught me.”

“I’ve taught you what you have needed to know so far, and at a certain point, there are limits to what you need to know, and limits to what you can know. But we are running out of time with those limits, running out of time with what we can do as we wait on you, and on what you must understand.”

“Why?” Sophie asked.

“Because there is more and more evidence that we are losing the opportunity to understand, to discover what the other sorcerers are after.”

“I thought we were only worried about Darius.”

“He is the one who leads,” she said. “And I don’t know how many he has been teaching, but I suspect it is more than we know.”

Sophie hadn’t realized that, but perhaps she should have. Hadn’t she known that Darius was involved in some way? Hadn’t Ridaln told her that, among many things? He had made it quite clear that he had learned from Darius. And for whatever reason, Darius had wanted her involvement as well, partly because... Well, Sophie didn’t know.

“We will keep working on your poses as we journey.”

“Are there any particular poses that I need to know at this point?”

“I will show you what I think you need to know,” Parvella said.

“Like you did with the Raven Queen?”

Parvella cocked her head to the side, frowning as she considered her answer. “Perhaps, but what the Raven Queen needed to know was a bit different from what you need to know. And I think that in time, we will see that to be the case.”

They continued onward, the journey slow and steady. And as Parvella had said, she did work with Sophie, demonstrating

a few more advanced poses. Unlike when she had learned from Ridaln, and even unlike when she had been working with Parvella before, Sophie was not expected to master any of the physical poses. She was only required to master them mentally, to hold them in her mind, to filter the power that came out.

All of them had various strange purposes, and Sophie wasn't exactly sure why Parvella chose these poses in particular.

When she asked as they neared another stream, where the Raven Queen crouched down and trailed her finger through it again—presumably to test for the Shavln, though Sophie did not go with her to see if there was any evidence of that—Parvella merely shrugged.

“It is necessary for you to know a few techniques to protect yourself, and those that are with you. We do not know what we might encounter here. The poses that you have been using are progressive, a way for you to understand how to summon the power deep within you and then utilize it. That is the basis of all poses. But—and this is important, Sophie—there comes a time when you must learn how to modify poses. And there is only so much that I can help you with in those modifications. There is only so much that the Raven Queen can help you with in such modifications. You need to find your own answers and your own way of modifying the poses, as it may be beyond us.”

It surprised Sophie that Parvella was talking about her learning how to fight with sorcery, but given everything that they had been through so far, and how much Sophie had experienced, she was actually thankful that Parvella was willing to let her learn something along those lines.

They traveled until late. Then they camped, got up, and continued moving. Everybody was generally quiet, and it was late in the next day when they came upon more ruins, much like the last. Lan and Jalyn went off to look at them. Sophie realized that it was the ruins that had brought the Raven Queen out here.

“What does this have to do with Darius?” Sophie asked, heading over to the Raven Queen.

“It’s not exactly about Darius,” she said.

“Then what is it about?”

“It is...” She frowned, closing her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them, she looked off to the south.

Sophie turned, and she didn’t see anything.

But the Raven Queen had gone completely still.

More than that, though, Sophie was aware of something different.

Power.

It came from the Raven Queen.

Sophie had always known that the Raven Queen was a powerful sorcerer, and she had also known that the Raven Queen did not need any sort of pose to generate her power, nor to reveal it to the world. It was the suddenness of it that surprised her. Sophie had not been around the Raven Queen when she had used her strength to its fullest extent. Feeling it now, the way that it surged out from her, left Sophie...

Marveling at the scale of it.

Parvella had joined the Raven Queen, though.

“Sophie?” Lan asked.

Sophie shook her head. “I don’t know what it is,” she said. “Do you...”

She was surprised. Lan had his sword unsheathed, and it was glowing.

He was glowing.

What did he detect?

And more importantly, how had everybody else detected something before she had?

She thought about some of the poses that Parvella had been teaching her, but none of them offered her the knowledge

that she wanted right now. What she wanted was a way of understanding what was coming, and whether there was any danger. She didn't think that there could be, or that there should be, but she also wasn't about to wait for somebody else to tell her what was happening around her, not when she was a sorcerer, and she had her own way of detecting power.

She sat quietly, forming the prayer pose, and as she did, she began to feel...

Sophie wasn't exactly sure what she felt, but she definitely detected power.

And worse, it was coming toward them.

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CHAPTER 15

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SOPHIE

Sophie looked over at her brother, staying seated on her horse. She could feel something in the air, even though she wasn't exactly sure what it was, but whatever was out there, whatever power she was detecting, was coming toward them—and it was coming soon.

“Why do I get the sense that I'm missing something?” Jalyn asked.

“Be ready,” Lan said.

“You know, it would be awfully helpful if you would tell me what I need to be ready for,” she said, and then she looked at Sophie. “I don't suppose you can feel anything here?”

“Not particularly,” Sophie said. “I can feel something is out there, but I can't tell you what it is. Whatever it is, it is building with quite a bit of intensity, and it is coming right toward us.”

“I didn't tell you some of the things I was dealing with before I returned to Hester,” Lan said, and he hopped out of his saddle, looking up at Jalyn, who caught his eye and nodded. She climbed out of her saddle and joined him, sword unsheathed.

“Will you now?” Sophie said.

“There were creatures. Sometimes they were dangerous.”

“And we have to deal with these now?” Sophie looked over at the Raven Queen and Parvella, but both seemed rigid.

What is that?

Sophie frowned. She wondered what kind of power they were using and whether there was anything particular to it that she needed to know more about. She could feel some sort of surge of energy, and whatever it was they were detecting seemed to be tied to it in some manner.

She was still holding her prayer pose when Parvella sucked in a sharp breath.

Then the Raven Queen did the same.

What was it that they had detected, though? Sophie couldn't feel anything definite.

"Which pose should I use?" Sophie asked.

Neither woman answered her.

That was annoying.

Why would they not want her to learn about what was out there, so that she could detect it as they did?

But she was left with other questions, questions about what poses they knew she needed to better understand. She couldn't help but wonder if perhaps there was a different way for her to learn about this kind of power, and a different way in which she might be able to master these poses.

It was what she had hoped they were going to teach her from the very beginning, but in this case...

Sophie let out a frustrated sigh, and she hopped out of her saddle and came to stand next to her brother.

Lan looked over at her, shaking his head. "I don't think you should be here," he said.

"And I don't care what you think," Sophie snapped.

Jalyn snorted out a laugh.

Nevarn had climbed out of his saddle, and he was munching on a piece of jerky, holding on to his sword with his other hand. "My mother gets like this sometimes. There may not be anything coming at us. It depends on what she does and how she counters it, so you don't need to be too worried about it, especially if she is only reacting like this because she is

trying to hold some sort of pose that will allow her to push away this attack.” Nevarn shrugged. “To be honest, I’m not terribly concerned about it myself.”

“It’s not what she detects that I am concerned about,” Lan said, and he looked past Nevarn, over at the Raven Queen and Parvella, before turning his attention back outward.

“What do you detect, then?” Sophie asked.

She didn’t like the fact that her brother had a better grasp of magic than she did. Maybe he didn’t. Maybe what he had was his own unique connection, but given that he had a true connection to a god, and that connection gave him this ability, allowing him to glow, Sophie couldn’t help but feel she was missing out.

She knew that it was ridiculous, and she knew that there was no reason for her to feel jealousy for her brother, but she couldn’t shake it, and she couldn’t deny what she felt.

Sophie pushed out with the prayer pose.

Now that she was standing on the ground, she used a physical pose, which allowed her to draw upon even more power than she could otherwise. She felt the surge of energy deep within her, and she pushed outward, allowing it to flow in a way that permitted her to detect the pressure coming at her.

Much like Nevarn had suggested, though, something about what was coming at them had started to slow.

Was it tied to what the Raven Queen and Parvella were doing?

Once more Sophie wished that she understood their power, but she didn’t have any means of doing so, and she didn’t have any connection to it, nor did she even understand the pose that they were holding, if in fact it was a pose.

She looked over at her brother, who had stayed quiet, keeping his sword unsheathed.

“Be ready,” Lan said, looking over at Jalyn.

“Is this what you and Magnus were dealing with?” Jalyn asked.

“Something along these lines,” he said. “It depends on what’s coming at us. We dealt with barrow-wights and elantars, along with a few other things, but none of them were exactly dangerous. This feels more dangerous.”

“They weren’t dangerous?” Sophie asked. She had heard stories of barrow-wights, undead creatures that had been brought back to life through powerful magic. Her brother was talking about them as if they were nothing. What had he dealt with in the time that he had been away from her?

“Oh, I’m not saying that it wasn’t terrifying,” he said, “but they weren’t that difficult to deal with. There are certain magics that are harder to confront than others.”

Through the prayer pose, Sophie could feel the oncoming power building.

And then she saw them.

They were moving quickly. They looked like strange, elongated cats, with long, pointy heads, sharp ears, and fur the color of night. Stranger still, though, was the energy that she felt coming from them. There was a distinct sense of power, and it was that sense of power that left her unsettled. She had no idea what it was, but whatever was coming at them was considerable, and she knew better than to dismiss it.

She looked over at her brother again, trying to make sense of what she was feeling.

Lan seemed unbothered.

Then he darted forward.

She had seen him fighting, and she knew that he was skilled, but what she saw now... it was unlike anything she had ever seen before. There was a movement to it, a fluidity, that left her marveling at how skilled her brother was.

Jalyn hurried after him, and though she was a skilled Taihg, she did not have the same god touch that Lan did.

And as she darted after her brother, she had her blade upheld.

Nevarn looked over at Sophie. “Do you think I should join them?”

“Would you just let them fight without you?”

“Oh, I don’t know if I have much of a choice in the matter. It is possible that they will deal with it even before I get there.”

“I just thought that...”

She wasn’t sure what to make of the situation, and she wondered what could be done. Still, when Lan reached the first of the creatures, she felt the sudden burst of power coming from him. He swept his blade down, carving through one creature’s neck, decapitating it. Jalyn caught up to him then, and they faced another one.

A sudden gasp from behind her caught her attention, and she spun to see that the Raven Queen had sat up, and she had turned, forcing her focus outward.

“Well,” Sophie said, looking over at the Raven Queen, “it’s awfully nice that you have woken up.”

The Raven Queen frowned. She didn’t say anything, though.

At this point, Sophie didn’t know if there was anything that the Raven Queen could say. It did seem that something was wrong with her, something that Sophie couldn’t quite identify. Whatever she had been dealing with, there was...

Sophie didn’t know what there was. Some dangerous power? Whatever she had detected had impacted the Raven Queen in a way that Sophie could not follow.

It hadn’t affected Sophie, though.

Maybe she wasn’t powerful enough.

Or maybe she had to use the right pose. Whatever it was, Sophie knew better than to question it. Instead, she waited on

Lan and Jalyn, who made quick work of the creatures. Almost too quick, for Sophie's taste.

They didn't know if these were like the thisten, which could be salvaged in some way.

As Lan stood, bloody sword in hand, she pushed out with the prayer pose to see if there might be something that would explain what was happening. Frustratingly, she could not see or feel anything.

Finally Lan and Jalyn made their way back.

Jalyn had a worried look on her face, and it was one that Sophie understood.

"Well?" Sophie asked.

"They were easy enough to deal with," Lan said. He nodded to the Raven Queen and then to Parvella before taking his place in his saddle again.

Jalyn stared at him for a moment. She shook her head. "I do not care for that," she muttered.

"What is it?" Sophie asked.

Jalyn let out a heavy sigh, but then she turned her attention back to Sophie. "I don't care for him getting there first."

Sophie realized that she could not understand what it was like to be a soldier. And maybe she never should. They obviously had a very different view of the world, and maybe even a very different view of the power that they possessed.

Sophie took a seat in her saddle and guided her horse over to the Raven Queen and Parvella.

"What was that about?" Sophie asked them both.

Parvella shivered, as if shaking herself free from some dangerous power that was working through her.

"That was unpleasant," Parvella said.

"What pose did you use?"

Parvella looked over at the Raven Queen, who still hadn't fully recovered, though as Sophie watched, the Raven Queen

began to shake slightly, and then she turned her attention behind her.

“That was a mistake,” Parvella said. “I should’ve known better than to think that I could counter it. We are beyond the border of...”

“Beyond the border of what?” Sophie prompted.

Parvella smiled tightly. “It doesn’t matter,” she said.

“It does. I’m a part of this now,” Sophie went on, and she glanced from one woman to the other, letting frustration build within her. Sophie thought that she needed to know more about what was going on and what she might be able to do. If they didn’t tell her, how was she supposed to be a part of this venture? “Just share with me. I’m supposed to be here. I’m supposed to be a part of this.”

Parvella glanced over at the Raven Queen, who nodded.

“I suppose it’s for the best,” Parvella said. She looked over at Sophie again. “This is about the gods, as I imagine you understand.”

Sophie frowned. “What about the gods?”

“Are we going to just stay here?” Nevarn asked, climbing into his saddle again and then guiding his horse forward. He looked around, but the others had not paid much attention to him.

Sophie wondered whether she was going to learn anything from the Raven Queen. She had to hope that she might be able to uncover something, and she had to hope that they would share eventually. Perhaps now, as it seemed as if they were starting to say something, but then there was Nevarn.

The Raven Queen took a deep breath, nodding as she looked around. “Perhaps this is not the best place for it,” she said to Parvella.

“What?” Sophie asked. “We just had—”

“We just had an attack,” the Raven Queen said, the hardness in her tone suggesting that she wanted no argument, and given that she was a queen, Sophie didn’t think that there

was any point in attempting to argue with her. “It’s possible that they have tracked me, or it’s possible that they have been tracking the Taihg, who have been tracking these things.” She frowned, looking over to where Lan and Jalyn moved ahead of them. “At this point, I simply do not know.”

Sophie wanted to argue with her, but she did not know whether there was anything that she could say to counter what the Raven Queen was saying, to protest her unwillingness to share.

“You had me chasing information about the gods, so why won’t you share what you know with me?” Sophie asked.

“She has a point,” Parvella said.

“Yes,” the Raven Queen said. “And I’m telling you that it is not the time, nor the place. If you focus, you can feel it.”

Parvella surprised Sophie when she began to form a pose, as if she was taking on the Raven Queen’s instruction. Sophie would have expected Parvella, the one who had taught the Raven Queen, to be less likely to listen, but maybe...

Maybe there was nothing more to be said about their relationship, and maybe what Sophie needed to do, rather than arguing, was simply wait.

It was difficult for her.

She was tired. She was tired of not knowing. Sophie was tired of being left out of what was happening around her. And she was tired of feeling as if there were other things that she needed to know. But she also felt she had to be patient.

So she was.

They started off, and Nevarn looked over at Sophie. “Don’t worry,” he said, leaning close to her. “She will tell you. She is obviously picking up on something here.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Well,” he said, and then he shrugged, “to be honest, when it comes to my mother, I don’t know.” He breathed out. “I wish that I’d had more time with my father,” he admitted.

“I understand that,” Sophie said.

They rode onward, nobody speaking as they traveled, heading steadily west.

Sophie found herself wondering what they were after. More evidence of these ruins? And if they did find more, what did that mean? She simply had no idea whether they were going to find anything, and whether anything would make a difference to what was happening.

By the time night began to fall, Sophie was extremely frustrated, and she had been working through her poses, focusing on some of the new ones that Parvella had been teaching her, rolling through each of them, to the point where she thought there had to be something more to them. If there was some aspect of these poses that could be used in an attack, then perhaps she should know what it was, especially if they were going to run into something like those creatures again. Once they had stopped, made camp, and Nevarn was setting the fire, as he had taken to doing most evenings, Sophie stormed over to the Raven Queen. Lan and Jalyn were patrolling, to make sure that there was nothing dangerous nearby.

“Are we going to talk about this?”

“I’m not exactly sure what you want to talk about,” the Raven Queen said.

Parvella looked at Sophie. “We should talk about the poses that you have been practicing on the ride. You have done well.”

“Great,” Sophie said. “I can master these poses as quickly as I have because I have been doing nothing more than practicing. And yet I don’t even know what I need to be doing. You brought me out here, presumably because I have some connection to the gods, but after you had me working with you, trying to understand the connection to the gods, I am left with more questions than I have answers for. I think it’s time I got some answers, as I think that I deserve them.”

“She’s right,” Parvella said. “And I’ve been telling you this from the very beginning. She deserves to know.”

“She hasn’t been interested in knowing,” the Raven Queen said.

“I haven’t been interested? How do you know this? I have been doing nothing but looking for answers, trying to understand what I am supposed to do, and—”

“What you are supposed to do?”

“Well...” Sophie began, and then she nodded. “Yes.”

“I don’t think you are supposed to be doing anything. You are to learn. But the better question, and perhaps the one that is more important for you, is what reason we have in all of this.”

“And what reason is that?”

“What do you know about the gods?”

The sudden change was surprising, as she hadn’t expected the Raven Queen to actually answer her. “I suppose that I know what I’ve told you about, as I’ve been looking for information about the gods on your behalf for quite a while.”

“Yes, but that information was also for yourself, not only for me.”

“Why do I need to know about the gods?”

“You don’t think that somebody with your ability, and someone who is connected to your brother, with his ability, should know about the gods?”

Sophie realized that the Raven Queen had erected some sort of barrier around them.

It surprised her that she hadn’t felt it before now, but it seemed to be a transparent wall, one that surrounded them entirely, so that they could speak and nobody else could hear them. It troubled Sophie that the Raven Queen would want a barrier around them, but it also bothered Sophie that she hadn’t felt it.

The level of control...

The Raven Queen's level of control was amazing, more than Sophie thought she could ever replicate.

“So I have a connection to the gods, and Lan has a connection to the gods,” she went on. “What concern do you have about the gods? What does this have to do with the ruins?”

“You have always appreciated stories, Sophie,” the Raven Queen said. “What do the stories of the gods say?”

Sophie found herself frowning again, still troubled by this line of questioning, and she had no real idea where the Raven Queen was going with it, as increasingly, she felt as if there were no answers that would even appease the Raven Queen.

“It depends on the story,” Sophie said. “I suppose that if you hear some stories, the gods are helpful, at least to those who serve them, and if you hear others, the gods can be troublesome—to those who bother them—and others depict the gods just as powerful entities.”

The Raven Queen smiled. “An interesting assessment, and accurate, to a certain extent.”

“Accurate?”

“The gods are real, as your brother has helped you see.”

“Well, I suppose that I believe that,” Sophie said, shrugging, “but I have had a hard time understanding what you have been asking me to look into the gods for.”

“I've been asking you to look into the gods because there have been no new gods in quite some time.”

Sophie started to smile. “New gods?”

But then her smile died.

New and old.

The Heart of the Grove and Odian.

New and old.

How many new gods were there?

And for that matter, how many old gods were there?

When she had been researching this, she hadn't found any real answers. And all the time that she had been studying, searching for answers, she had not come across anything to help her find out what the Raven Queen might want to learn about the gods, and what Sophie might be able to do with that knowledge.

“Should there be new gods?” Sophie asked.

The Raven Queen nodded. She spread her hands out, and a faint light began to glow. It took on a pattern. The pattern reminded her of one of the ruins that they had visited. Then the pattern shifted, becoming another shape, one that reminded her of another set of ruins that they had visited. One by one, the Raven Queen continued to show these patterns, and one by one, the patterns glimmered into existence, creating images that Sophie could follow.

“Places like this crop up around places where the gods exist. Or I should say where the gods existed. There was a time when we saw evidence of things like this creeping up often. It revealed power. Sometimes unspeakable power. And because of that, we can track places where the gods appeared. Some of them were old; some of them were newer. And with the right use of power, you can get a sense of where they were.”

“I don't understand,” Sophie said. “So the gods are real,” she went on, and she realized that was true and that she probably should have known that even before hearing Lan talk about the Heart of the Grove, “and you are concerned that we haven't seen any new gods? Why is that an issue?” She paused as the realization hit her. “The god-touched. That's what you are concerned about.” She turned, looking back at her brother. “You think that people who are god-touched are somehow...”

“There are many things about this power that are unknown. I suspect that if you were to ask one of the gods,” the Raven Queen said, glancing at Parvella for a moment, “they would tell you the same thing. There are things they know about their power, and things they do not. It is often impossible to separate fact from fiction. Story from truth.”

“But why are we doing all of this, then?” Sophie looked around her. “Obviously, you think that this is something important, but what makes it important?”

“What makes it important is the people who believe,” the Raven Queen said.

“Who believe in the gods? I think you will find that there are quite a few people who believe in the gods.”

“No,” the Raven Queen said. “Those who believe in the power of what the gods can do, and that, Sophie, is not quite as straightforward as you might believe.”

Sophie frowned at that, wishing that she better understood just what the Raven Queen was getting at, but maybe she wasn't supposed to.

And maybe, Sophie wondered, she couldn't know anything about all of this, because the Raven Queen might not know about it. She'd had Sophie looking into information about the gods for some reason.

And that had to matter, didn't it?

“And what does Darius have to do with any of this?”

The Raven Queen smiled. “That is a better question, isn't it?”

The power that was wrapped around them suddenly faded. Sophie didn't know what the Raven Queen was doing, but she released the power, and then she smiled at Parvella before looking off into the distance, out into the night.

“Is Darius chasing the power of the gods?” Sophie asked.

“Is he chasing it, or is he destroying it?” the Raven Queen asked.

And Sophie didn't have an answer. But given what she had seen, what she had felt from the Shavln, and the way that it had been used against the Heart of the Grove, she thought she knew what the Raven Queen was suggesting.

If the Shavln could destroy the gods, what would happen to those who were god-touched?

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CHAPTER 16

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“What was that?” Sophie asked, looking over at Parvella.

Parvella was seated in front of a small fire. They had stopped near a pile of rocks, what Sophie presumed to be another set of strange and ancient ruins, and the Raven Queen had wandered out into the night, as she often had over the last few nights. Parvella pressed her hands together in what looked to be a very faint form of the prayer pose. Sophie wasn't entirely sure what Parvella was doing, but she could feel some energy coming off her. She wished that Parvella would tell her what she was doing, so that Sophie could be ready.

No. What she really wished was that the Raven Queen hadn't wandered off on her own. It irritated Sophie, though perhaps it should not. She was the Raven Queen, after all, and there was no reason that she couldn't go wandering away. She was one of the most powerful sorcerers in all the land, perhaps the most powerful.

Why shouldn't she be able to wander and see what she wanted to see and do what she wanted to do, especially if she was the reason that they had come out here?

But maybe she had gone because she had come out here for some specific reason, looking for some god power.

“I don't detect anything,” Parvella said softly.

Sophie got to her feet nonetheless, and she began to look around, feeling that there had to be something out here. She

was certain that she detected something.

She looked over at her brother.

He was standing, his body entirely rigid, though he also seemed somehow at ease. It was a strange combination, and something that Sophie found herself marveling at. These days, when she saw her brother, she was more and more aware of the fact that he was a soldier, nothing else. He left her admiring his skill and how much he had changed from the boy back in their home village. What would Nana have said if she had seen Lan like this?

Would she be proud?

Sophie found herself questioning that about herself as well. Would Nana have been pleased with the fact that Sophie had become a sorcerer? Or would she have been disappointed that Sophie had not followed a different path, into the Weavers' Guild, using the techniques that Nana had taught her to possibly become a Karell?

There were times when Sophie found herself wondering whether her nana would even have appreciated the kinds of things that Sophie was able to do, or maybe she would have found a way to tell a story about the kinds of things that Sophie had learned to do, but whatever else had happened, Sophie recognized that she had followed her own path and become the story that she had needed to tell. It left her feeling she was doing something useful.

And maybe that was enough. Maybe that was all she needed to do, and all her nana would have wanted for her.

She strode over to her brother, and she formed the prayer pose in her mind, letting some of it flow out from her. As she did, she didn't detect anything.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. Sophie used enough of the pose that she was able to feel the people who had arranged themselves around her. She could feel Lan and Jalyn, and even Nevarn, where he was lying as if curled up asleep, though she doubted that he was truly asleep, and even Parvella. She

couldn't tell what Parvella was doing, though she was holding on to power.

Whatever it was, Sophie was ready to use her own power.

Lan frowned at her. "What are you doing?"

"I felt something," Sophie said.

"There's nothing out here," Jalyn said, moving over to stand next to Sophie.

Sophie was aware of something else from Jalyn. She had power as well, maybe as much as Lan did, as the kind of power that she detected was considerable. It left Sophie thinking that perhaps Jalyn was even more powerful than she had realized.

But then again, everything that she knew about the Taihg indicated that they were connected to the gods. The Raven Queen had suggested that fact and told her that they had access to a different kind of power. Sophie wanted to understand, but at this point, she simply did not.

"I felt something," Sophie said again.

Once again she focused on the prayer pose.

She could harness power. She could harness even more were she to perform the pose, not just use it in her mind. Even though she had been able to focus on the power, using it without even moving, she had discovered that there was even more potency when she did use her body to harness something deeper. She twisted, forming the prayer pose, raising one foot and pressing her hands together. Lan looked over at her, frowning at her for a long moment, but Sophie ignored him.

She held her pose and then began to focus power deep inside herself, letting it spill out of her. As she did, she began to feel the effect of the prayer pose. It flowed out and away from her.

Sophie had not used power like this in quite some time. And as she did now, she let it sweep away from her and gush down toward where she knew the Raven Queen had gone.

That was what she had felt, wasn't it? The Raven Queen's power. As she let the prayer pose energy continue to flow away from her, she confirmed that there was something out there.

Power.

Quite a bit of power.

But it wasn't just the Raven Queen's.

Sophie recognized the power of the Raven Queen quite well, much like she had recognized Ridaln's pattern on the map. The fact that she now felt something different left her worried about what it was, and why it was out here.

She started forward, and Jalyn hurried after her.

"There's something wrong," Sophie said.

"There's nothing," Jalyn said.

"I felt it," Sophie said. "And I know what it is, but I don't know where it is, and I want to be ready for it."

Jalyn unsheathed her blade and nodded. "Then I will come with you."

Sophie was surprised by how much that helped her relax. Maybe it shouldn't be surprising. Having a Taihg with her was useful, especially with something like this, especially when she didn't know what she was going to be dealing with and whether it was dangerous. But she was even more relieved when her brother joined her.

It was just the three of them, but...

But maybe their number didn't matter.

"Where are you going?" Nevarn called out, jogging toward them.

Sophie looked over her shoulder at him, and she wanted to tell him to go back, to keep an eye on Parvella, but even Parvella had gotten to her feet and started after them.

That was surprising.

Sophie locked eyes with Parvella, wondering if the other sorcerer had detected anything, but the woman didn't say anything. Instead, she just followed behind Nevarn, as if she were worried about him more than anything else. And maybe she was. It was possible that the Raven Queen had instructed Parvella to keep an eye on Nevarn, given everything that he had been through, everything that had changed for him, and had instructed her to make sure that he wasn't somehow contaminated or tainted in the way that he had been before. Sophie didn't detect anything that made her think that there would be any sort of taint nearby, but she wanted to be careful. She didn't know what she didn't know.

Sophie looked into the distance, straining to make sense of what was out there.

She felt something. She was certain of it.

"There's something up here," Sophie said. "I feel power, and I'm not exactly sure what it is. But it is considerable."

Lan was glowing, though he had not unsheathed his sword. Sophie wondered why, as Jalyn had already unsheathed her blade, but perhaps it was tied to the fact that he glowed when he moved, and maybe he was concerned that his glowing would reveal their presence if he were to draw his sword.

Sophie jogged forward, holding the power of the prayer pose in her mind, and as she sent it flowing away from her, she continued to detect something. As she drew closer, she realized that it was sorcery, and as she started to slow, she recognized that not only was it sorcery, but it was not the Raven Queen's.

The only other sorcerers that Sophie had really been around besides the Raven Queen and Parvella were Ridaln and Darius.

Ridaln had a power that Sophie would have recognized. This was not Ridaln. She didn't know if she would recognize Darius, as she had not spent any time around him and didn't know if she would even know how to detect his kind of magic.

This was unfamiliar power.

Not only that, but it was the power of more than one sorcerer.

As far as she could tell, there had to be at least five.

She slowed, looking ahead, passing along a series of hills.

“There are quite a few up here,” Lan said.

Sophie glanced over at him. “You can feel them?”

“I can see them,” he said.

Jalyn frowned at him, but she didn’t say anything.

Sophie didn’t think that there was anything that she could say to him, either. The fact that Lan could see sorcery opened up quite a few possibilities.

Then again, she wouldn’t be here without the power that Lan possessed, the power the Heart of the Grove had gifted him. She wasn’t sure what it was, but it seemed to her that he had power that she couldn’t even fathom.

Parvella moved next to her. “Show me what you feel.”

“How much time do we have?” Sophie asked. “If the Raven Queen is in any difficulty—”

“You’re talking about the Raven Queen, and sorcerers. If there is anything up there”—from the tone of Parvella’s voice, Sophie could tell that she wasn’t convinced that there was—“then the Raven Queen is unlikely to be in much danger. She would, however, need you to help me know what you have detected.”

With a frustrated sigh, Sophie focused on her prayer pose and let the energy that she summoned through it spill out from her. Sorcerers were unlikely to be of any danger to the Raven Queen, unless Darius was here.

But he wouldn’t have come here—not to risk himself.

Her brother touched her arm, and she felt a wave of warmth flow from him and into her.

Was this the gift of the Heart of the Grove?

And if it was, why did it work for Sophie?

She took a few steps forward, still holding the prayer pose and feeling the flow of Lan's power, and she saw a faint shimmering. As she did, she recognized the patterns that these sorcerers were holding. It was a containment pattern, and it seemed to be linked from one to another, as if the five sorcerers were circling something.

And Sophie's mouth went dry as soon as she felt that.

Her heart began to hammer.

"They have the Raven Queen encircled," she said.

Even as she focused on them, she was certain of what she felt. She could feel the different patterns, and she could detect the way that they were circling the Raven Queen. Maybe it was what Lan had given her, the way that his power worked through her, that permitted her the ability to detect much more than she would have been able to feel otherwise. Whatever it was, Sophie felt a rising certainty about what was out here.

"If you've detected sorcery, then we will need to disrupt it. Do you know the jial pose?"

Sophie frowned, but she nodded. "I do."

"Good. This, with enough of a strike, will permit you to slam into what they are doing. It will need to be precise, Sophie. Do you think you can do that?"

Sophie nodded again. "I can do it. I don't know if I can do it while moving, though."

"I would not ask you to do that." Parvella looked over at Nevarn and then glanced at Jalyn and Lan. "I need all of you to create a diversion. And if there are sorcerers, there are likely to be soldiers as well."

"They won't be able to harm my mother," Nevarn said.

"If it were fewer than five, I would say that you were right," Parvella said. "But the numbers matter, even against your mother. Your mother is powerful and competent, and she is skilled, but it is possible that she was surprised, and something like that may have overwhelmed her ability to defend against this kind of attack." She nodded to Sophie. "We

will get as close as we need to, but we are going to have to attack from a distance. Do you have that ability?"

Sophie nodded.

"Very well. We will go."

At this point, Parvella took the lead, and they reached a small rise. From there, Sophie could see the faint shimmering more clearly. It was dark enough that she could make out the shimmering encircling something up ahead, as if there was a purposeful danger. But there was something more than that. She also felt a pressure out there. And it took her a moment to realize just what it was. It was the Raven Queen fighting back against whatever was happening here. She could feel her power, and she could feel the way that it was sweeping outward, even though she wasn't able to do much with it.

"The three of you must go," Parvella said. "We will offer whatever support we can, but first we must save her."

Lan nodded, and he looked over at Sophie. "Are you going to be all right?"

"I think so," she said.

"Can you do this?" It was the better question, but it was a question that Sophie didn't want to answer—at least, not to Lan.

She knew the jial pose, but the problem was what accompanied the pose, and she also had a sneaking suspicion that she was going to have to work quickly. And working quickly with a pose like this had a different sort of danger. She needed to form the pose to rescue the Raven Queen, but it was more than just rescuing the Raven Queen. She was going to have to deal with five sorcerers.

And that, more than anything else, worried Sophie. Even once she rescued the Raven Queen, there was a danger with these sorcerers. Sophie thought that she could handle some of them, but how many?

And how many of the sorcerers would her brother be able to defeat? He was a Taihg, but Sophie didn't know if he would

be able to do enough to make a difference here. She worried that they might be overpowered.

She was unprepared for something like this.

And she couldn't help but feel the Raven Queen had known that all along.

That was probably why she hadn't involved Sophie, but now there was no choice. She needed to be ready. She had to help the Raven Queen. If she couldn't, too much would fail.

"I'm ready," she said, turning to Parvella.

"Good. We will begin."

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CHAPTER 17

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Lan raced forward, following Jalyn. He hadn't unsheathed his sword, as the moment that he did, the sorcerers would know he was there. He wanted to give Sophie and Parvella the opportunity to summon the power they needed.

Warmth bloomed inside him, and he pushed it out.

He didn't have control over it yet, but maybe the Heart of the Grove didn't need him to.

"We are going to need your blade," Nevarn said.

"The moment he unsheathes, they'll know that we are coming," Jalyn said, without looking back.

They hurried forward, but Lan began to feel something. He had a growing sense of unease the farther he ran, and it left him thinking that he would need to be ready for a challenge.

"I think we could use your light now," Jalyn said.

Lan frowned at her, wondering what she knew, but she didn't say anything.

So he unsheathed. The blade glowed, illuminating the night, pressing back darkness and shadows.

As it did, he caught sight of soldiers... and creatures.

They were massive, looking something like wolves, but with enormous heads, tall, pointed ears, and jaws that seemed a little too long. All had black or gray fur, some striped, and bounded toward them. There had to be a dozen swarming this hillside.

He swore under his breath.

Jalyn growled. “Stay together,” she said. “Don’t let them get too close.”

Lan pointed toward one of the nearest creatures. He knew what he needed to do, even though he hated that he had to do it. He pushed on the warmth inside him, and it flowed out through his arms, into his blade, and blasted the creature.

It roared and then collapsed.

The soldiers and other creatures turned toward them and started racing in their direction.

Lan pushed warmth through the end of his blade, and it struck an oncoming soldier. A wave of weakness washed over him. He stumbled, but then Jalyn was there. She drove her blade into the soldier and then spun, catching the blade of another.

Lan fell into a rhythm.

There was a certain comfort in fighting. Ever since he had trained with the blade, he had felt this comfort, and he had felt the sense of ease of having a sword in hand, facing a combatant. There was just something natural about it.

He slid closer to Jalyn, and he focused on the power in his blade. Energy filled him. It was as if the Heart of the Grove stayed with him, guiding his blade. The soldiers remaining gave him a bit more space. As did the creatures.

They didn’t stop Lan. He pointed his blade at each of the creatures, sending a burst of power out.

The attack had shifted, though. No longer were the blasts of light from the end of his blade as effective as they had been. It was as if the creatures—or the soldiers—had adjusted in some way.

Maybe the sorcerers are providing protection.

Or perhaps he had lost strength.

Lan did not know whether there were limits to how much power the Heart of the Grove could offer him. He had been

using his power quite a bit, especially when he had helped his sister, and then when he had flooded the plain with light, and when he had started to blast energy outward. All of that use of magic might have depleted his power.

Lan also feared drawing too much. He didn't know whether drawing a lot of power would affect the Heart of the Grove, though that wasn't why he really hesitated. Lan didn't know what fully connecting to the power would do to *him*.

He looked over at Jalyn, who clenched her jaw tightly. She was looking outward.

"I count a dozen remaining," she said.

"Same," Lan said.

"Why are they coming at us?" Nevarn asked.

"I suspect they are giving Lan a chance to burn out as much as he can, and waiting to see how much power he has left," Jalyn said. "And given what I have sensed from Lan, I think that was probably a good strategy. Are you starting to get tired?"

"I'm fine," he said.

"Are you sure about that?"

Lan could feel the warmth within him, but it was fading. It wasn't nearly as potent as it had been before, and he wished that he could draw upon more than he had, but even as he tried to do so, he felt the warmth starting to flutter inside him. As much as he wanted to summon more, he just did not have the strength for it.

"I'm trying," he said.

"Well, do more than just trying," Jalyn said, and she looked over at Nevarn. "You are plenty good with your blade, but do you have a connection?"

"I don't talk about it," Nevarn said.

"You may need to," she said.

He didn't have a chance to respond, as three attackers came at them.

It was two soldiers and one creature.

Surprisingly, it seemed the creature was the one leading the attack.

But then, given what Magnus had said, about how they had once been sorcerers and had become corrupted, Lan couldn't help but feel that perhaps that made sense.

If his connection to the Heart of the Grove faded, he would have only one option—he would have to fight naturally.

That wouldn't be so bad, would it?

He roared as he raced forward.

And then he felt a burst of energy against him. Lan recognized what he was feeling and where it was coming from: the creature.

It was using sorcery.

He focused on the heat inside him.

“If you're there, I need your help, Heart of the Grove,” he whispered.

He had no idea whether that would make a difference, as the Heart of the Grove had never responded to his calls for help before, but he needed to draw upon her. He needed her strength.

But there was a possibility he had already drawn too much from the goddess.

The creature fell upon him.

The soldiers had split off, going for Nevain and Jalyn, as if the creature had recognized that Lan was the significant danger. Almost too late, Lan realized that there was another one, and it had come up behind him.

Lan dropped his blade and then drove it upward.

He feigned moving off to the side and then pushed warmth through his blade.

Light exploded around him, so that he could see the other creatures.

There were three now. They had been trying to separate him from the others. It had worked. And the soldiers had Jalyn and Nevarn surrounded.

The power in Lan continued to flutter.

He had to draw on even more.

One of the creatures swiped at him. Lan thrust his blade out, swinging toward it, but his arms felt heavy. He was forced back. He nearly collided with another creature behind him.

Lan swore under his breath again.

He was surrounded.

This was too much. He wasn't going to escape.

Lan needed to find a way. He had to get past this.

The only way was to allow that warmth to consume him.

Lan felt it there within him, but he feared it. He had been unwilling to allow it to flood him the way that he thought he now needed it to.

He stood for a moment, holding his blade in front of him, ready for the attack.

The creatures all surrounded him, as if waiting for him.

But waiting for what?

He stopped fighting.

Lan feared his power—and the gods—not knowing what this connection meant for him. He still didn't, but now was not the time to fight it.

A surge of warmth flooded him, and it was nearly overwhelming.

The oncoming power felt unlike anything he'd ever experienced. It was simply *more*. More of the gods. More of that connection. More power.

Lan turned, angling his blade toward the nearest of the creatures, and struck it in the chest. The creature roared but then turned to dust.

He spun, still holding the power inside himself, and he let the next blast strike the next creature, and much like the last one, it exploded into a spray of dust.

By the time he spun to the third one, it had turned away, as if it had realized what Lan was doing. Lan blasted it with the energy within him.

He looked over at Jalyn and Nevarn, and both were surrounded by soldiers. He had used his blade against the creatures, but he had never done anything like that against the soldiers. He tried angling toward one of the soldiers and took a stumbling step. Power exploded from the end of his blade, catching the soldier in the chest. He then fell into one of the other soldiers. It gave Jalyn an opening, and she darted forward, driving her blade into the belly of one, spinning and decapitating another. Lan turned toward Nevarn, but Nevarn had already handled his soldiers.

Lan sank to his knees, trying to focus, but everything within him was going black.

The glowing energy was starting to fade, retreating steadily, until it was nothing. Then he went cold. It was a strange, shocking sort of cold, and Lan could barely hold on to the warmth, but he knew that he was going to have to try to keep himself awake. He looked up at Jalyn, his vision going blurry, and struggled to keep the warmth inside himself.

Jalyn crouched next to him. She had a hand on him. He could feel the warmth of her touch, and there was something in her eyes... Was it concern?

“Relax,” she said.

“We need to stop the attack,” he said.

“Relax,” she repeated. “You’ve done enough. Maybe too much.”

“But we need...”

She touched his arm again, and Lan felt his grip on his sword begin to fade. He was holding onto it but couldn’t control it. The only thing he was aware of, the only power he

was aware of, was an energy here. He tried to strain but didn't have enough strength.

Could they have stopped the creatures but failed to save the Raven Queen?

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CHAPTER 18

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SOPHIE

Sophie focused on the jial pose.

It was a complicated one, and she had the extra challenge of trying to hold it in her mind. She looked over at Parvella, who was standing motionless, though there was a distinct sense of energy coming from her. Sophie tried to model herself after Parvella, as she had tried to ever since Parvella had begun to teach her.

“Just focus,” Parvella said.

“I’m trying. It’s just...”

“Do not pay attention to what your brother and the others are doing, as that will only distract you.”

And as soon as Parvella said this, Sophie realized that a burst of glowing energy began to build from Lan. It was powerful, though she had seen it before. It was power from the Heart of the Grove, and it left her marveling at the considerable gift of magic that her brother had been given. And were she honest with herself, she was a bit jealous. She had struggled to gain control over her own magic through the poses.

She had to focus, ignore what her brother was doing, and what Jalyn and Nevarn were doing, and ignore... How many soldiers were down there?

But it wasn’t just soldiers.

Her pose faltered, and the power that she had been summoning faltered as well.

Some strange, wolflike creatures standing on two legs attacked her brother, Jalyn, and Nevarn. They emanated power that unsettled her.

Magic.

Sophie had heard stories of such things. Nana had told her quite a few stories of magical creatures, though she had never seen any in the time that she had known about her own type of magic. And Lan did not seem at all bothered by them. He was strong. Brave. Every bit the Taihg soldier.

She turned her attention away. Lan would be fine.

But she would not.

Neither would the Raven Queen unless Sophie got this pose right. She had to focus, so she pushed out all distractions the way that Parvella, and Ridaln, had taught her. That was going to be the key for Sophie to summon the necessary pose and power to attack these sorcerers and the containment that they used on the Raven Queen.

“You need to maintain your focus,” Parvella said, though she didn’t turn to Sophie at all. There was an urgency to Parvella and how she held her power, though.

The Raven Queen was not moving. That alone was worrisome to Sophie.

“What happens if these five sorcerers—”

“We are not going to talk about the possibility of our failure,” Parvella said.

There was a very real urgency in her tone now. Sophie didn’t know if the kind of power she could summon would be enough. But if it wasn’t, then the Raven Queen would fall.

Sophie could feel the power coming from the sorcerers, a considerable energy that bloomed into the night and encircled the Raven Queen with tendrils of power.

Focus.

Sophie focused on the pose, contorting her body, ignoring the look that Parvella cast in her direction. She couldn’t form

the mental pattern. It wouldn't be potent enough. At this point, Sophie wanted to generate the most power that she could, and she knew that the only way she would be able to do that was by twisting her body into the actual pose.

As the power built, Sophie turned her attention to Parvella.

"We will strike on my count," Parvella said.

"Whenever you're ready," Sophie said.

Parvella started her count. "Three... two... one."

Sophie unleashed her power. She targeted the five sorcerers that surrounded the Raven Queen. A burst of energy crossed the distance.

The power struck the circle.

"Come," Parvella said.

She started forward, gliding across the ground.

Sophie hesitated a moment.

She wasn't a soldier, but she had to go after Parvella. She had to help the Raven Queen.

The Taihg, including her brother, had surrounded the creatures and the other fighters. Sophie didn't think there was anything she could do to help them, anyway. Lan wasn't glowing quite as brightly as before, which worried her somewhat. There may be limits to his connection to the Heart of the Grove.

She tried not to think about it, following Parvella.

They had scarcely gone a dozen paces when a burst of energy came toward them.

Sophie hurriedly formed the prayer pose in her mind, not at all taking the time to pause and form the physical pose. She cast it outward, creating a large swirl of power that reached past Parvella, who skidded to a stop and froze in place.

When the attack struck Sophie, she braced for her pattern to destabilize.

It flowed past her.

Parvella looked in her direction but then turned and darted forward. Sophie raced after her.

“What do I do?” Sophie asked.

“You defend yourself,” Parvella began, “and you get to her.”

“What about you?”

“You do not need to worry about me. If we manage to disrupt their connection, then I can handle much of this.”

Sophie wasn't sure if that was true. She knew Parvella was gifted, but she also knew that she wasn't as powerful as Sophie. Nor was she as powerful as the Raven Queen. For her to take on multiple sorcerers...

One of the sorcerers turned in front of Sophie.

She focused on the prayer pose, and she turned it outward.

The prayer pose was little more than a focus of her energy, and she could use it to detect other power, but she could also use it to unleash summoned magic in an uncontrolled fashion. When she targeted one of the sorcerers, the man grunted and collapsed under the impact of her power.

Parvella looked at her. “Do not waste your strength on them.”

“We can remove them as a threat,” Sophie said.

“I will remove them as a threat.”

“I'm stronger than you. You need to get to her.”

Parvella looked as if she wanted to argue, but she didn't. Instead, she let out a soft sigh. “It is unfortunate that you must train in this way, Sophie. Use a combination of the lisathn pose, the ardil pose, and perhaps even the whistle pose.”

All of them were fairly standard poses, but the combination made sense in this situation.

Sophie focused on the ardil pose. It was a fairly easy one. She didn't need a dangerous amount of power. Just enough to disrupt. And if she was able to do that, then she might be able

to send enough power to give Parvella a chance to slide forward. If she could take out one more sorcerer, she might buy herself some time.

A considerable burst of energy struck her, and Sophie was pushed back.

She tried to look behind her and realized that the soldiers and the strange creatures were there. Thankfully, Lan and his glowing blade were dealing with them, but for how much longer?

Holding her prayer pose, she began to focus on another turn that might be useful. She could feel the magic these sorcerers used and twisted her pose ever so slightly. When she did, a burst of power slipped away, and then she was free.

Sophie stumbled, disrupting the poses that she was holding.

She hurriedly scrambled to regain control over the power.

She hurried up the hillside, and she saw the sorcerer lying motionless. He was dressed in a dark robe, a metal chain hanging around his neck, and his eyes were closed. He seemed to be breathing, though Sophie didn't care at this point. She was tempted to check if he had anything on him but decided that could wait until she knew if the Raven Queen and Parvella needed help.

She hurried up the hill and saw Parvella standing just outside the ring of now four sorcerers.

Sophie used an unfocused blast of power from the prayer pose as she targeted one of the sorcerers. It crackled through a barricade the sorcerer had, and sent him staggering back until he fell.

Sophie darted forward, but not nearly as quickly as Parvella did. She had already reached the Raven Queen, and she held one hand up over her head, one hand down at the ground, forming a pose that Sophie had never seen before. Parvella began to glow.

It reminded Sophie of Lan when he called upon the power of the Heart of the Grove. Parvella was busy focusing on the

Raven Queen, which meant that Sophie was going to have to take care of these sorcerers.

Where was her brother?

Where were Jalyn and Nevarn?

She paused, bringing herself into the prayer pose. Then energy slammed into her.

She stumbled, staggering out of the pose, but thankfully, she was holding on to some aspect of the pose in her mind, which offered her a measure of protection. Had Ridaln not tormented her by knocking her down as she had been learning, Sophie wasn't sure that she would have been able to maintain this pose with such concentration.

The three sorcerers turned their focus to her.

One of them sneered at her.

Rather than moving, Sophie stared at the nearest of the attackers, and she focused on the prayer pose. She modified the posture ever so slightly, using the same modification that she had used when she had targeted the other sorcerers.

When power slammed away from her, it knifed toward the nearest sorcerer.

He had begun to move his feet into something of a pose, but Sophie's blast of power swept through his and collided with him. It didn't have nearly the strength that it had when she had been able to hold her posture, but it had enough.

The sorcerer staggered.

She didn't give him a chance to reset and raced toward him while holding her hands out, using her fingertips as a focus point. That wasn't how the prayer pose should work, but it was such an easy pose that she saw how it could. When the burst of pale energy streaked from her fingers, it slammed into the sorcerer, and he collapsed.

She looked toward the next of them, and there were only two remaining, one on either side of the Raven Queen.

Neither paid any attention to Sophie. Whatever they were doing to the Raven Queen required their full attention.

Parvella maintained her pose, one hand to the sky, one hand to the ground, and she seemed locked in a rigid posture. Sophie had never seen a pose like that. The sorcerers took a step toward Parvella.

Parvella cried out.

She was glowing, but the glowing started to fade a little.

Parvella needed her help.

Sophie had attempted multiple poses at one time before, posturing her body in one and holding another in her mind, but this time would be different. She had to focus on two poses in her mind. That was extremely complicated but not more than she could achieve. She held them and then pushed outward.

The concentrated magic created a beam of energy that blasted away from her.

It wasn't enough. She shifted her feet. She had to try something different.

Could she use the pose Parvella used?

Obviously, it was powerful, even if Sophie didn't understand it.

She brought her hand up, pressed the other one down, and then focused. She used the prayer pose, as if she were trying to call to the energy of the gods. And perhaps that was what she was doing. She reached for power, to draw it through her, through the ground, and then what?

Sophie didn't know what it would do, and at this point, she wasn't even sure that she cared. The only thing that she cared about was that it worked. She sent more of it through herself and felt an unfamiliar buildup. It concentrated everything that she could draw upon in a way that she had not attempted. As power continued to bloom inside her, Sophie focused, sending it splitting through the dual prayer poses that she was holding.

Parvella looked in her direction, her eyes going wide. She mouthed one word at Sophie. "No."

The energy building within her was overwhelming. Something crackled deep inside her that Sophie had never felt before, a massive connection that was greater than anything she had ever drawn. She held her pose, maintained her focus, and targeted the two sorcerers.

When it blasted into them, overwhelming strength surged away from her and shot toward the sorcerers like lightning bolts.

Sophie collapsed. She couldn't move.

She felt as if she had dipped into some impossible power, as if she had touched the gods themselves.

She rolled her head, looking over at Parvella, who had slumped down onto the Raven Queen, neither of them moving.

Sophie needed to get to them, but her body didn't work. As she attempted to move toward Parvella and the Raven Queen, she collapsed, the world going black.

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CHAPTER 19

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SOPHIE

Sophie came around slowly. The sky was dark overhead, and she had no idea how long she'd been unconscious. It seemed like an eternity to her. Sophie could scarcely remember what had happened, but it seemed she had been drawing upon impossible power, which had flowed through her in a way that she had never felt before.

And she had single-handedly stopped five sorcerers.

She started to sit up, but her head pounded.

“Take it easy,” a voice said nearby.

Sophie licked her lips. They were dry, and her mouth wasn't working the way that it should. Her tongue felt thick and heavy. The last time she had drawn on power like that was when she had first begun to use sorcery with Ridaln. She had felt it exploding out of her and had nearly lost control of it... more than once.

“What happened?” Sophie asked.

“You're fine,” Nevarn said.

“I'm not fine, as I can't move. Tell me what's happening and what happened to me.”

“It sounds like you saved my mother,” Nevarn said. He leaned close to her, and though her vision was blurry, she could see him. There was worry written in his eyes.

Sophie licked her lips again, trying to work some feeling and some moisture back into them, but nothing worked the way that it should.

“What did you do?” Nevarn asked, his voice little more than a whisper.

Sophie tried to shake her head, but it throbbed. “I don’t know. I felt... well, I felt some sort of power. I tried to reach for it to stop the sorcerers.”

“You took down all of them?”

“I guess,” Sophie said.

Nevarn whistled. It was a soft, impressed sound. He leaned closer to her, and once again Sophie was aware of his presence in a way that she had not been before. It was as if she could feel something coming off him. There seemed to be a faint shimmering to him, as if he were glowing, the same way that Parvella had glowed when she had held one hand to the sky and one hand to the ground. Could Nevarn be using some sort of sorcery now? Sophie knew he had some potential, but she had never seen him demonstrating it. Why show it to her now?

Unless he doesn’t intend to.

Sophie wondered if he had any control over it. He probably did not.

“What is it?” Sophie asked.

“I was just whistling because you did something that obviously even my mother couldn’t do. She was tapped by those sorcerers. Maybe she didn’t realize they were there, and they had her surrounded before she had an opportunity to react, but either way, you managed to defeat them, and she didn’t.”

Sophie tried to sit up again. This time, she found that her body worked properly. Her arms and back and legs were sore. She licked her lips again, realizing that she was sitting next to a crackling fire. It looked like they were still sitting on the hillside where they had been fighting the sorcerers.

“Why are we still here?” Sophie asked.

“Jalyn didn’t think it was wise for us to move anybody,” Nevarn said. “I went back for the supplies and brought

everything here. She started a fire, then brought your brother and my mother to it.”

My brother?

“What happened to Lan?” Sophie asked, worry suddenly filling her more than it had for the Raven Queen.

She had seen it herself, though, and thought that she understood. Lan had been drawing upon too much power. Much like her, probably. Sophie had not realized that there was a limit to how much sorcery she could summon, but obviously, there was some natural limitation, and she had touched upon it.

But that wasn’t the way that it had felt when she had been drawing upon it. In fact, Sophie had felt that she had been tapping into something much deeper than herself, a well of power deeper than she had ever drawn from before.

“I don’t know,” Nevarn said. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it before. He seemed to be shooting power out of the end of his blade. Then he... just collapsed. Jalyn said he’d spent quite a bit of himself, and Parvella concurred.”

“How’s Parvella?”

Sophie didn’t even know how Parvella had ended up. She had collapsed on top of the Raven Queen.

“Parvella is fine. She did say that she had to exert herself more than she ever has, or at least, as long as she’s been working with my mother.” Nevarn glanced behind himself before turning his attention back to Sophie. “But she seems to be as well as she can be. I don’t know, to be honest. I haven’t seen Parvella fight before. I don’t even know what she was doing.”

“She was using a pose I’ve never seen before,” Sophie said. “And I mimicked it.”

“You followed a pose you’ve never used before?”

Sophie nodded. “I didn’t know what it was going to do, but I assumed that it was powerful. There were two sorcerers

remaining, and they were targeting your mother. I did whatever I had to do to help her.”

Nevarn breathed out again. “She’s not going to like that.”

“Your mother’s not going to like the fact that she survived?”

“Oh, I’m quite certain that she’s going to be pleased she survived,” Nevarn said, and there was something to the tone of his voice that left Sophie a little bit worried about what he wasn’t telling her, “but I do think that she’s not going to like the fact that you had to help her.” He started to laugh, but then he trailed off, leaning toward Sophie once again. “She can be a bit arrogant.”

“She will recover,” Parvella said.

Sophie looked to where she stood, her shadow looming over Sophie. A faint glow still persisted around Parvella. It was the same glow that she had seen when Parvella had formed her pose during the fight. Was Parvella holding one of her poses even now?

“What happened to her?”

“I’m not entirely certain, but I suspect those sorcerers were trying to harness the god-touched connection that the Raven Queen possesses.”

“Were they trying to kill her to claim it?” Sophie asked.

Another question plagued her, though. If they could drain that power, would they do the same to her? To her brother? To all that were god-touched?

“I don’t know,” Parvella said, and she sounded much more concerned than before. She leaned forward and touched Nevarn on the shoulder. “You should go and sit by her so that I can talk with Sophie.”

Nevarn leaned toward Sophie, and he surprised her by taking her hands, squeezing for a moment, before getting to his feet. “I’m going to be right over here. If you need anything...”

At this moment, the only thing that she wanted was water.

“Can I get something to drink?”

Nevarn bobbed his head, then got to his feet and hurried over to his mother. He grabbed a waterskin and carried it back to Sophie, glancing at Parvella as he handed it to her. He said nothing.

Sophie took a long drink, forcing herself to keep swallowing, though she did have a moment of pause. They had a limited supply of clean and fresh water, and she wasn't sure that she could trust they could clean water they found if it was contaminated by the Shavln.

When she set the waterskin down, Parvella was watching her.

“Have you had enough?” Parvella asked.

“I just feel so dry,” Sophie said.

Parvella settled on the ground next to her, crossing her legs and resting her elbows on her knees, her hands crossed in her lap. Sophie wasn't familiar with this type of pose, but she could feel some power coming from it.

She leaned toward Sophie. “Why did you follow what I was doing?”

Sophie looked away. “I needed to try whatever I could to help the Raven Queen. I couldn't tell what the sorcerers were doing, but I could feel something. I didn't know what it was. It seemed they were linked together, though the other three were no longer there. And you and she were trapped in the middle. I saw the way that you were fighting, and then I saw that your glow started to flicker.” Sophie shook her head. “I knew that I shouldn't be involved, but I also knew that there was nothing I could do without trying. And so I split my focus, formed two prayer poses, and...”

And she wasn't sure how she was supposed to comment on the fact that she had modeled her pose after what Parvella had done, nor was she sure how she was supposed to tell her that she had no idea what she had been doing, or how she had felt the way the power had bloomed inside her, welling up from

some deep and distant place that Sophie had never felt before. At this point, she wasn't sure that even mattered.

“Well,” Parvella said, “you have advanced even more than I think the Raven Queen anticipated.”

She leaned back, her hands still clasped in her lap. As she did, the glowing within her persisted, getting a little brighter. She was silent for a while, as if she was trying to decide what she wanted to tell Sophie.

“That pose was incredibly dangerous,” she said at last. “And it's one that I would not have attempted had it not been necessary. And it is one that I would not have ever suggested that you attempt, not in your current state, as it can draw more than most can withstand.”

“What is it?”

“There are many names for it, but I know it as the godling pose,” Parvella said. “It is an ancient one, one of the earliest, and perhaps one of the most powerful. There are some who used it long ago to try to tap into something much greater than themselves. For those who are ill equipped for it, it can change something about them.”

Sophie closed her eyes for a moment, licking her lips. She took another drink before opening her eyes again and looking over at Parvella. “I didn't know.”

“And I didn't warn you. At least, I didn't warn you in time. Had I known that you were going to try to copy it, I would have perhaps tried to give you a little bit more guidance, as it is incredibly challenging to form. And yet...” Parvella paused, almost for dramatic effect, “you managed to do it without having much training.”

“I've had plenty of training, though. I've been working with you, the Raven Queen, and others for quite a few years now.”

“And how long do you think that I have been training?”

She really had no idea how old Parvella was, though there were times when she seemed in her forties, and other times

when she seemed much older than that. “I’m not going to give you any response to that,” Sophie said with a laugh.

Parvella chuckled. “A wise decision. I have been training for many years,” she said. “Longer than you have been alive. And even I have not dared use that pose before. I knew about it and recognized the dangers within it, but I would never have attempted to do so had there not been the absolute need.”

“Why was there the absolute need?” Sophie asked.

“I don’t know what they were doing,” Parvella said. “But we cannot lose her. Not yet.”

There was something about the way that she said this that left Sophie feeling nervous, but it was more than just nervousness. She wasn’t sure what Parvella was getting at, but...

“What are we doing out here?” Sophie asked.

“She told you what we were doing out here,” Parvella replied. “She warned you that we were chasing after information and that what we found might be difficult and dangerous.”

“She didn’t tell me that we were going to face sorcerers. She didn’t tell me that we were going to face monsters.” Sophie glanced over to where Lan was lying, with Jalyn still sitting next to him. She had her sword on her lap, her gaze fixated outward, as if she was ready for any possible attack.

It was a wonder that they had not been attacked while they were weakened. And maybe it wasn’t so much a wonder as it was just luck. Sophie did not know what else they might encounter, but what they had already dealt with, the power that they had run into, was far faster than Sophie had ever imagined. She had never seen creatures like that and would never have imagined that the Taihg had been confronted by monsters, but at the same time, she had never dealt with anything like those sorcerers.

“I don’t think that she knew the extent of what we might face,” Parvella said. “And until we see more of what we are

dealing with, we must be prepared. You must rest, recover, as you may be needed.”

Parvella started to get to her feet, and Sophie almost reached up for her. Instead, she cleared her throat. “Parvella?”

When Parvella looked down at her, she seemed to be glowing even more. Sophie wasn’t sure why she was glowing, nor was she sure why she could see the glow, but there was considerable power in it.

“Why is it so dangerous for me to use the godling pose?”

“Because we don’t know what power it draws,” Parvella said.

She turned away, leaving Sophie alone.

Sophie sat there for a long time, rocking in place. As she did, she tentatively began to focus on the prayer pose again, wondering whether she had done any significant damage to herself. She wanted to know whether she would be able to hold the prayer pose if she needed to, and she had some concern that she might have damaged something in the process of using the godling pose.

Thankfully, there was no obvious damage. Her head throbbed as she tried to form the prayer pose, and when she attempted to push power out through it, that throbbing intensified, in a way that left her trembling slightly.

When she had been working with Ridaln, he had taught her about focusing her mind and meditating. It had been his way of helping her to concentrate. Had she not learned that from Ridaln, Sophie wouldn’t have been able to learn the next steps in how to hold these poses.

“Pay attention,” Ridaln had told her while pushing on her.

Sophie had been holding a basic pose, which she had attempted to maintain while working with Ridaln in his tower. Her body had been sore, and she had barely managed to hold the pose, but frustration had made her persist.

“You must clear your mind to find power.”

She remembered how she had wanted to look over at him, but that was another part of his test. If she were to turn in his direction, it would disrupt the pose, something that she knew better than to do. And yet it would have amused him greatly, she suspected. He wanted her to fail.

“My mind will never be as clear as yours,” she snapped at him.

“Then you will never have the power that you could have. I can feel it in you, but it is inconsistent. You need to find it in yourself, feel the connection, and draw upon it.”

“What is the purpose of this power?” It was so different from the Karell power, which she had heard stories about, so different from what she had heard about in stories of the Pale Princess. This sorcery was... somewhat boring, and more difficult than she would have expected.

“Some say it connects us to the gods,” he said, though from the way that he spoke, Sophie could tell that he didn’t believe that. “Others think it links us to some deeper part of the world. And perhaps they are both right. What is a deeper part of the world but the gods themselves? Regardless, you can’t reach it unless you focus. So find it in your mind.”

“I would find it easier if I could sit.”

“Do you hold a pose when you sit?”

At the time, she would have said no. Now...

Now Sophie could hold the poses in her mind, so she could sit.

She wondered what Ridaln would say about that.

She lost track of how long she had been sitting, and she felt when somebody took a seat next to her.

She looked over, expecting it to be Nevarn, or perhaps Parvella, but she was surprised to see Lan.

He looked tired in a way that she had not seen before, and he was a mirror of the fatigue that she herself felt, exhausted from the magical fight.

“How are you?” he asked.

“I should be asking you the same thing,” Sophie said. “It sounds like you were touching too much of the Heart of the Grove’s power.”

Lan coughed and turned, looking over to where Jalyn still sat, motionless with her sword on her lap. “That’s the way it sounds to me as well, even though I don’t know what I was doing. I could feel... well, I guess I could feel the power of the Heart of the Grove within me.”

“Did you lose your connection?”

“Not exactly,” Lan said.

“What happened?”

“I’ve suspected that there is a limit to how much of the Heart of the Grove’s power is available to reach, and it seems I’ve found it.” He chuckled softly, and then he looked around before turning his attention back to Sophie and coughing again. “And I understand that you found something of a limit as well. At least, that’s the way that Jalyn said it, though I don’t think that she really understands what happened. She didn’t know that sorcerers had limits.”

“I guess I didn’t know, either,” Sophie said. She stopped focusing on her poses. It was unusual for her not to have at least the prayer pose in her mind at any given time, but she wasn’t willing to form it now, as she wasn’t sure that she would be able to hold it safely enough to ensure that she didn’t harm herself, or cause a headache if she held it for too long. “And I don’t know if I found a limit or if I just tried to reach too far.”

“Those sorcerers weren’t what I expected to find,” Lan said. “When I agreed to come with the Raven Queen, I thought I was going to help her...” He shrugged. “I suppose I don’t even know what I thought I was going to help her with. She asked me to come along, but now I’m not even sure if she knew the extent of the danger.”

Sophie wasn’t so sure about that. Knowing the Raven Queen, she probably had known the danger but may have

wanted—or even needed—to come anyway.

“I think she’s going to be all right,” Sophie said. “At least, that’s what Parvella said. We have to give her some time to recover. She is the Raven Queen.”

“And I think that’s exactly why we need to be worried about her,” Lan said. He sat quietly for a long time. “We’re going to have to work together.”

“You don’t think that we did?”

“Well, I think that we did, but I also feel there will be opportunities for us to work in ways that we have not tried before—well, ways we have not tried since we were in the Devlar Forest together. Do you remember the way our power built when we were there?”

Sophie wasn’t entirely sure what had happened, but the two of them had seemed to have a linkage of energy that had made them both greater. And when he had touched her as she had been focusing on what was out on the hillside, when the sorcerers had attacked, she had felt something along those lines as well. It was considerable enough that Sophie had wondered whether she could replicate it, but she wasn’t even sure if her brother understood what it was, nor if he understood that there may not be a way to mimic it again. At this point, she simply did not know.

“I don’t know what it means,” Sophie said.

“It means that we are related, Sophie,” he said. “And as much as I used to annoy you—and I might still annoy you—I think we are connected.”

“You never annoyed me,” Sophie said. When Lan held her gaze, she shrugged. “At least, not the way that you think. I think I annoyed you more than you annoyed me. I looked up to you. I idolized you. You’re my brother.”

A flush came over Lan. “I don’t think I was always the nicest to you when I was younger.”

“And that’s all right,” she said. “We change. I can’t imagine what it would be like if we were to go back to our

home, to see what Nana and Papa were up to, and to speak to them, assuming they were still alive...”

Sophie felt a wave of sadness washing through her. Lan was all she had left.

He took her hand, and they sat in quiet for a while.

“I’m glad that things have turned out the way that they have,” Lan said.

“Are you?”

He snorted. “Well, I suppose I would have preferred not to become some champion for one of the gods, even though I don’t know what that means, and I would’ve preferred you not to become some powerful sorcerer, such that you’re now a target for dangerous entities, but I do love the fact that we are finding our way.”

Sophie found herself smiling. “I like that, too.”

“And I like that we’re working together,” he said. “I think that we will need to keep working together. If we do, the two of us can... well, I don’t even know what the two of us can do, but I feel like the two of us might be able to do more together than we can apart.”

He sat back, closing his eyes for a moment. When he did, he glowed softly. It was the first time since he had come over here that Sophie had seen him glowing like that. It was as if some part of him had been disconnected from the Heart of the Grove.

Maybe he really had pushed himself too much. That worried Sophie, as she wasn’t sure what would happen if he separated from his power. He needed it, she knew. And more than that, they needed him to have it. She didn’t know what it meant, nor did she know how it would affect him, but it had changed him. And given what they were already dealing with, she suspected that they were going to need his god-touched gift in order to survive.

“How are you feeling?” Sophie asked.

“I’m feeling achy,” Lan admitted. “I feel like I have been running for days. And I feel like I just need to rest, but I don’t know if we have time to rest.”

“Well, I don’t think we can go anywhere until the Raven Queen recovers, so maybe you don’t have to worry about that so much.”

He snorted. “Maybe not. But I still feel like... well, I’m not even sure how to tell you what I feel like. I just feel awful. Maybe that’s the price of using the Heart of the Grove’s gift.”

Sophie shrugged. “I feel much the same, and I wasn’t using the Heart of the Grove’s gift. I was just drawing upon sorcery in a way that I never have before, and the power that I was summoning filled me in a way that... I’m not exactly sure what it did, but apparently, I was drawing upon it in a way that Parvella is concerned about. She’s concerned I might have overdone it and pushed for too much power.”

“I guess we have that in common.”

Sophie chuckled. “I guess so.”

They sat for a while, until Lan squeezed her hands again and then got to his feet. “I’m going to keep watch.”

“You need to recover, Lan.”

He smiled tightly. “I have recovered enough. And now it’s my turn to stand watch.”

“What happens if more of those creatures come?”

“Then I’m going to have to fight. I’m going to hope and pray the Heart of the Grove has given me enough that I can do what I need to do.”

Pray.

That was not her brother, was it?

But she could see in his eyes that he didn’t mean it in the way that those who were devout about the gods meant it. She could see in his eyes that he meant that he only hoped that he would have the kind of power that he needed.

When he took his watch, he nodded to Jalyn, who immediately lay back, still holding her blade, and rested her head. Her breathing slowed, and she drifted. Sophie marveled at how quickly Jalyn was able to fall asleep.

They probably all needed to rest. Sophie didn't know what dangers they might encounter, but if sorcerers returned, they had to be ready. She had to be ready. It was just unfortunate that she had not trained to fight with her sorcery.

If it came down to a fight, they would need the Raven Queen.

Sophie hoped she would recover in time.

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CHAPTER 20

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SOPHIE

Sophie didn't like moving the Raven Queen like this. Something about it felt wrong, but she also didn't like the idea of lingering so close to the point of a recent attack. Nobody did, least of all Parvella, who had become increasingly distraught through all of it.

"I haven't seen anything," Lan said, sweeping his gaze around. He had his sword in hand, and it was glowing softly, though not with the same power as it once had. Sophie worried about what had happened to her brother, that perhaps some part of his power had begun to shift. Given that he had overreached during the attack, Sophie was left facing the possibility that he wouldn't be able to recover enough to help.

Parvella was quiet, and yet Sophie began to feel power coming from her.

It wasn't quite as potent as what she had held while using the godling pose, but there was still a significant power to her pose. She didn't even need to form any physical posture to draw so deeply on the energy. Strange, Sophie thought, as she had found that when she held her poses physically, the power bloomed within them much more potently than it did otherwise.

"Do you think we can get her back to Hester?" Sophie asked Parvella from atop her horse.

"If we can't, we need to get her back to the border," Parvella said.

“I don’t understand,” Sophie said. “What is it about the border?”

Could the Raven Queen’s power be greater in certain places than others? And if so, what made that the case?

“There are protections,” Parvella said, “ways in which we have prepared the realm, ways in which we have ensured the Raven Queen’s safety, but we have to get back within the boundary in order for them to be useful.”

Sophie frowned, wondering what these protections might be, and whether there was anything more that she might be able to understand about them.

Her brother was quiet, as was Jalyn, and Nevarn, for that matter. Everybody was quiet, given the dangers that they had encountered.

Sophie understood, and she didn’t know if there was anything that she could do or say that would make anything better at this point.

“Is there anything that we can do to speed up the process?” Sophie asked.

Parvella smiled. “If only there were,” she said.

“We can place more protections.”

“There are only so many protections that can be used on somebody in this state,” Parvella said. “And I have done all that can be done.”

“There has to be more,” Sophie said. “There has to be—”

“I have done all that can be done,” Parvella repeated.

They rode in silence.

The farther they went, the more Sophie felt the jarring of the horse with every step. She kept shifting in the saddle, trying to get comfortable, but she could not do so. How did her brother handle this all the time?

Of course, maybe he didn’t handle it as well as he seemed, and given what she knew about her brother and his strange

abilities these days, she was left wondering again if perhaps her brother didn't need a horse.

"Can we signal more Taihg?" Sophie asked.

"It's dangerous," Lan said.

"Why?" she asked. "If there are more soldiers out there that might help protect the Raven Queen, shouldn't we bring them to us?"

"It's not that we don't want to bring the Taihg to us," Jalyn said. "It's just that if we do, the Taihg, patrolling along the border of the realm, will leave an area open." She looked over at Lan. "The queen realized that the border was under threat. It's why she increased the patrols."

Lan was quiet.

"Did you know this?" Sophie asked.

"Not exactly," he said. "I knew that we were on our patrols, and I knew that we were trying to make sure that Thea didn't contaminate more of the realm, but I wasn't given the opportunity to learn as much as I would've liked."

Sophie sensed his frustration. "You would keep Lan out of it?" she asked Jalyn.

"We didn't know what his connection to the Heart of the Grove might allow, and we didn't know what it meant," Jalyn said, shrugging, "but obviously, your brother has been quite useful."

Useful.

Lan was much more than useful. And a connection to the Heart of the Grove, to one of the gods, new or old, was something that should be celebrated, not feared, especially by the Taihg, who obviously had their own connections to the gods to begin with.

Sophie stayed quiet.

At one point, she thought that she heard the Raven Queen moaning, but when she looked over, she realized that wasn't the case at all. Parvella was holding the reins of the Raven

Queen's horse and had used some holding pose—one that Sophie wasn't familiar with, but she thought that she could sense the shape of it—to hold the Raven Queen in the saddle. The noise was Parvella muttering something under her breath, though quietly enough that Sophie couldn't make out a word.

“Can I help with anything?” Sophie asked Parvella.

Parvella blinked. Her eyes looked heavy.

“You don't have to do this yourself,” Sophie said.

“I'm not,” she said softly.

“Who else is doing it?”

Parvella didn't answer.

Sophie found herself getting frustrated, but she knew better than to challenge Parvella, to let those frustrations get the better of her. Had this been a few years ago, when she had first been learning how to use sorcery and form her poses, maybe she wouldn't have been able to handle the frustration. She had always been passionate, as her family had said. Sometimes that passion could get her into trouble, and Sophie had done all that she could to avoid irritating people with her passion, but there were certain things that could be done and certain things that could not.

At one point, they came across another set of ruins.

Sophie frowned at Parvella, who was still holding the reins of the Raven Queen's horse. “Are you guiding us here?”

“The task is not completed,” Parvella said.

“I thought the task was to get the Raven Queen back to Hester so that we could get her the help she needs.”

“She will recover,” Parvella said.

“Even if we don't make it back to Hester?” Sophie looked over at her brother, who was seated in his saddle with his sword unsheathed, glowing softly. She didn't know whether that was anything to be concerned about, but with the expression on Lan's face, and the weariness in Jalyn's expression, Sophie knew that they were in danger if they

encountered any difficulty. How long could they withstand all of this? “Do you really want to risk the Raven Queen for whatever it is that you are risking her for?”

“She is in no danger,” Parvella said. “And once we reach the border, she will recuperate. Trust me, Sophie.”

Sophie had a hard time dealing with all of this, but she knew that she needed to find a way to trust Parvella, and she needed to trust that the Raven Queen would get better. Even Nevarn believed that she would recover.

Lan rode forward, checked the ruins, then returned.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Haven’t we already passed through here?” Sophie asked.

She’d had a hard time keeping track of their journey, and she wondered if there was a way of learning how to follow their course in any real or meaningful fashion. She wished that she had her brother’s ability with tracking, and his Taihg ability, as she suspected that would grant him a bit more knowledge than she had, but...

At this point, none of that really mattered.

“We didn’t pass through this way,” Jalyn said. “We traveled a bit north of here. The mountains are that way.” She pointed off into the distance. “And if we head that way”—she pointed again—“it should take us toward Neylash.”

“I didn’t think that we wanted to get so close to it.”

“Perhaps not,” Jalyn said, “as we don’t know what Darius might do.”

“I don’t think it’s Darius we have to worry about. It’s more about if we run into Lorantian soldiers. There are only a few of us.”

“It’s easier to travel with just a few of us,” Lan said. “The Raven Queen was wise in that.”

She snorted. “You’re complimenting her on leaving soldiers behind? We could have dealt with the sorcerers much more easily if we’d had others with us.”

“Possibly,” Lan said. “Or we could have lost more. It really depends. And I think she intended to come through here unnoticed, but to be honest, I just don’t know.”

Sophie looked over at Parvella. “Are we finding anything about the gods that is helpful to you?”

“We have found that these are destroyed,” Parvella said softly.

“And what does that matter?”

“It matters,” she replied. “These were still standing not that long ago.”

“What?”

Lan frowned. “I didn’t realize that.”

“Not all of them, and perhaps not quite the way that you would envision,” Parvella went on, and she offered a slight smile, looking at Lan more than at Sophie.

Sophie felt that Parvella was ignoring her contribution to the battle with the sorcerers.

“But they were more intact,” Parvella continued. “They are reflections of power. When that power fades from this world, the reflections of power fade as well.”

“So if the ruins are destroyed,” Sophie said, “does that somehow destroy the gods’ power, or is it more like the opposite?”

It was the opposite that left Sophie with a bit more concern.

What would happen if the ruins reflected the destruction of the gods?

How would something like that even be possible?

“It is the opposite,” Parvella said, her voice still soft, “as I suspect you knew.”

Sophie hadn’t known for sure, but now, more than ever, she began to worry about what that meant and whether there

was a way to deal with somebody who was chasing a means to destroy the power of the gods.

“What happens if we come across more sorcerers?” Sophie asked Parvella. “Are you strong enough to withstand them?”

“I don’t know,” Parvella admitted. “If we encounter anything more, we have to hope that we are near one of these places.”

“Why? What is it about the ruins that will protect us? Do you think the gods will come down and save us from whatever we are dealing with, and deal with the threat that is out there?”

“They don’t come down from anything. They simply are. And some of these places are more powerful than others.”

Sophie frowned, but she saw that Parvella was looking at Lan once again.

The old gods and the new.

Odian and the Heart of the Grove.

He was somehow connected to both.

He had the Mark of Odian, but he was gifted by the Heart of the Grove.

What did that mean for them?

“So the old gods are more powerful?” Sophie asked.

“The old gods were the first, or perhaps not,” Parvella said, shrugging softly. She looked over to where the Raven Queen was still bound in her saddle, still breathing quietly, but not moving. Not speaking. Not moaning or making any other sign of life. Sophie worried more about that than Parvella did. “We just know that there were at least two generations. Maybe there have been more, but they have been lost. The old gods, at least as we consider them old gods, were more powerful. Their power was diluted, became something else. A gift to the new.”

“And now we need that for the Raven Queen?”

“Oh, not for her,” Parvella said, smiling slightly. “We’ll need it if we encounter another attack, because that is the

threat to us, but all the Raven Queen needs is to return to her home.”

Sophie still wasn't sure why that would make a difference.

They kept riding, and when Sophie felt she wanted to take a break, she started to say something, but then a strange energy pressed upon her.

Perhaps it was just because she had taken to holding the prayer pose, but she felt the energy all around her, a sort of power that seemed to be far more potent than she had anticipated encountering, enough that she felt it pressing against her.

Parvella was slumped forward in her saddle. She was still awake, or at least seemed to be, as she was muttering something softly to herself, and from what Sophie could tell, she was still holding the pose that was keeping the Raven Queen in her saddle.

Sophie looked over at her brother. “Do you feel anything?”

Lan frowned, and then he raised his sword, but he did so with a weakness that he hadn't shown before. A faint light glowed from the end of the blade. Not as much as Sophie would have expected, but still, some light spilled out from it, pushing back the darkness.

He was quiet.

He was taking too long.

Long enough that Sophie became frustrated, so she jumped out of her saddle and began to form the prayer pose.

It might not matter, but Sophie couldn't help but feel there was something within the prayer pose that had revealed itself to her, something that would show her what she needed to see. It was a detection pose, one that she found useful, but at this point, she no longer knew how—or why, or whether—she might learn anything from it.

Her brother remained quiet.

“Jalyn?” Sophie asked.

“I don’t have his ability,” she said. “You have to give him time.”

“It’s not that,” Sophie said without looking over at her. “It is what I feel.”

The other Taihg looked at Sophie for a long moment, and then she nodded. She slipped her sword out of the sheath, climbed out of the saddle, and then joined Sophie.

“Your brother is—”

“I know,” Sophie said. “The fight took a bit out of him, out of Parvella, out of all of us, really.”

“You seem to have recovered,” she said.

“I am recovering,” Sophie said, “but I don’t know if I expended myself quite as much as the others did.” She thought about what her brother had been through and how he had nearly lost the connection that he had to the Heart of the Grove, and she thought about what Parvella had been drawing upon to protect and then free the Raven Queen, and she realized that anything that she might have done, any power that Sophie might have touched, was nothing compared to what they had drawn on.

That was the reason that she had recovered sooner than they had.

That was the reason that she had to be the one to protect them now.

“We need to know what’s out there,” Sophie said. “And I know a pose that might work, but I want you to be ready.”

She looked over at Nevarn. “We could use his help,” she said. “I don’t know how much Nevarn can contribute to this. At this point, it might have to be the two of us.”

Jalyn smiled. “Imagine what Ridaln would say if he were here now.”

“Well, I would imagine that he would take credit for training both of us.”

“He could take credit for starting the process, but Ridaln is not responsible for everything, as you have seen. You have continued to progress in the time since you left his tutelage, and I... well, I became something else entirely.”

“But you must have had some ability before.”

Jalyn smiled tightly. “Some, but not enough. Not nearly enough.”

Sophie shifted her feet, deciding that she wanted to form the elash pose, one that would allow her to create a band of light, like what Lan often used. His was just uncontrolled power from the Heart of the Grove. Sophie would draw upon something far more refined, but perhaps less powerful because of it.

She shifted. The pose was not difficult, but it did involve her stretching her arms out in a wide circle and then twisting them slowly and steadily as she began to form the pose in its fullest form. As she did, she turned steadily, slowly, beginning to feel... well, she began to feel some aspect of power slowly easing out from her. As it did, she pushed more and more, and then it began to burst with light.

She unleashed it, spreading her hands, breaking the link.

The light streaked outward.

As soon as it did, Sophie saw that they were surrounded.

She had no idea what the creatures were. She needed to form the pose again, but she didn't know if she had the strength, or the speed, to do it.

“Where did these things come from?” Sophie asked, not really expecting an answer.

“Some things are drawn to darkness,” Parvella said, though she didn't come around enough to be any further help.

Sophie looked at her brother. “Lan,” she snapped, “we need your help. Light.”

Her brother stirred, and his effort was enough—barely enough—for him to shift his blade, and more light spilled out

from it. When it did, he shifted his hand, and then the darkness was pushed back.

Jalyn looked at Sophie. “Well,” she began, “it was nice to know you.”

“What?”

“I don’t know if I can survive this,” Jalyn said. “Don’t let them take the Raven Queen.”

Before she started off, Sophie grabbed her by the arm. “Not like that,” Sophie said.

“What?”

There were other poses that Sophie knew, poses that Parvella had shown her, poses that might be useful now.

Sophie began to concentrate, and rather than forming them in her mind, she thought about how she could contort her body.

But even that wasn’t going to be enough. Instead, she thought about how she could modify them.

Lan’s light was burning and blazing in the night. If she could focus on this power, and if she could form something that would create a band around them...

Modifying the power.

She had already begun to use the lash pose, so modifying that would be the easiest, because she could add an element to it. It didn’t just have to be light, did it? She could add fire to it, using an aspect of one of the poses that she had rarely even attempted.

She formed the lash pose again, and light began to build.

“They are getting closer,” Jalyn said.

“I know,” Sophie said. “Let them get closer. I want to draw them in.”

“Sophie,” Jalyn said.

“Give me a moment,” Sophie said.

And as she held the elash pose, she felt the power all around her and waited for it to build up inside her. That was what she needed. Starting slowly, steadily, she let the energy continue to course through her, until it was the only thing that she felt. She concentrated it, waiting, and as that power reached a peak, and as the light that Lan was holding continued to blaze out and around her, Sophie knew that there was a window of time in which she could use this power. If she waited too long...

If she waited too long, she wouldn't be able to do anything effective.

And so she hesitated a moment more, and then she felt the energy in her building, almost to the point where she could no longer hold it.

Then Jalyn cried out.

Sophie released it.

The power had built up inside Sophie so much that it was almost painful when she let it go.

It was light. It was heat. It was flame.

Parvella had said that some things were drawn to the dark. Sophie intended to be the light. She intended to be the brightness of the sun. She intended to burn through whatever was out there.

Heat exploded, and a raging fire created a rippling ring of power around them. It radiated away from them, burning brightly, until it struck the creatures. There was a horrifying shrieking that Sophie had to will herself to ignore.

The flames burned for nearly a minute.

They died down as the power that Sophie had been pushing died down. She couldn't draw on anything more, though she wanted to.

She looked at Lan, and his blade had sagged.

He was still blazing with light, though.

"Jalyn?"

“I think... it worked,” she said, looking over at Sophie. “Good work. I suppose we know what we need to do if creatures like that come again.”

“I suppose we do,” Sophie said.

“Let’s get them to someplace safe to rest,” Jalyn said to Sophie. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Ruins,” Sophie said. “I think that’s where Parvella would take us.”

If they couldn’t make it back to Hester, then they might as well stay near a place of power. Let the gods protect them, if they would.

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CHAPTER 21

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The night was quiet.

The last few nights had been much the same. Lan had kept waiting for another attack, every bit of his body on edge, thinking that there would be a time when they would encounter something dangerous—perhaps creatures, perhaps soldiers, or worse, sorcerers—but there had been nothing. And he had finally allowed himself to start to relax.

In the last few days, the Raven Queen had been motionless. She had been resting, sleeping, and according to Parvella, recovering.

This had given Lan a chance to recover himself. He had needed it far more than he had ever expected to need it. His body had felt off for the better part of a day after the sorcerer attack, and it wasn't until the following night that he finally began to feel like himself. There certainly seemed to be a limit to the power of the Heart of the Grove, something that he had suspected but had not really known.

When he had first awoken, Jalyn sitting at his side, watching the night but looking down at him worriedly, he had questioned whether he had severed his connection with the Heart of the Grove. Lan hadn't been able to feel it at first. There had been an emptiness, as if there were a void deep inside him, but gradually—far too gradually for his liking—he had begun to feel something return. It had taken what seemed like an eternity.

The night was quiet.

A shadow moved near him, and he turned to find Jalyn. He had felt her approaching, even though he wasn't sure what he had felt about her, but he had been aware of her presence before she had stepped closer to him. She smiled at him, and he smiled back.

"You seem jumpy," she said.

"I don't like being startled," he said.

"You didn't seem startled. Just jumpy."

He turned his attention back out into the darkness. "We've been here a long time," he said. "If we have to keep watch on the Raven Queen, it would be better to have others to keep guard."

"Others would draw attention," she said.

Lan breathed out, and looked around before he settled his gaze back on Jalyn. "It just feels like we are so exposed. This isn't a good place to defend."

"We haven't had to defend it again," she said.

"They came out here for a reason." He looked over to where his sister was sitting, talking to Parvella.

Nevarn was sitting next to his mother, as he had taken to doing over the last few days. He had been training with his blade, sparring with either Lan or Jalyn, but when he was done, he would often take a seat next to his mother again and rest his hand on hers.

"I think you are hoping to find something to fight," Jalyn said.

"I don't want to fight anything," he said. "I just want to..."

Lan felt something off in the distance. He wasn't sure what it was.

He immediately reached for his blade, but he didn't unsheathe it. He had already seen how it was instantly visible to others, and he didn't want to run the risk of giving away their location.

Strangely, over the last few days, Lan had begun to see a faint glow from some of the others. Maybe that was tied to the god touch, and perhaps tied to the fact that he had drawn upon so much power. That may somehow have connected him to the god touch in a way that he had not been before.

He looked over at Jalyn. “Do you feel that?”

“I don’t feel anything,” she said. “Like I said, you’re jumpy.”

Sophie looked up at him, seated as she was across from Parvella, her hands clasped in one of her poses. She frowned, then got to her feet, looking out into the darkness. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” he said, and he frowned as he looked off into the distance. “I can feel... well, I’m not sure what I can feel.”

As Sophie looked into the distance, a trace of power drifted from her, and he could discern more of it than he had in the past. It was as if he could recognize the structure of it. She had called this pattern the prayer pose, and Lan had never really understood what it was, nor did he understand why he could see it. Yet as he focused on the way that she was forming the pose, he perceived the swirling of energy, the way that it was building, and he noticed that it twisted, almost forming in an image that looked like a person seated with her hands clasped in front of her, praying. Then power flowed outward.

A faint glowing swept away from her, rippling with her sorcery.

“What is it?” Sophie asked.

Lan shook his head. “It’s nothing.”

She frowned at him. “You are looking at me like you have just seen something.”

“I will talk to you about it later,” he said, realizing that Parvella was watching him, as was Nevarn.

“I can feel it,” Sophie said softly.

“I can as well,” Lan said.

“What is it?” Jalyn asked, drawing her blade.

Lan shook his head. “You don’t need that.”

“If there’s something out there—”

“There is something out there, but it’s not what I thought it was.”

He had been concerned about what they were going to encounter, and he was still a little worried, but not nearly as much as he had been before. He strode forward a few steps before pausing. “Keep an eye on things here,” he said to Jalyn. “And you,” he said to his sister, “keep watch.”

“I could come with you,” Sophie said.

“I’m not sure that you can, and I’m not sure that you should.”

She watched him for a moment, and then she formed another pose that began to sweep out from her and loop around him. Lan tried not to think about what she was doing to him, nor how he felt her magic, but there was something considerable about the way the power swept through him.

He focused on it, and then he moved forward.

He didn’t know what she had done, whether she had placed some sort of protective spell over him, but at this point, it didn’t even matter. The only thing that mattered was that he had felt something familiar out there.

He moved forward, carefully, and with each step, he focused on the warmth inside him and allowed that power to bloom. Lan had felt this power before, and there was something about it that called to him.

Something familiar. Something dangerous.

But why was the Hunter out here?

CHAPTER 22

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Lan reached the edge of the forest before he slowed. It felt as if the Hunter was calling to him. And if the Hunter was there, maybe the Heart of the Grove was as well. He hadn't seen either of them in the better part of a year. With the attack, he had been hopeful that they could help. And as he made his way into the forest, he could feel something of the Hunter building, some sense of power, but there was something else as well.

It was a deep, faint trembling.

Lan had not felt that in a long time. Long enough that he had forgotten how it felt, the way that it reverberated, and the echoing sense that came from it.

It was the power of the thisten.

They were here?

He had to know why. He hadn't found the thisten since he'd last seen the Heart of the Grove. If they were here, it raised questions that he didn't have answers to.

He reached the edge of the trees.

He paused for a moment, and once again heat flared within him. Lan had a measure of control over it that he hadn't had before. He unsheathed his blade, striding forward.

He didn't have to go very far before he found the Hunter. He was seated on a boulder, only about a hundred yards inside the edge of the forest, and he looked over at Lan as if watching for him, waiting for him.

Then again, if he was Darish, as Lan had long suspected, he would have known that Lan was there the moment he had entered the forest.

“Are you waiting on me?” Lan asked.

The Hunter shifted, and he swept his gaze around. “You’re getting stronger.”

“That’s the first thing that you have to say to me?” Lan wasn’t sure whether he should be annoyed or pleased. He *was* getting stronger. Maybe it was a good thing that the Hunter recognized it.

“It is the only thing that matters.”

The Hunter closed his eyes and started to glow, the same way that Lan glowed. Lan had once thought that perhaps the Heart of the Grove had gifted the Hunter power, but if he was Darish, then it didn’t make any sort of sense for him to have been given a gift from the Heart of the Grove. The only thing that would make sense was if all god power glowed in the same way.

“You fought here,” the Hunter said.

“There were five sorcerers and a dozen or more soldiers.”

“There were more than five sorcerers,” the Hunter said, glancing toward Lan and then turning his attention back to the depths of the forest. “I can feel their passing.”

Lan moved forward a few steps, focusing on the warmth inside him. If the Hunter could feel something, then Lan wished that he might learn that technique, because he wanted to know how to detect such things as well.

“How do you feel that?”

“Connections that you do not yet have.” The Hunter turned, and the glowing faded for a moment before surging with brightness once again. If this was Darish, then he would have incredible control. He was a god, after all.

Distantly Lan was aware of a faint rumbling, and he turned his attention toward it, focusing on what he could feel and whether there was anything that he might be able to learn from

it. He was convinced that it was the thisten, even if he wasn't sure where they were or why they would be out here.

"You feel them," the Hunter said.

Lan nodded.

"You saved them."

"Was I not supposed to?" Lan had not seen the Hunter ever since the attack in the forest. He had known that the Heart of the Grove had been pleased by the fact that they had not destroyed the thisten, but he didn't know how the Hunter would feel about it. Given what he had seen of the Hunter, and the fact that he had shown a willingness to destroy the thisten, Lan wasn't sure if the Hunter agreed with the Heart of the Grove.

"It is not a matter of what I think so much as it is a matter of what you think. They are unharmed."

"And they are out there, roaming," Lan said.

"So it seems," the Hunter said.

"Are you chasing them yourself?"

"I have no reason to chase them. They will not harm anything."

"You seemed awfully concerned about them before," Lan said.

He knew that it was a mistake to get into an argument with one of the gods, especially Darish, who he had once followed more faithfully, but at this point, Lan also thought that he needed to have answers.

"I was concerned about what they could be. I did not know that they could be reclaimed."

"So now you don't fear them?"

"I fear their potential," the Hunter said.

Lan thought that sounded overly vague, but from experience, he wasn't sure that he could get anything more out of the Hunter.

“Why are you here?” Lan asked.

“I am here because I am called.”

Lan snorted. “And who calls you?”

“Someone of great power.”

Could the Raven Queen have called to the Hunter? She’d mentioned knowing Darish, so it was possible that she had summoned the Hunter.

“But you were waiting on me,” Lan said.

“I felt you, and I sent out a call,” he said.

“Why?”

“To speak.”

Lan snorted. “I’ve tried searching for you for the better part of a year, but you’ve avoided me.”

“I have not avoided you so much as I have avoided others,” the Hunter said. “And I knew you were searching. We had time.”

“Did we?”

“We did,” the Hunter said, but there was something in the way that he said this that left Lan thinking that perhaps they no longer had time.

“What has changed?”

“Many things have begun to change,” the Hunter said. “But perhaps the most important is that Oodian is awakening.”

There was that name again.

“Who is Oodian?”

“Oodian is an old god,” he said.

“And you?”

“I am not an old god,” the Hunter said.

“What about the Shavln?”

The Hunter frowned and looked around for a moment, his gaze sweeping all around him. It might have been Lan’s

imagination, but it seemed as if everything lightened for a moment. Perhaps the Hunter glowed ever so brightly that he could illuminate the darkness of the forest. Why do that now? Was it because he was somehow nervous?

“The Shavlín, as you call it, is not exactly a god. It is a power,” the Hunter said.

“And Odian?”

“I have already told you about Odian.”

“You told me that Odian is an old god. That doesn’t help me understand anything about him. What does that mean?”

“There are ancient powers that slumber. And newer powers that have replaced them.”

“Like the Heart of the Grove,” Lan said.

“She is what you would call a new god.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Power takes different forms. Perhaps that is all you need to know. Occasionally, new power begins to appear.”

“Such as the sorcerer Darius?”

The Hunter frowned again, and he also glowed a bit more than before. Was he connecting to more power?

“That one searches for something that he should not have.”

“He wants power,” Lan said. “But then, I think he’s always chased it. The gods could have intervened long before now.”

“The gods do not intervene, not as you know intervention. And not for such things. In a time long ago, there were many old gods, and people knew them and worshipped them, borrowing their power. Something changed, and new powers emerged, though there were some who claimed that they took power from the old gods for themselves.”

“So were they something like sorcerers?”

“Not exactly like sorcerers,” the Hunter said. “These people wielded a different kind of power, and they accessed it in a different sort of way.”

“Then what are you doing here?” Lan asked.

“I came to give warning.” The Hunter took a deep breath, and the strange energy that radiated from him built.

“Is it tied to the gods? Is it tied to something that you are involved in?”

“I am here for a different reason.” The Hunter looked around.

“The Shavln?”

“You have already seen the danger of that kind of power,” the Hunter said. “And if it continues to spread, if that power continues to work its way out into the world, then everything that is and has been will change.”

“But you said it wasn’t a god power.”

The Hunter was quiet for a few moments, and when he looked over at Lan, it seemed as if his eyes blazed with light, and perhaps a bit more energy. Lan wasn’t at all sure what it was, or whether what he was saying was true.

“I have told you that it is not the same as what you call gods,” the Hunter said. He looked up, and there was a flickering in his eyes that suggested that he had seen or sensed something.

Lan reached for his blade. “You might not want to do anything, but I cannot stand aside.”

He was a Taihg.

That was enough for Lan.

As Lan unsheathed his blade, some light radiating from the Hunter worked along the surface and changed it. Part of the blade rippled, the metal shifting.

“I offered only guidance. You could have altered your blade yourself. It would be helpful for you to have some guidance. There are times when the world needs a warrior. I might be many things, but that is one I am not.”

“Is that what I’m supposed to be?” Lan asked.

“You bear the Mark of Odian. There is but one thing you can be.”

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CHAPTER 23

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The ground rumbled around him.

He wondered if it was tied to the thisten—though he didn't think that was the case, even though he could feel the thisten nearby—or if it was something else. Maybe the Shavlñ. He looked over at the Hunter, who was standing quietly and staring. Some part of him was glowing more than it had been before, but the way that he was glowing was different. It was as if the Hunter had started to call upon the energy around him, as if he was summoning it up from the forest itself.

The Hunter turned to him, and his eyes flashed with light, reminding Lan of the very first time that he had seen him. “You hope for help that is not going to come. I told you that this was not my fight,” the Hunter said.

“Whose fight is it?”

“This is the fight of men,” he said, starting away from Lan.

If the Hunter was a god, why wouldn't he help?

“Are you Darish?” Lan called after him.

The Hunter slowed.

“You call yourself the Hunter, but we know Darish as the woodsman god. Is that you? Are you Darish?”

“I have been called many names over the years,” the Hunter said.

“That's not an answer,” Lan said. “Are you Darish?”

He stood across from the Hunter.

For the first time, Lan felt as if he could detect some of the energy coming off the Hunter, as if he was supposed to feel it. It radiated in a way that left him awash with strength and power, but it also left him aware of just how weak he was in comparison.

“I suppose you can call me that,” the Hunter said.

Lan breathed out a heavy sigh. “If you are Darish, then you can help. You claim that the gods won’t help, but my people once worshipped you. Others have as well. Some of the Taihg still do. That has to matter, doesn’t it?”

“I could have helped,” he said. “But now your fight is beyond my borders.”

“Your borders are just within the trees?” Lan shook his head. “I saw you outside the boundary of the forest, facing off against the thisten. I saw you there, where you shouldn’t have been, if you claim that you are truly confined to the forest.”

“You claim that I am a god, but even gods have limitations. Even gods have places where they are stronger and places where they are weaker. What you ask is something I cannot provide.”

That was a frustrating answer, and one that Lan wasn’t quite sure what to make of.

“So you are one of the gods. Are you a new god or an old god?”

Darish looked at him, and the glowing flickered again. When it stabilized, it seemed that some part of Darish was amused. That irritated Lan more than it probably should have, as he knew better than to get upset with a god, especially one he had followed his entire life.

“Perhaps neither,” Darish said.

Lan grunted. “That’s not much of an answer.”

Darish turned, looking off toward the edge of the trees. “It is the answer you will get. And I think that your people need you now.”

There was a trembling again.

“What is going on?”

“A new threat has surfaced,” Darish said.

“And you won’t help with it?”

“This is not within my purview,” Darish said.

With that, he strode forward, then started to fade. The glowing that had surrounded Darish flickered and then became nothing. Lan hurried after him, but by the time he reached where he had seen Darish flickering and fading, he was gone.

“Darish curse you,” he muttered.

Then he laughed at himself, realizing just how ridiculous it was to ask Darish to curse himself.

Lan retreated, heading toward the edge of the forest, focusing on the trembling. Reaching the edge of the forest, he saw a shifting of shadows.

He paused for a moment, trying to tamp down the glowing within him, but maybe it didn’t matter at this point, as the glowing seemed to help him. And given that the Hunter—Darish—had changed something about his blade, maybe now he had a truly god-given weapon. And if he was supposed to be some sort of warrior for the gods, then having a god-gifted weapon was going to be necessary, wasn’t it?

Not only gifted by a god, but by Darish himself.

Something surged from the darkness nearby.

It was bounding on four legs and coming straight at him.

Lan stood his ground, and he flared within the darkness, using the power of the Heart of the Grove, and he could see the shadowy form appear. It reminded him of the creatures he had encountered before, all long and spindly, but this one was on all four legs and running quickly.

He focused on the blade, pointing it at the creature, and then harnessed the energy deep inside himself. As he had done before, he pushed and let power come up from deep within. It

streaked through the blade and crashed into the creature, a beam of white that slammed into it.

The creature tumbled, rolling over two times, before it bounded to its feet and then started racing toward Lan again.

Lan tried again to call upon the warmth and pointed the blade at the creature.

As before, he pushed and felt a surge of energy coursing along the blade, and then it exploded from the end. The lance of power struck the creature, which then seemed to absorb it again, tumbling to the side.

Channeling his power through his sword wasn't going to be enough.

Had Darish changed something about his sword such that it would no longer work that way? Or maybe some part of himself had changed.

Lan had certainly been drawing upon enough of his strength, and his connection to the Heart of the Grove, that he couldn't help but feel it may have altered something for him, but he didn't know what it was, nor did he know whether he had enough control.

He tried again, focusing even deeper than before.

When the beam of light flowed, it felt *sharper*.

And this time, the creature screamed.

It was a strange, almost human scream.

Lan was reminded of what he had heard about creatures like this, and the fact that they had some sort of power to them. Sorcerers that had been corrupted by the kind of power that they were calling upon. What if this was another sorcerer?

He called upon the power inside himself again and pushed harder than he had before. As before, he sent energy out through the end of his blade, and it slammed into the creature. He followed with another, and another.

There was a depth to his power that he hadn't had before.

Maybe he had opened up some part of the connection between himself and the Heart of the Grove, and by accepting that power inside himself, he was no longer countering it, and he no longer had to fight it as he had before. He continued to call upon the energy, letting it fill him. He focused, blasting at the creature, until it stopped moving.

He turned slowly.

Six other figures surrounded him.

Lan turned carefully, focusing on his glowing energy, and he pushed it out through himself. It illuminated the ground around him.

Six soldiers.

Lan could handle six soldiers, as long as they weren't gifted with some sort of god power.

And he had the blade Darish had given him. That was going to be enough.

He readied himself, then darted forward.

Lan drove his blade into the man nearest him, and then he spun, driving it toward the next.

He caught one man on the thigh, another in the belly, and a third in his shoulder. Three were down before any of the others had a chance to even react.

The blade took on some of his energy, crackling and leaving a streak of light in its wake. The three remaining soldiers backed away.

Lan took that moment, and he spun, driving his now-burning blade toward one, then another, before finally spinning and sending the glowing blade into the chest of another.

Then they were down.

Lan paused for a moment to catch his breath.

It was powerful. The blade itself was powerful, but even as he attempted to use it, he could feel the connection to the Heart of the Grove beginning to wane inside himself. He

wondered if he was hitting the limit to what she had gifted him, or if perhaps he had already drawn upon too much. He focused on his power, focused on whether he might be able to use some part of it, and as he sent it out from himself, he once again sent a surge of energy through the blade.

He felt the power that was pressing down upon him beginning to ease, but he wasn't sure why, nor was he sure what he was feeling around him. The energy was trying to constrict him, squeezing down upon him.

He recognized it.

The soldiers could not.

Those creatures could.

He had to find the warmth.

Lan had somehow connected to something deeper in the past, and he had felt that energy drawing through him. If nothing else, he wanted to get free, to get to his sister and warn her.

He had the blade. That was what Darish had given him, wasn't it?

Maybe Darish had not intervened, because he did not think that he could, but...

But Lan had the Mark of Odian.

That had to matter. It certainly seemed to for Darish.

He moved forward.

It didn't feel as if *he* was restricted. Rather, the power that the Heart of the Grove had given him was restricted. He hurried back toward where he felt the others, where he knew his sister and the Raven Queen were waiting.

He didn't even need to get that close, as he suspected that his sister—or Parvella—would recognize what was coming, and they would be able to help. Maybe Jalyn and Nevorn would be able to race out to his aid. It was strange to think that he needed assistance, but at this point, Lan knew he wasn't able to do this on his own. He could feel the energy within

himself. He could feel the way it was sweeping through him. And as much as he was trying to call upon that power, he couldn't feel it coming to him. He had the god-gifted blade, but even that wasn't going to be enough.

Something came from behind him.

Lan spun, holding out his blade, and he swept it toward the oncoming attack. He could feel something. It was another of the creatures.

This one was larger than the last one. Lan didn't have the power that he'd had to use against the last one, and so as he brought his blade around, he braced for the possibility that it wouldn't be enough.

The moment that the end of his still-glowing blade struck the creature, there was a painful, loud shriek that echoed all around. Lan staggered back.

The creature started to smolder. It had thick fur, a massive torso, and horns that protruded from either side of its head. The legs looked impossibly powerful.

Whatever Darish had done to the blade had definitely changed it. Lan wasn't pushing as much power into it as he had been before. He started forward again, but there was another surge of movement near him.

He spun, driving his blade outward, and he was met by resistance.

Lan tried to jerk his arms free, but they wouldn't move.

A man stepped forward.

He was just a man.

But he was glowing with real power.

A sorcerer.

Almost too late, Lan realized that he wasn't the only sorcerer near him. There were others.

Five in total.

And they had him surrounded.

His power continued to fade, collapsing. He could feel it sputtering. There was little more than a faintness to it, as if the warmth the Heart of the Grove had gifted him was disappearing.

Then one of the men smiled at him. “Quite the prize we have here.”

And with that, Lan felt the warmth fade altogether.

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CHAPTER 24

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The Raven Queen was quiet, her breathing regular. Parvella took a seat next to her, eyes dark and reflecting the moonlight, making her seem to glow even more. The other woman rested one hand on the Raven Queen's chest. She shifted her hands into a pose, and power flowed from her. Sophie couldn't tell what she was doing, so she shifted closer to offer her assistance.

Shadows drifted off piles of rock, and Sophie felt a distinct sense of energy, though she suspected that was imagined rather than real. How could she feel anything in a place like this?

"I don't think you can do anything to help her," Parvella said.

"I thought I might be able to gift her some of my own power."

"That's dangerous," Parvella said.

"Why is it dangerous?"

Parvella sighed and looked over at the Raven Queen before turning her attention back to Sophie. "I'd like to talk to you about the power that you are drawing upon."

"You told me that it could draw upon something deep," she said.

"Deep' is one way of putting it," Parvella said. "It calls upon an old power."

Parvella pressed the tips of her fingers together. It was a pose, but it was a simple, basic pose. As she focused, power

flowed within her. For the first time while watching Parvella, Sophie was distinctly aware of the kind of power that she was drawing upon. It seemed to work from somewhere deep inside her, and then it began to work outward, along her arms and then into her fingertips. As Sophie watched, she recognized that the power was continuing to stretch, straining into her, and then...

Then, as Parvella spread her hands apart, the power began to shift, and Sophie could see that it was flowing outward. She braced for it, even before she realized what was happening.

She instinctively began to form the prayer pose and pushed outward with a bit of resistance in order to protect herself, but Sophie wasn't sure if that was even necessary. Whatever it was, the power Parvella drew upon was enormous. And here Parvella had told her that she didn't have much strength.

She felt the rippling of energy that washed over her, and then she turned her attention back to Parvella, wishing that she could get to her feet and form the prayer pose.

"You have quite a bit of power," Sophie said. "You've just been holding out on me?"

"I have power in certain ways," Parvella said. "And unfortunately, the way that I have power and the way that you have power are a little different. For now."

"I don't understand."

"Of course you do not," she said. "You have not been given the opportunity to learn, and the Raven Queen has not wanted you to understand. Not yet. You still have time to learn, but perhaps time is running out." She glanced over the Raven Queen. "You are accessing something that most call sorcery, but it is something deeper. What you are drawing upon is a connection to the natural world that others do not have."

"Even the Karell?"

"They brush along the surface of it," Parvella said, turning her attention back to Sophie. She held her hands outward again, and some of the power that she was drawing upon

shifted, as if it was changing color. “They access aspects. And perhaps that is more than enough.”

Parvella twisted her fingers together, forming what Sophie recognized as a weave, like her grandmother’s. The way that she used it, and how she wove, was so similar to what Sophie had seen that she found herself modeling her hands after Parvella’s. There was something familiar about the action, something soothing, that left Sophie wondering whether Parvella was a weaver as well.

“But it is not the only way that the potential can be determined, unfortunately.” Parvella looked up at Sophie. “But it is effective enough for the Karell. They use wands for power but cannot use poses, because poses would not be effective for them.” The woman shrugged and moved her hands again, and the color started to shift, becoming a bit paler, more translucent. “They brush along the surface of that kind of power, as I have said. But the power that you, and the Raven Queen and others like you, access is something quite a bit different. It is a deeper kind of power.”

“So you’re saying that I’m drawing upon some power of the gods?”

Considering what the Raven Queen had her researching, Sophie thought that perhaps this was part of the reason the Raven Queen had set that task for her.

“The answer is complicated. You are drawing upon something deeper when you use sorcery, and perhaps...” Parvella sat up and looked into the distance. “Perhaps you will see it is not the gods at all.”

What had Parvella detected?

Sophie got to her feet, forming a quick prayer pose, and let energy sweep away from her.

“You have to be careful, Sophie,” Parvella said, still barely moving. “Some of the entities that you may confront are more powerful than others. Be ready.”

Sophie looked down at Parvella, who had rested her hand again on the Raven Queen’s chest, which left Sophie

wondering whether she was doing something to help her, or whether there even was anything that she could do to help her. At this point, Sophie didn't know, though she could feel energy flowing from Parvella, something that struck her as considerable, the kind of power that Sophie thought she could draw upon, if only she had a bit more time to practice.

The pose that Parvella was using was different. She had one hand resting on her lap and one hand resting on the Raven Queen's chest. But this time, the hand on her lap was focused toward her stomach. Sophie could practically see the lines of energy she was drawing upon, and the way that something was moving, some power, shifting, as if flowing from Parvella.

Why was that?

That was odd, but more than that, it seemed as if Parvella was trying to draw upon herself, upon some power from within herself, and gifting that to the Raven Queen.

“Parvella?”

“I just want you to be ready,” Parvella said.

“What's going on?”

“I don't know, but we will be ready.”

And then Sophie focused on the prayer pose and let it flow away from her, the power sweeping outward. She hadn't done that in quite some time, and she expected to feel her brother, and maybe some other entity, this power that he referred to as the Hunter, but as she released the energy, she felt something else. Instead of the Hunter and her brother, she felt...

She felt danger.

That was the only way that Sophie could characterize it. It felt dangerous to her. It reminded her of what they had encountered before, the way that the creatures had come at them, the soldiers as well, and...

And sorcerers.

“Jalyn?”

“I feel it,” Jalyyn said, and she had her sword unsheathed, motioning to Nevarn, who had gathered up his blade as well. The two of them stepped forward, moving away from the Raven Queen.

Sophie found Parvella still seated, a hand on the Raven Queen’s chest, and she noticed the circling of power. Rather than the cycle of power coming only from Parvella, now it seemed as if some part of it was coming from a deeper place than before, to the point where it was flowing up from the depths of the ground, as if Parvella was trying to call upon it from the earth itself, or perhaps even from the air around her. The power Sophie felt was incredible.

Parvella was holding a variant of the godling pose.

“I thought you said this pose was dangerous,” Sophie said, crouching down and looking over Parvella. “But here you are, using it again.”

“Because we must protect her,” Parvella said.

“Why are you using it?”

“I’m doing what must be done,” Parvella said. “Much like I did before. And you...” She looked up at Sophie. Her eyes flashed with an expression of concern. She looked down at the Raven Queen and continued to move her hand around her belly. The one resting on the Raven Queen did not move. The glowing of energy was still there, and it continued to flow out from Parvella, giving the Raven Queen her power.

Where was Lan?

Sophie straightened herself and focused on her power.

At this point, she needed to keep fighting, and to keep drawing upon the power that she had within herself. She could feel some of it radiating outward, and she focused on the prayer pose, forming a boundary around herself and the others. If nothing else, it might create a layer that would help defend them.

And if any creatures got within the boundary, then they could take care of them. But until then, she was going to fight as much as she could. She looked over at Jalyyn, who had her

blade unsheathed. Sophie saw her starting to glow a little more. She had seen that from Jalyn one other time, but she hadn't been sure of what she had been seeing. Now she could tell. It struck her as considerable, and the kind of power that she was radiating struck Sophie as similar to what she had seen from her brother. And if that was the case, if Jalyn was able to draw upon that same sort of power, then shouldn't Sophie be able to help her in some way?

Sophie positioned her feet, focusing on the prayer pose. She created a ring barricade. She had felt the dangerous sense of the creatures, and the sense of soldiers, and more than that, there were sorcerers out there as well. Sophie had to wonder if she had enough strength to call upon.

She had to fight, and yet call upon power at the same time, and she had to find some way to keep summoning more and more, thinking that if there was something else within her that she might draw upon, she could use that.

Then something struck her barricade. It was like a thundering, like a bell tolling. Sophie braced for it.

"Hold on to it," Parvella said. "You have to protect the Raven Queen."

Sophie shifted her pose.

She could turn the prayer pose into something violent, couldn't she?

It involved collapsing the energy down, but first, she had to summon as much as she could and let the power continue to concentrate. She sent it blasting outward and began to feel a rippling of energy crashing into something.

It tolled again, much like a bell.

Then Jalyn sprinted forward.

Sophie was using a pose that Ridaln had taught her all that time ago, and she remembered the way that it would become unstable. And in this case, instability gave an advantage.

She pushed her power out again.

Distantly Sophie saw Jalyn fighting. Three soldiers faced her, along with one of the creatures.

Jalyn braced for a swipe from the creature as it attempted to claw her, and then she spun, ducking underneath a bladed attack. Then Nevarn was there, driving his sword up into the belly of one of the other creatures, spinning, cleaving one man's arm free, and then moving forward again, fighting through another attacker. One after another, they fell.

Jalyn was better than Lan, Sophie thought. At least, she would have been better than Lan, had Lan not been powered by the Heart of the Grove. With the power of the Heart of the Grove, Lan had an advantage Jalyn did not have. Sophie called back her prayer pose, wrapping herself, Jalyn, and Nevarn, along with Parvella and the Raven Queen, inside the prayer pose protection.

Power started to press inward. It was another disruption, another similar explosion of power, and this time, as it surged away from her, it was completely uncontrolled.

There was a strange explosion of energy. It took Sophie a moment to realize just what she was feeling: the energy of another sorcery spell collapsing around her.

Thankfully, her disrupted magic was enough.

But would it stay that way?

Sophie shifted her feet. She looked down at Parvella, who was still pouring power into the Raven Queen. Nothing changed for the Raven Queen, and there was no shift of energy within her, though Sophie kept hoping that maybe the Raven Queen would come around to help them.

And as power continued to build around Sophie, she had to wonder if it was more than sorcery.

What if this was a god?

CHAPTER 25

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Sophie could feel the prayer pose starting to fade.

Jalyn and Nevarn finished with the soldiers they were dealing with, defeating them and the creatures, which left them now inside the shielding of the prayer pose, but it wasn't enough.

"Keep holding on to it," Parvella said.

"I need you to help," Sophie said, looking at Parvella, barely turning her head, as she didn't want to disrupt the energy of the pose. "I'm holding the barrier, but you're going to have to attack."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Parvella said.

"You need to. The Raven Queen needs you to."

"I'm doing what she needs now," Parvella said.

The way that she was using power was remarkable.

"You're trying to wake her up?"

"I'm trying to give her what she needs," Parvella said.

Sophie had to focus on the power inside herself. The pressure continued to build.

She had only met three powerful sorcerers in her time.

The Raven Queen, Ridaln, and Darius.

She had never really met Darius directly and didn't know his power, but she knew he was the only one who might be able to counter the Raven Queen.

“Sophie?”

She looked over at Jalyn.

“I don’t want to alarm you, but there are several dozen of these creatures and soldiers now surrounding us. I would suggest that we use whatever sorcery you might have to combat them.”

“I’m holding the barrier as well as I can,” Sophie said.

Sophie didn’t need to say more, as Jalyn locked eyes with her and nodded solemnly. “Hold out as long as you can.”

Jalyn made a quick circuit inside the perimeter of the prayer pose. Sophie began to feel the pressure building, and the pose was starting to collapse. The sorcery pushing down upon her was considerable enough that she wasn’t going to be able to hold on to it for very much longer. As that power started to constrict downward, Sophie tried to hold out, but she felt her pose was nearing collapse. And the longer the power continued to constrict, the harder it was going to be for her to maintain her own.

She wondered what would happen if her power exploded.

“Listen,” she said, looking at Jalyn. “If this goes poorly, I’m going to send every bit of energy I have outward. It should give you some time. Take out the sorcerers first.”

“Sophie,” Jalyn said, shaking her head, “I’m not going to let you sacrifice yourself like that.”

“I’m not going to sacrifice myself,” she said. “I’m just warning you that...” At this point, Sophie wasn’t sure whether her warning would make a difference, because she wasn’t even sure whether she was able to do what she proposed. “It’s not a sacrifice. And if it saves the Raven Queen, then it is necessary.”

Parvella looked over at Sophie at that point, and there was a different look in her eye. It was one of resolve.

The glowing energy coming from Parvella was increasing, as if she was summoning even more power.

Jalyn turned her attention outward. “If it comes down to it, I can jab through your barrier. I don’t know if it’s going to hold, but we can fight together. You have to have other sorcery that you can try.”

“I don’t know if it’s going to make a difference,” she said.

“Why don’t we...”

When Jalyn trailed off, Sophie looked over at her, wondering what was going on.

But she didn’t need to look for very long.

There was a different buildup of energy on the other side of the barricade.

Sophie stopped struggling.

Lan.

Her brother was here.

She focused on the prayer pose, focused on what she could feel of her brother, but it wasn’t much. He was lying near her boundary, as if whoever was on the other side, the sorcerer—and Sophie increasingly felt that it was Darius—knew that Lan was important to her.

Either that, or they knew that he was important to the Raven Queen.

She could no longer feel his familiar energy. Some part of his connection to the Heart of the Grove had changed.

“You see it, don’t you?” Sophie said to Jalyn.

“I see him,” Jalyn said softly. “And I see what they have done to him.”

Sophie tried not to think about all the things that could have been done to her brother, nor the ways in which he could be hurt. At least he seemed to be alive.

“Hold on to it,” Parvella said from behind her. “I need you to give me enough time to finish what I am doing. If you can, we might be able to salvage something from this.”

Salvage?

The power swirling around continued to press downward, constricting her prayer pose.

Sophie cried out.

Jalyn joined her, standing next to her, sword held out and at the ready. “Tell me what you need,” Jalyn said.

“I don’t know,” Sophie said. “I don’t know if I can hold out any longer.”

“Not much longer,” Parvella said, her voice sounding weaker.

Parvella looked as if she was about to collapse down upon the Raven Queen, and yet power still flowed out from the air around her, from Parvella herself, and into the Raven Queen. Finally everything seemed to reach a climax. And then there was a soft burst of gray haze, and the air clouded. When it cleared, Parvella was gone.

“Check the Raven Queen,” Sophie said.

She would do it herself, but she didn’t dare move at this point, not knowing whether it would disrupt some of her prayer pose or cause her to lose the power and potential that she needed within it. Instead, she had to stay here, holding the power inside herself and hoping—and praying, she thought with a bit of amusement—that she would have enough strength to handle whatever was coming at them.

“She’s alive,” Jalyn said.

“Alive or awake?”

“Alive,” Jalyn said again.

Jalyn reached over, touching the strange stone that had been left on the Raven Queen’s chest. Maybe that was what Parvella had been summoning power through to help the Raven Queen. Sophie grabbed the stone and slipped it into her pocket.

“Nevarn,” Sophie said, glancing over to where he remained crouched next to his mother, “you need to do something to help her. Didn’t you help her turn a healing pose on herself?”

Nevarn shook his head. “That works if she’s more alert, but she’s not awake enough to help herself.”

The prayer pose continued to squeeze down on Sophie.

Now it barely surrounded her and the others. She stood at the edge of what she was holding, at the rim of the prayer pose encircling her and the Raven Queen but not extending out any farther. The sorcerers on the other side of the barricade were nearby, looking inside, as if trying to gauge how much longer Sophie had. And at this point, she didn’t know herself, but she felt as if her power should be able to withstand more.

The prayer pose began to crumble.

She cried out, drawing upon the power deep inside her. There was some sense of it, but it did not come to her nearly as effectively as she needed it to.

A sorcerer stood across from her.

He had dark hair, eyes that seemed to swallow all the light around them, and he was dressed in black. Darius looked every bit the terrifying sorcerer that she remembered from the fight in the palace in Neylash, when she had seen him attempt to destroy Dannith—and when she had seen him attack Ridaln.

He didn’t even move, though she felt his power beginning to build.

She had known that Darius was a skilled sorcerer, but she hadn’t known how much power he had. She had been told that he had strength that rivaled the Raven Queen’s, but she had never truly seen it firsthand when she had the strength to understand. And now, feeling that power as it built from him, she was all too aware of just how much he possessed.

He reached outward, then tapped a single finger on the prayer pose barrier Sophie held. With a sudden burst of energy, her pose exploded, and there was nothing left.

Sophie collapsed.

CHAPTER 26

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Lan came around slowly. His body ached, and his mind hummed with pain. He tried to ignore it but could not.

Everything seemed off. It took him a long time to realize why that was, and he wondered whether he might be able to draw upon his power to feel the connection once more. He had known the link to the Heart of the Grove, and the warmth that flooded inside him from her touch. He remembered the way the sorcerers had surrounded him, continuing to squeeze until he felt that sense collapse, snuff out.

Is it gone, though?

Lan sat up, looking around.

He was surrounded. Soldiers stood all around him. They had taken his sword. Considering that Darish himself had given him his blade, turned it into something more than just a mere weapon, Lan wanted to claim it again. And he felt power around him.

Even without a weapon, he wasn't helpless. He was a brawler, wasn't he? When he had first trained as a soldier, Lan had relied upon that skill, and the brawling nature that he had acquired in order to get to safety. And if nothing else, he could use that now.

He heard someone talking behind him.

“Did you think you could go so long without drawing my attention?”

There was something unpleasant about the voice, something that Lan could feel, even though he wasn't at all

sure why he was so aware of it. It echoed in his mind, reverberating with a sense of power, and Lan couldn't help but feel it came from a sorcerer of considerable power.

And there was only one other powerful sorcerer that he knew about.

Darius.

That was who Sophie had been worried about all along, and if he was here, then the steady drumming of energy he had felt before made much more sense. Could he have called the thisten to him?

He shifted, trying to get a better view.

A flicker of firelight burned in the night. He wasn't the only one bound, as there was another figure lying on their side not far from him. Dark hair spilled over their face, which left Lan thinking that this had to be Nevarn. At least he was bound—which meant he was likely alive.

What of Jalyn?

He found her surrounded by three creatures.

They stood around her in a ring. Jalyn stood unarmed but staring defiantly, as if unmindful of the fact that she had these monsters around her. And knowing Jalyn, Lan couldn't help but feel that perhaps she truly was unmindful of it. Given what she was capable of, and the power that she had, Lan had to believe that she would fight her way free if she had an opportunity.

What of his sister?

Sophie had to be somewhere nearby.

"I'm not trying to draw your attention," a voice said.

It took Lan a moment to recognize the voice.

That was Sophie. Which meant that she was captured.

All of them were captured.

"No? And yet you have continued to work with her."

They had the Raven Queen as well. All of this was too much. Lan knew that there would be no way to get free without fighting.

Lan wished that there were some way to signal the Taihg. Perhaps if he had his connection to the Heart of the Grove, he would have some power that he could use, but he had never mastered it in any way that would allow him to reach out to Magnus or Torthan or other Taihg and alert them of his presence here. He wondered if there would even be a way to do that when fully empowered.

“You aren’t going to hurt her,” Sophie said.

Darius laughed, a deep, dangerous sound. “And who do you think is going to stop me?”

There was a hint of a pause, and Lan moved, trying to see better. Darius was tall, dark-haired, and wearing black, and he carried a dark aura around him. As he loomed over Sophie, Lan found himself feeling proud of his sister for not shrinking away.

“Do you think *you* can stop me?”

“No,” Sophie finally said. “But *she* will stop you.”

He smirked at her. “Will she? I’m afraid I have ensured that she doesn’t pose much of a threat to me. Not in this state. And perhaps never again.”

“You don’t know her the way I do,” Sophie said.

Darius laughed again. “Oh, I think that I know her quite a bit better than you could ever imagine.” He made a motion. “Set her over there.”

A pair of soldiers dragged Sophie, and she was tossed near Lan. She looked over, her eyes going wide, and he tried to get closer to her, wanting nothing more than to hug his sister, but the soldiers loomed over him and prevented him from moving.

“Now to see what we might be able to do with her,” Darius said.

“Sophie?” Lan whispered.

Sophie shook her head. “I’m not hurt. At least, not yet. I don’t think I can call upon any more power. I was trying to hold out as long as I could, but it was just too much. I’m not strong enough. And then with what Parvella was doing, and the way that she was summoning power, before she disappeared—”

“What do you mean, she disappeared?” Lan kept his voice quiet, as the soldiers were looking down at them, but they didn’t seem to be paying that much attention—at least, not yet. He worried about what would happen if they began to. “How could she have disappeared?”

“I don’t know. She was doing something for the Raven Queen.” Sophie began sliding closer to him, keeping her voice low as she did. He didn’t see any power coming off her, but given his weakness, maybe it wasn’t possible for him to do so. “And then she just disappeared.”

“Where is it?” Darius’s voice boomed.

Sophie slid closer to Lan and reached toward him. She was handing him something. He took it quickly, having no idea what she was doing, and he could feel something metallic in his palm. He cupped his hands around it.

“She should have it on her.”

Darius stormed over toward Sophie, and with a simple flick of his wrist, she went floating up, and she had to contort her body to look at him.

“Where is it?”

Sophie tried to shake her head, and Lan could see her straining against the power holding her, though she didn’t seem to be able to fight it. “I don’t know what you’re asking for,” she managed to get out.

“She has an item on her. I would have it.”

“I didn’t see anything. Maybe Parvella took it.”

Sophie licked her lips, and there was a nervousness in her eyes, but there was also something else to her that Lan became vaguely aware of. He could see a trace of power within her.

For a while now, ever since his own power had started to fade, he had not been able to see any other power. Suddenly, and maybe it was tied to the fact that he was holding this strange metallic item, he began to see a faint glowing once again. It started softly, working its way from deep inside Sophie, but it didn't spread very far. It crept through her, as if she was holding it but not releasing it.

Darius glowed much more brightly. With every passing moment, Lan became even more aware of how much energy he commanded. There were other sorcerers around the clearing, and they were also holding power, much like Darius was.

“I don't know what Parvella did, but she disappeared. She was trying to help the Raven Queen—at least, I think she was—but then when you attacked, she disappeared.”

Darius glowered at her. He reached forward and ran his hands over Sophie's jacket, digging into pockets, throwing things on the ground. Lan felt a surge of anger work through him at the familiar way that Darius was touching his sister. He wanted to grab for his blade—

Lan did not have his blade.

He wouldn't be able to do anything.

Not without the power of the Heart of the Grove within him.

But was that a spark of warmth?

As he focused on it, he recognized the heat beginning to bloom inside him. It was slow, but it was definitely there. He could feel the blooming energy starting to work its way into him. Rather than starting deep inside, as it often did, it began in his hands, and it spread up his arms, into his neck and head, before gradually working down into his belly and then deeper, to some core part of him. He had no idea what it was, nor how he had this power, but he was certain that it was from whatever he was holding in his hands. Had Sophie known he needed this?

He squeezed the object even more tightly. But he was also aware that this was what Darius was after. Maybe it was some way of drawing more power.

“Go and search,” Darius said, motioning to a pair of men near him.

Heat and light flared within them, though it wasn't a pure white light, as it was within Sophie, or within Parvella or the Raven Queen. In this case, it seemed to be darkness mixed with light. Corrupted energy. It had to be the Shavln, but why would Darius have been willing to allow others to latch on to his Shavln connection?

As they left, Darius pulled Sophie closer to him, clutching at her for a moment as she let out a sharp cry. “If I find you have misled me...”

“Parvella,” Sophie said, her voice strangled. “I don't know where she went. She's incredibly powerful. You'd better be careful. When she comes back—”

Darius threw Sophie to the ground with a laugh, and she collapsed, letting out a soft grunt.

“When she comes back? Do you think I fear any sorcerer?”

“You don't know what Parvella is capable of,” Sophie said.

“Oh, and should I fear this Parvella more than I fear the Raven Queen?”

He said the queen's name with a sneer, and Sophie drew herself up, finding some hidden source of power and strength that Lan couldn't even fathom. What was his sister doing?

“Parvella taught the Raven Queen,” Sophie said. “So if you fear anyone, it should be her, and not the rest of us. You could let us go.”

Darius watched her for a long moment, the darkness in his eyes seeming to swallow more moonlight, and then he smiled, the expression predatory and leaving Lan wanting once again to drive a blade into him. If only he had the strength of the Heart of the Grove...

Heat began to bloom within him again, and he had to tamp it down before he ran the risk of releasing some of the energy. He had to find a way to hold it down, to control it, so that he didn't risk revealing that he had some god gift that he was concealing from Darius. He had no idea what they might do, but given how they had managed to tamp that power down once before, leaving it little more than a faint memory, he didn't want to risk the possibility that they had some other way of handling him.

“Oh, I have something else in mind for all of you.”

Darius motioned to several sorcerers, and three people took a position around Lan and Sophie. They glowed with the strange dark light, which radiated around them, as if to hold him and his sister in place.

Lan crawled closer to Sophie. “What is this?”

She shook her head, as if to silence him the way that she had when they were younger, and he had intended to tattle on her to Nana. “I don't know what happened to Parvella,” Sophie said, leaning in close to him and dropping her voice to nearly a whisper. She was glowing a little again, and he wondered if she was aware that she was drawing upon power now. Maybe she no longer was, as the kind of power she was summoning was faint enough that it wouldn't be detectable, especially given the way that she had been summoning it up through herself. “She was doing something to the Raven Queen, and then she disappeared.”

Lan couldn't fight without a weapon, and he wasn't sure how to fight if he couldn't have the sword Darish had gifted him.

The situation reminded him of some of the training he had undergone when he had first learned how to fight. There had been times when he had been told to fight, though he'd had no weapon, and been instructed to find a way to survive. Lan had managed to do that, partly because he had managed to claim a blade from somebody else. He could risk himself, fling himself at one of the attackers, and possibly find a way to get free, but...

He rubbed the rope ever so subtly against the metal in his hand, and he felt a blooming of energy within his arms. He focused on where he felt it and started to push some of the heat through himself. The energy he had deep inside started to shift, sliding around to where he had his hands trapped.

He pushed even more, until...

His hands were free. He didn't move.

Lan didn't dare do anything other than lie where he was. He slipped the metal item back into his palms, cupping them together. It seemed to be some item of considerable power. He rolled over to look at his sister, noting how she sat staring into the distance.

Not into the distance, he realized. At the Raven Queen.

A pair of sorcerers stood on either side of her, and Darius grasped her head in his hands. Lan couldn't tell what he was doing, but he could see a darkness rolling out from within Darius and flowing into the Raven Queen.

Lan had no idea what would happen when he finished.

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CHAPTER 27

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Lan looked over at his sister. They'd been camped for the better part of the night, and the soldiers were no longer guarding him quite as closely as they had been before, as if they were no longer concerned about what Lan and Sophie might do. His connection to the Heart of the Grove had improved further, blooming inside him, such that he thought he might be able to control it.

Sophie had not moved. She sat cross-legged, and Lan realized that it was a pose, but he wasn't sure what kind of pose.

"I don't know what he did to her," Sophie finally said. Her voice was soft, barely carrying over to him, and she didn't turn to look, though Lan had the distinct sense she was fully aware of what Lan was doing.

"I thought it was tied to the Shavln," Lan said. As difficult as it was for him to admit this to his sister, he thought that she deserved to know the truth, because he thought that she needed to know just what was going on with the Raven Queen, and whether she might be able to help her. "I don't know if that's true any longer."

"I thought you were going after the Hunter," she said.

"Darish," he said.

Her eyes widened slightly. "He *is* Darish?"

"I think so. And he spoke about the gods and claims that the Shavln isn't necessarily a god. It's connected to the gods,

though. I don't really understand it, and nor do I know what they need it for, but..."

Sophie turned to him. "The Raven Queen wanted those who had a god touch to come with her. Why do you think that is?"

Lan shrugged. "I don't know."

Sophie leaned forward. When she did, he noticed more glowing coming off her. It started to radiate outward. He twisted so that he could touch her, making it seem as if his arms were still bound behind him. She jerked her head around.

"Careful," he whispered. "I can see it, and if I can see it, then it's possible that some of these others can as well."

Her power started to fade.

"It's interesting that you can see it," she said. "I know of no one else who can see sorcery like that."

"Well, I'm sure that it has something to do with what the Heart of the Grove did to me." Lan shrugged. "And once I held that strange item..."

Sophie leaned over, took the item out of his hands, and squeezed her palms around it. As soon as she did, the glowing began to build even more. Lan was aware of the way she summoned energy and sent it swirling through her. It wasn't a pose—at least, not one he had seen before. She finally relaxed and pushed the item back into his palm.

"I can't discern anything about it," she said. "Maybe it's only meant for somebody like you."

"You were doing something," Lan said.

"I was?"

He nodded. "You were glowing more than before."

"We might be able to use that," Sophie said. "Maybe we can release the power inside it in some way." She looked around as if trying to count the sorcerers. Lan had done that and knew how many wielders of power they had to deal with. "I don't know if I'm going to be able to counter this, Lan."

He shook his head. “I don’t know if you are, either.”

“If we could fight...”

“It’s more than just fighting,” he said.

“We need a distraction, then,” she said.

Lan frowned at her. “A distraction may help, but...”

If he could get Jalyn’s attention, maybe she could find a way to counter the soldiers and the sorcerers. And there was the possibility that she could draw their focus.

But that meant sacrifice.

Lan suspected that he knew what she would do if it meant sacrifice on behalf of the Raven Queen, and the way that she would be willing to do it.

He shifted, sitting up. He began to tap on his back in a rhythmic sound to communicate. The series of taps suggested that he was going to try to make a break for it.

Jalyn tapped back, signaling her consent.

He sent another message across, and he warned her that this might mean a sacrifice.

She sent another message back: “I know.”

He glanced over at Nevarn. “We will try to get Nevarn. We will get the queen.”

“Quickly,” Jalyn said.

Lan turned his attention to Sophie, and everything within him seemed to go cold, as if his body was readying for the next step. He found his sister watching him, though she didn’t seem to know what he was doing.

He brought his hands around and then hurriedly swiped through the bindings that now wrapped around her wrists. They untangled. He hadn’t been sure if it would work, but he had the metallic object in one hand, and he pushed a bit of heat through him as he swiped at the rope.

Then he lunged.

His jump carried him to the nearest of the soldiers.

Then everything around him fell into chaos.

Somewhere nearby, he heard the creatures shrieking.

Jalyn had attacked.

Hopefully, whatever she was doing would buy them some time.

Lan grabbed for a soldier's sword, ripped it out of the sheath, and then drove it into the belly of another nearby soldier.

He spun, holding his sword out, and pointed.

A burst of light exploded from the end of the blade.

He spun again and shot another burst of light outward. It struck a sorcerer.

But he didn't have to keep fighting the sorcerers.

Sophie shifted and released power, slamming it into the attackers. Somehow she used controlled energy from her palms, as if she had created a weapon out of them.

One of the creatures reached Jalyn. Lan sent another burst into the creature. It staggered back.

Then Jalyn was there.

Somehow she had gotten a sword. *How?*

She drove it into the creature's belly and jerked up. It was *his* blade—the one Darish had given him. Could he do something with this blade?

Lan touched the end of it and poured some of his power out into the blade. He felt some of the metal shifting and folding. Pressure built around him. Somewhere nearby, Sophie cried out. He squeezed the strange item that Sophie had given him, and once again he began to feel a wave of warmth. It washed through him, and it felt as if he was somehow connected to the power of the Heart of the Grove even more than he had been before. He searched for the source of the power building around him.

And then he pointed.

A burst of energy exploded from the end of his blade.

It slammed into the figure.

The weight was lifted from him.

Sophie raced toward him, then stopped and positioned her body in a strange fashion, and a burst of energy surged away from her.

The power erected a barrier around them, shielding Lan and Nevorn, and prevented some dark energy from slamming into Lan. He hadn't even seen it coming.

One of the creatures near Jalyn had reared up onto two legs, glowing with the dark energy.

Lan pointed his blade and a burst of white light streamed out of it and into the creature.

Jalyn followed, driving her own blade—Lan's blade—into the creature, which then burst into flames.

“Get to the queen,” Sophie said.

Darius stood near the Raven Queen, power pouring out of the sorcerer.

Lan attempted to push as much as he could through his blade, and an explosion of white light crashed into Darius, forcing him back. It seemed as if Darius might launch another attack, but the blast had pushed him into the trees—where he then stood for a moment.

Is he readying another attack?

He needed the time to make his next move. Lan used the opportunity and rolled to stop next to the Raven Queen to grab her.

Get her away.

She was heavy, but he was powered by something beyond human strength. It was the power of the Heart of the Grove. It was the power of the gods. He spun in place, more and more power pouring out, creating a glowing ring of energy all around him.

Sophie reached him and touched his shoulder.

When she did, the power that he was drawing upon exploded.

A wave of pale light went rippling outward, tearing into the night.

Somewhere nearby, something shrieked. And then everything went silent.

Lan still had a hold of the Raven Queen. He felt Sophie's arm on him.

"Move," Jalyn said.

She had Nevarn thrown over her shoulder and gave Sophie a shrug.

"Where are we going?" Sophie asked.

"The only place we can hide," Lan said.

Sophie frowned at him.

But Jalyn nodded. She went racing toward the forest, seemingly knowing what he was planning. And he followed. He had the Raven Queen. She was unconscious, but alive. They had Nevarn, the prince, who was also unconscious, but hopefully alive.

But were they going to be able to get to safety?

And even if they got to safety, could they then stay safe? Or was all of this going to be too much for them?

Lan raced toward the trees, hopeful that Darish would be there, and that they might be able to find a measure of peace and safety, but he was not optimistic. At this point, the only thing he really knew was that they had escaped.

But for how long?

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CHAPTER 28

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Sophie looked over her shoulder.

She couldn't imagine what had happened.

They had managed to escape?

Lan had done something with that strange item that Parvella had left behind, an item that must be tied to the gods, but how?

Lan had helped them.

But it wasn't just that Lan had helped them. It was what had happened when she and Lan had touched. There had been some sort of explosion of energy, an unimaginable rippling of power. It had poured out, spilling into their surroundings. There was something quite incredible about it, to the point where Sophie couldn't help but feel there was something connecting her and Lan. Maybe the two of them, with their god-touched connection, were truly bonded.

They had escaped Darius.

But Darius was powerful. And he knew that they had the Raven Queen. He had soldiers and monsters and other sorcerers. How much longer did they have?

If they got into the forest, maybe they could hide, and perhaps Parvella would return to help.

"What are we going to do in the forest?" Jalyn asked, glancing over at Lan as they reached the edge of the trees. "Is this Hunter you found going to help?"

“The Hunter gave me that blade,” he said, nodding to the sword Jalyn was carrying.

She looked down at it before holding it up. It reflected the moonlight and glowed a little more brightly than it should. Then again, if it had been given to Lan by the Hunter—Darish—then it was truly gifted by the gods. That was the kind of power they needed.

“I would give it back, but it seems you have your own.”

Lan looked down at his sword. “I made this one myself.”

“What if the Hunter doesn’t help us?” Sophie asked.

Lan held the Raven Queen over his shoulder. It would have been disrespectful, had it not been for the fact that she was alive because he’d just dragged her from danger.

“I don’t know if he will. We need to get someplace they can’t follow us easily.” He looked around. “And there’s something else.”

“What?”

“I’m hopeful we may have some assistance here,” he began, and then he paused, frowning. He shifted the Raven Queen on his shoulder, and for a moment, Sophie felt a faint trembling, only this time the trembling seemed to come from Lan.

“What sort of assistance?” Jalyn asked. “We have Taihg here?”

Lan shrugged. “No. But the thisten might respond.”

“Have you seen them since the Mistress of the Woods was stopped?” Jalyn asked.

“Thea,” Sophie said. When they turned to her, Sophie shrugged. “We should call her by her real name, as it takes away some of her power. Her title only makes her more terrifying than she really is. This was Thea. She’s a Karell, and dangerous enough in her own right, but now that she has access to the Shavln, she’s even more dangerous. But she is still Thea.”

Jalyn watched Sophie for a long moment before she turned her attention to Lan. “So we have this woman who corrupted the thisten, and the two of you somehow salvaged them.”

Lan nodded. “I was here before, and I thought that I felt the thisten. I don’t know if it was real, but if it was, then I’m hopeful that we might be able to use them.”

Sophie couldn’t feel anything, but then again, she wasn’t sure that she would. She didn’t have Lan’s ability with that sort of thing. But she could use a pose, if she took the time. The only problem was that if she were to use a pose, she might reveal their presence.

“Where are they?” she asked her brother.

“I can feel something, but I don’t know.” Lan kept moving.

He shifted the Raven Queen on his shoulder again. “What is this item?” He leaned toward Sophie.

“I don’t know,” she said. She spoke about what Parvella had been doing, and she even referenced the powerful pose, though she didn’t tell them that she believed the pose to be forbidden, as she wasn’t even sure what it was. “She drew upon more power, and then she disappeared. This was left behind. I thought that maybe she was using it on the Raven Queen, but...”

Nevarn suddenly moaned, and Jalyn set him down.

He blinked for a moment before opening his eyes and looking up. He jerked his head back, but Jalyn was there, preventing him from smacking it into the tree behind him.

“What happened?” Nevarn asked.

“Well, we managed to get away,” Sophie said. “And your mother is with us, but she’s still not awake.”

“We escaped?” He frowned. “How?”

None had an answer.

And so as Sophie trudged her way through the forest, pulling on Nevarn, she looked over at her brother, noticing the way that he kept squeezing the item in his hand. It glowed

periodically. Sophie couldn't help but feel they were not moving quickly enough, and they were not going to be able to get out of this soon enough to save the Raven Queen.

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CHAPTER 29

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When Lan reached the edge of the forest, he felt the energy there.

The others with him were scarcely able to keep up.

Nevarn barely stayed on his feet. He was injured, and Lan worried about how well they would be able to keep him upright. Jalyn took over keeping him moving, allowing Sophie a break, but if it came down to fighting, Jalyn would need to wield her blade, and Sophie would have to protect Nevarn.

It felt as if they had been walking for hours.

Lan had seen no sign of Darish. He knew it was naive to think Darish would intervene, but Lan had been hopeful. If they could have the help of a god, they wouldn't have to worry about any mere sorcerer.

"I feel that the sorcerer is getting closer," Sophie said, walking closer to Lan and dropping her voice to a whisper. Even so, Jalyn cocked her head to the side and seemed to have heard. Nevarn kept his head slumped as he trudged forward, with Jalyn holding on to one arm. He didn't seem to recognize anything.

"I know," Lan said.

"What if they catch us? I don't know what they did last time, or how they were able to hold us, but if they do that again, do you think that you can fight past it? Or maybe the two of us can fight past it. I don't know if the thing that Parvella gave you—or me, as I don't even know what it is—

will make a difference, but perhaps it will give us enough power to handle this.”

Lan looked over. “Sophie. You’re babbling.”

She nodded. “I tend to do that when I get nervous. And right now, I’m definitely nervous. I just don’t know if we can handle Darius again. I was holding a prayer pose with as much power as I could, and even that wasn’t enough. I’ve never felt anything quite like that before. When I was first learning with Ridaln, he was able to squeeze my power down, but not quite like that. I was always able to overpower him, but this time, I wasn’t...”

“Sophie,” Lan said again.

She nodded. “I’m sorry.”

Lan continued to sweep his gaze around. He could feel something out there, but it didn’t seem to be getting any closer. “I need you to focus on your pose,” Lan said, looking over at his sister and finding her frowning. “I’m curious to know if you can detect anything. But it’s more than just detecting. I want you to try to communicate with the thisten.”

“How am I supposed to communicate with them?”

“I don’t know,” Lan said. “If you can draw upon your power, maybe combine it with what I’m doing...” He shrugged. “To be honest, I don’t have any real idea. I can feel the thisten, but they don’t seem to be responding to me.”

At this point, Lan didn’t know if the thisten would respond, and if they did, what they might do for them. He still wasn’t entirely sure what role the thisten had in all of this.

“There’s something moving out there,” Jalyn said.

Lan shifted the Raven Queen, sliding the metallic object into his pocket, then grabbed for his blade. He hadn’t been holding it as they had trudged through the forest, as he wanted to have a free hand to hold the Raven Queen, but he also wanted to be able to hold the strange metallic item. He had no idea whether it would help them, but he believed that the power in it had awoken something in him and helped him connect to the Heart of the Grove again.

“What do you see?” he asked.

“Shadows moving,” Jalyne said. “I see them in the distance, at several positions around us.”

“See if you can help,” he said, leaning into his sister and touching her on the arm.

He had to shift the Raven Queen, to make sure that he had her in his arm as carefully as he could, but even as he did, he worried he wouldn't be able to hold her nearly as well as he needed to. Lan could feel energy in the forest around him, but he wasn't sure that it was something he needed to deal with.

“I can't determine anything,” Sophie said. “I've been trying, but whatever is here seems able to resist me. I can keep pushing on it, but it's not answering in any way.”

“Lan,” Jalyne said, and she pulled on Nevarn's arm, dragging him forward. “I don't know how much more time we're going to be able to take here. Whatever this is, we could be dealing with something dangerous.”

Soldiers.

He knew that was a possibility, but he also knew that there might be some way to determine what this threat was. He was also going to have to find some way to handle it, but how was he going to do that?

He had the connection to the Heart of the Grove, and the power within him, but he did not know enough about it. He wasn't sure how to control it, something that Darish had suggested he work on, and Lan had attempted to do so but had not managed to succeed as well as he had wanted. It was possible that he could find a way to fully master his power, but so far, he hadn't had the time, nor did he have the understanding.

All he knew was that he had been gifted some power, and it was a power that seemed to be connected to the gods.

Or perhaps a power that was connected to only one god.

He pushed those thoughts aside. He had so many questions, particularly about Odian, and what his mark meant

for him, but at this point, Lan wasn't sure that he could get those answers.

More than that, he wasn't sure how he would get those answers.

"I can feel something," Sophie said, raising her hands up and spreading them apart. She looked as if she was balancing slightly on one foot, and then she tipped her elbows in, positioning her body in such a way that it looked as if she were trying to balance in a dance. The entire posture seemed a bit ridiculous, but then again, Lan had no real understanding of the poses that she used to summon the kind of power she had access to. All he knew was that each pose called upon her power in a different way, such that she could use it for different effects.

He settled the Raven Queen down on the ground, looking up at his sister. "Protect her."

Then he reached for his blade. If this was the sorcerer, then Lan was not going to go down without a fight.

Jalyn looked at him. "You don't need to do this yourself," she said, shaking her head. "I don't think you need to do it at all. I think you need to give your sister a chance here."

Lan was ready to fight, but he wasn't sure what he was going to have to deal with.

Then he saw a shadow moving.

He stepped forward, his blade raised.

He felt something wrapping around him.

Sophie stepped forward, no longer holding the strange posture, and looked off into the forest. Her brow furrowed, and there was darkness in her expression, but more than that, there was a resolve that he had not seen from her in quite some time.

"What are you doing?" Lan asked.

"I'm keeping you from making a mistake," she said.

"What kind of mistake?"

"The kind that would endanger the Raven Queen."

She stayed in place for a long moment and still hadn't released him.

"I can be a part of this," he said.

Sophie held out her hand and touched the power that held him, sliding her hand through it and touching him on the arm. "I'll release you, but I don't want you to do anything."

"But the Raven Queen—"

"Is safe," Sophie said. "Jalyn is there. And I have a protection around her. If needed, I can return to her very quickly. It's sorcery, but not Darius. In fact, I recognize this power."

She turned, looking off into the trees, as a cloaked figure approached.

The protection might have been removed from Lan, but that didn't free him. He held his blade, staying with his sister. She had one hand on his shoulder. He wanted to have the connection with her—whatever that might be—to use against this danger. That might be the only way that they would be able to escape, if this danger tried to wrap around him again.

CHAPTER 30

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Sophie couldn't imagine how much power Lan had.

She had been forced to wrap almost all the power of her prayer pose around him, and even then, he had nearly managed to fight through it. She had known that he was powerful. He was a Taihg, and more than that, he was touched by the Heart of the Grove, a god that had given him significant power, but Sophie had never tested him. Perhaps that had been a mistake. Maybe she should have tried to find out just what Lan was capable of, as she may have needed to test herself. Still, she needed him to wait just a moment, so that she could see what was coming.

It had taken her a moment to recognize the kind of power here, but she realized that the pattern, and the pose, of the power was familiar to her. She had not felt it in a long time. Years, in fact.

Lan waited, sword gripped in hand, and it glowed with the same strange energy that she had seen from him before. He no longer fought her, which she was thankful for, though she was afraid that he might attempt to do so again.

"Who is that?" Lan asked as a cloaked figure emerged from the trees.

All around him, Sophie felt others. She was holding a weak prayer pose, but it was enough that she could detect something more. She felt soldiers moving in, surrounding them. There was the sense of sorcery as well. That was an

undercurrent to all of it. She could feel the sorcery as it approached, though she wasn't sure if it was all tied to Ridaln.

When she had last seen Ridaln, he'd been able to summon sorcery while moving, but he had done so while tapping and making other small movements, a very different technique from what Sophie used now. It was possible Ridaln had mastered other techniques in the interim.

"Sophie," a familiar, warm voice said.

Dannith pulled the hood of his cloak down, and he swept his gaze around, pausing as he looked at Lan, at his blade—likely noticing that the blade was glowing—before he took in Jalyn, Nevarn, and...

"Stay away from her," Sophie said.

"We sensed someone here. At least, another did."

Sophie stepped forward, still holding the prayer pose in her mind, and this time, she sent some power radiating out. "You can say his name. I know Ridaln is with you."

Dannith tipped his head. "Do you?"

"I can feel him. Remember when you told me that certain powers were like fingerprints?"

Ridaln had suggested to Sophie that there was a reason that he couldn't be the one to mimic the power of the Pale Princess. She had never really believed it before now. Then again, she hadn't had much experience fighting other sorcerers. And once she had combated Darius and felt his power, she wasn't sure that she would ever forget it. But now that she felt Ridaln again, she also realized that there was a very good possibility that she had always known his power, and she could feel it quite easily now. "I feel your fingerprint now."

There was a shadowy movement ahead of her, and she readied for his appearance. The figure that stepped forward looked like Ridaln, but there was something about him that she could scarcely remember. It was as if Ridaln himself had changed.

“You’ve progressed,” Ridaln said, his voice little more than a whisper. “As I knew you would. You were always capable.”

“Was I?” Sophie shifted and positioned herself in a way that she could envelop everything in a wave of power if necessary. It wasn’t the prayer pose necessarily, but it was a pose. By holding it in the physical manifestation, she didn’t need to worry about losing control. She didn’t know what Ridaln might try, but she wasn’t going to wait for him to attack.

“You were. And now it seems you have proven every bit of your potential. Look at you, holding so much power.”

Sophie intentionally took a step forward while shifting the prayer pose, pushing it toward Ridaln and wrapping Dannith inside it. She grabbed her brother, taking him with her, while holding a secondary prayer pose outward.

She felt Ridaln’s reaction immediately.

He rebelled, pushing power outward. It was a slicing pose designed to disrupt the prayer pose, but Sophie had already shifted the prayer pose, and she countered it. That was easy enough to do, as it was something that Parvella had instructed her on. She sliced power toward Ridaln, then solidified the prayer pose once more. Then she began to collapse it inward, pulling Ridaln toward her, along with Dannith, and toward Lan’s sword.

“Fine,” Ridaln said. “You have grown *quite* capable.”

“I told you,” Dannith said.

“What did you tell him?” Sophie said.

She hadn’t seen him since his escape from the tower during the assault on Valan. At the time, she had questioned how much of a role he’d had in the attack, though she hadn’t been sure that he had been a part of it at all. Maybe it had just been gathering spies so that he could escape.

“I told him that the Raven Queen kept speaking of you in glowing terms. She knew you had incredible potential.”

“She was skilled when she was with us,” Ridaln said. “And yet I wonder if perhaps she was hiding something from us.”

Sophie snorted. “Now you think that I was some sort of spy? That’s rich coming from you.”

Lan approached, still glowing. She was tempted to let him unleash his power.

“This is Ridaln,” Sophie said. “And you know Dannith, as you were there during his rescue from the city.”

“Rescue?” Ridaln said.

“It was better than leaving him there,” Sophie said.

“That is enough,” Dannith said. “Now, Sophie, I must ask what you are doing here in the forest.”

“I believe this is still the Raven Queen’s lands,” Sophie said. She glanced over at her brother, as she wasn’t entirely sure.

“Barely,” Ridaln said. He flicked his gaze past her, and then there was another expression. “What happened to her?”

“What does it matter?” Sophie asked.

“It matters,” Ridaln said. “Unless you think that we mean her harm.”

Sophie turned, still holding the power that was keeping Ridaln in place, to check on the Raven Queen, along with Nevarn and Jalyn. Other soldiers had moved out of the trees.

“I remember, when I was training with you, Ridaln,” Sophie said, and then gradually, carefully, she turned her attention back to him, “you told me about the war, along with what you had done in it. It was the reason that you were fighting. It was the reason that you were trying to find your false Pale Princess. You wanted to find a way to overpower the Raven Queen.”

“Darius is here,” Ridaln said.

“Is that why you are here?” Sophie asked.

Ridaln's face contorted into something of a sneer. "I'm here because we have been tracking Darius's movements. We haven't gotten too close, because it's too dangerous to do so."

"It won't be dangerous for much longer," Dannith said.

Ridaln's frown deepened. "But it is still too dangerous now, sire."

"Why have you been following Darius?"

"The answer is complicated," Dannith said.

Sophie regarded him for a moment. He had been a friend, but he had also been something else. "Why haven't you reclaimed your throne?"

"As I said," Dannith said, "it is complicated."

"It can't be that complicated," Sophie said.

Ridaln looked around, and he pressed his fingertips up, over his head, and then began to part them. As he did, Sophie could feel the power of his pose—the filak pose—starting to crackle against her barricade.

She frowned at him.

It was a simple matter to counter that as well. She hadn't realized how much she had learned from Parvella. And it was Parvella who had been teaching her these things, not so much the Raven Queen.

And here Sophie had thought that she was going to learn everything that she needed to learn from the Raven Queen, as she believed that she was the powerful one. In fact, it had been Parvella who had been teaching her, showing her how to control her power, and helping her to find answers.

And now Parvella is gone.

Ridaln regarded her, the darkness in his gaze reminiscent of when she had first met him. The situation was quite a bit different than it had been when she had met him all those years ago, and she no longer feared him. At least, she didn't fear him in quite the way that she had. She respected him. And in the time that she had been away from him, and his influence, her

memories of him had softened, so that she no longer blamed him.

“I will not harm her,” Ridaln said, tipping his head down, keeping his eyes locked on Sophie. He pressed his fingers together in front of him, and though it wasn’t a formal pose, she detected some power, flowing outward and spreading toward her. She had no idea what Ridaln was trying to do, but she could feel it. There was something considerable to it. “As long as you do not harm me.”

“Just you?” She flicked her gaze at Dannith. “Obviously, he’s not as concerned about you.”

“That one does not need my protection,” Ridaln said.

Sophie started to smirk, but then she frowned, wondering what Ridaln was implying. She had not thought that Dannith had any sort of power. When she had been around him in the palace in Neylash, he hadn’t demonstrated anything. He had seemed like an old man. Well, an old man with a penchant for pastries—and always rhubarb—but still an old man. Then he had come to the tower in Valan, where the Raven Queen had kept him. There had been no evidence of power there, either.

Wasn’t there?

He had managed to escape his guards. That wasn’t the kind of thing that a simple old man would have been able to do, even one who had spies scattered throughout the tower, as Sophie believed.

What can Dannith do?

She turned her attention to him and focused.

She held Dannith inside a pose, and his eyes twitched as if he recognized what she was doing. That surprised her.

“You can stop whatever you are trying to do,” he said.

“And what am I trying to do?”

“Just release it,” he said.

“You haven’t told me what I’m doing.” She took a step toward him, constricting the barricade down even more. For

the first time, Dannith's expression shifted. "You can feel this. That's unusual, for somebody who doesn't have any sort of magical potential. How is it that you can?"

Dannith spread his hands, and when he did, he pulled his cloak apart.

For a moment, Sophie wasn't sure what he was trying to show her. Maybe that he was carrying a weapon. Then she realized what it was. Strapped to his waist was a long, irregularly shaped object.

A Karell wand.

Then he closed his cloak, pressing his hands together in front of it.

"Karell."

He tipped his head in a slight bow. "Not as potent as some, but I have my own potential."

"Does the Raven Queen know?"

He glanced past Sophie, to where the Raven Queen was lying motionless. Sophie was thankful that she had him wrapped in her power now, as he wasn't able to do anything.

"I suspect she had a pretty good idea but never said anything," Dannith said. "At this point, given the connection the two of us have, I didn't think that it really made much of a difference. She was always so much more powerful than me, much like any sorcerer is more powerful than one Karell."

"But the Karell betrayed her."

Could he have had something to do with that?

That didn't seem like something Dannith would do, but she hadn't even considered the possibility that he was a Karell. And if he was, and if he'd had a hand in what was happening and the way that Sophie had been betrayed, then she had underestimated him.

He shook his head again. "Thea took her own actions," he said, his voice soft, and there was frustration in it. "I had

nothing to do with it, as you would very well know if you had paid any attention, Sophie. You know me.”

“I thought I knew you,” Sophie said.

She continued to constrict her power down, holding it as tightly as she could, but she wasn’t sure if she could do anything with it. She didn’t want to harm him, but she had also been overly suspicious of the Karell ever since what had happened with Thea.

“And did you know anything about my grandmother?” Sophie asked.

His brow furrowed. “How would I know her?”

“She was tied to the Karell. I don’t know what she was, or what connection it was, but I know that she was a part of it somehow.”

Dannith’s expression soured for a moment, and then he looked over at Ridaln. “He never told me.”

“I’m sure he told you something. He must’ve told you about how he took us from our home, after the attack, and how he pinned it on the Karell.”

“The Karell wouldn’t have attacked your grandparents,” Dannith said. “I don’t know anything about what happened there. The council may know more, but... I can help the Raven Queen. At least, I think I can. Ridaln and I have learned to work together, to share power to do things that others have not. I’m assuming Darius did something to her.”

Before Sophie had a chance to answer, Lan interrupted.

“Something is coming,” Lan said, immediately spinning.

She glanced around, and then she released the pose that she had around Dannith and shifted. She held the prayer pose, amassing considerable power, and then let it flow away from her. She sent it sweeping outward, using as much as she could to press through the trees, until she began to feel something more.

It was incredible.

She detected soldiers, and something else.

Sorcery?

She looked over at her brother, who was quiet. He held his blade, but he was glowing in a way that he had not been before. He stepped forward then. A surge of energy rolled off him and through Sophie.

“I can offer my healing,” Dannith said.

“After,” Lan said. “If we reach an after. For now, we deal with the threat in front of us, and then...”

He didn’t finish. Instead, he darted forward.

“Go with him,” Dannith said to Ridaln.

The older sorcerer shook his head. “I don’t like this, sire.”

“There isn’t anything to like. We are going to deal with Darius if he comes. And think about it this way, Ridaln. Sophie may be enough to overpower him.”

“Not this way, and not yet,” Ridaln said.

Sophie frowned at Ridaln. He knew something.

But what?

When Ridaln took off after Lan, Sophie was left with Dannith and more questions.

And unfortunately, now was not the time to get the answers.

CHAPTER 31

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Lan reached the edge of the clearing, and he could feel the sorcery near him. He didn't know Ridaln, but he remembered Sophie telling him about the sorcerer, and how powerful he was. From Lan's assessment, he was not nearly as powerful as Sophie, but then again, Sophie was far more powerful than she gave herself credit for. She was perhaps nearly as powerful as the Raven Queen—at least, when the Raven Queen was awake.

“You command the soldiers?” Lan asked, looking around and trying to keep track of how many were out there. Dragging the soldiers away from the Raven Queen meant that the smaller party might be able to move and hide more easily.

“I can command them,” Ridaln finally admitted.

“Good. Then get them moving.”

“How did she overpower Darius?” Ridaln asked as they made their way through the trees.

Lan had the sense that he was genuinely curious—and perhaps even impressed.

“I don't know,” Lan said, and he meant it.

“It surprises me that she has gained enough power to overwhelm him. She is still a sorcerer, is she not?” Ridaln asked.

Lan paused near a tree. “What do you mean?”

“I suppose it doesn't matter.”

Lan felt frustration filling him, and he welcomed the warmth of the Heart of the Grove that flowed inside him. “It matters. What aren’t you telling me?”

“I’m telling you all that you can know right now,” Ridaln said.

Lan knew there was more, but he wasn’t sure whether it would make enough of a difference for him to push. He followed what he felt. He detected two dozen soldiers. All of them were coming with him, somehow controlled by Ridaln, directed by some power that Lan had no idea how to explain. The sorcerer certainly commanded them, as he had claimed, but Lan was left with questions as to how he could do so. It was impressive.

“Something is different about you,” Ridaln said. He began to tap his fingers. Pale light began to build as he did.

Lan didn’t care for it. He raised a hand, felt for the warmth inside himself, and pushed out with a pulse of energy, which slammed into Ridaln, sending him spinning to the side. The link between Ridaln and the soldiers shattered.

Five soldiers came toward Lan.

“Hold back,” Ridaln said, raising his hand.

The soldiers stopped.

“How do you command them?”

Ridaln frowned at him, and the power continued to tap out of him, yet the other soldiers were not moving.

“You do command them. I can feel something. I don’t know what it is, but...”

Ridaln cocked his head to the side, and he regarded Lan for a long moment. “You’re not Karell.”

Lan shook his head. “Taihg.”

Ridaln snorted. “No Taihg would be able to detect that. That requires a measure of power. And either you’re a sorcerer—and I have not seen you demonstrating any poses, not like your sister, who has clearly mastered the Raven Queen’s

approach to sorcery—or you’re a Karell. And if you were a Karell, you’d have to be a powerful Karell. Only powerful ones would be able to detect what I’m doing.”

Lan sniffed again. “You’ve got it wrong on both counts,” he said, and he turned, looking over at the soldiers. “You might as well call them back. If they get too close, I’m going to feel threatened. And you do not want me to feel threatened by your men.”

“You would attack them?”

Lan shrugged. “I don’t feel any great fondness for your soldiers. You forget,” he said, glancing at Ridaln, “how I was trained. It wasn’t until I was saved from them by the Taihg that I finally began to learn what it takes to be a true soldier.”

Ridaln made another motion with his hand, and the tapping began to intensify. Lan could feel the other soldiers around him beginning to back away, spreading out into the forest.

That’s impressive.

“Tell me about your new ability,” Ridaln said.

“Why don’t you tell me about what you’re doing to command the soldiers? I’ll share with you as much as you will share with me.”

“I doubt you would understand anything about it,” Ridaln said.

“Perhaps not, but I am Taihg.”

Ridaln watched him for a long moment. “Who have you connected to?”

Lan jerked his head around to look at the sorcerer.

“You speak to one of the gods, don’t you?” Ridaln continued. “This isn’t just Taihg power. This is something else.”

Lan breathed out heavily. “It’s complicated. While Dannith was trapped in the tower, Thea, a Karell, managed to reach for some of the Shavln power, and she started to control it. She corrupted a power in the forest. I was called in to help, and I’m

not sure if it was by Darish or the Heart of the Grove, who went by the name of Ciydalla. I was drawn into more than I can understand.” It was a simple explanation, but it was true enough.

“A direct touch,” Ridaln said, and there was a measure of respect in his voice, though it was a strange sound, something that Lan wasn’t sure what to make of. “I have not heard of any of the gods speaking so clearly.”

An unpleasant sense suddenly pressed against Lan, but it was also familiar.

He slowed and raised his hand. He glanced over at Ridaln. “Keep your men from attacking.”

“What is out here?”

“Wait here.”

“You intend to go alone? Are you mad?”

“Not mad, but I know that there’s something up ahead that only I can deal with.”

“Your sister will be quite disappointed if you die here. Should I bring her the story or your body?”

“Either,” Lan said. “But you know Sophie. She always loves a story.”

Lan stepped forward, focusing on the power of the Heart of the Grove, glowing as he did. He didn’t mind revealing himself, as he thought that he needed to. The energy revealed a figure only ten paces in front of him.

Magnus stepped forward. His face was dirtied and lined with heavy wrinkles. His massive, curved blade was unsheathed. “What are you doing here? We’ve been chasing the threat from Lorant. We followed them here. We lost them, but...” He frowned and looked past Lan.

Lan turned, and he realized that Ridaln had followed, along with the line of soldiers.

Lan cursed under his breath. “I thought I told you to stay back.”

“And I thought I needed to know what we were dealing with. I did not realize that you had summoned the Taihg.”

“What are you doing with them?” Magnus asked. “Have you abandoned your post?”

“I’m here with the Raven Queen. How many soldiers did you bring?”

Magnus frowned at him, and then he seemed to be trying to decide whether to answer. At last he shook his head, letting out a soft, frustrated breath. Lan began to feel a strange energy. Maybe Magnus was connected to the gods in a way that allowed him to use their power.

“Only about two dozen of us remain. We ran into some difficulty with a sorcerer.”

“It wasn’t him,” Lan said, pointing at Ridaln.

“How do you know which sorcerer we were dealing with?” Magnus asked.

“Because I suspect that it’s the same one that attacked us. And the Raven Queen.”

Magnus sucked in a breath. “What?”

Lan slipped his sword into his sheath. “It’s complicated, but I traveled out of the city with the Raven Queen, my sister, and a few others. Jalyn’s back with them, keeping guard over the Raven Queen.”

“What do you mean she’s standing guard over the Raven Queen?”

Lan filled him in on what had happened, and the way that the Raven Queen had been harmed. Magnus’s frown deepened, and he began to look along the line of Taihg before turning his attention back to Lan.

As Lan was talking, he began to feel the thisten moving. They were moving toward him.

That was odd.

During all the time that he had been focusing on the thisten, he had attempted to reach out to them and summon the

power within them, but they had not responded to him. Why would they have suddenly decided that they wanted to react now? It seemed unlikely that something had changed enough that they felt they needed to come in this direction. That was unnerving, but Lan couldn't focus on that. He had to focus on the Taihg.

“Now that you are here, we need your help.”

“And you brought in soldiers from Lorant?”

“Well, not exactly. We encountered them in the forest right before I detected you, and Sophie is trying to bring everybody together and get some answers. I don't know if we have any answers, but we are trying to figure out what's going on.”

“Whatever the Raven Queen needs,” Magnus said, and then he whistled three times.

The Taihg responded, and they moved into position around Magnus.

Lan glanced behind him, looking at Ridaln. “Send them back.”

“They will stay with me,” Ridaln said.

“Then you go back. We do not need conflict here. Not yet. So send them back, and go back with them, and we will follow.”

Ridaln regarded him for a long moment. Then Lan felt power coming from him. The soldiers, and Ridaln, turned and headed into the forest.

CHAPTER 32

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SOPHIE

Sophie looked down at the Raven Queen. Dannith crouched beside her. He had drawn his wand, and he was tapping it on his thigh while touching the Raven Queen on the cheek, then the other, then the wrist. Sophie felt a bit uncomfortable trusting somebody else—especially a Karell—to work on the Raven Queen, but she couldn't deny the possibility that the Raven Queen needed help that she couldn't offer, and perhaps help that a Karell could render.

“Can you tell what's wrong?”

“I can feel that she has strained herself,” Dannith said. The wand began to glow softly. He continued tapping on his thigh, but he didn't direct it at the Raven Queen quite yet.

Jalyn looked down before turning her attention back up to the forest. Only a few of the soldiers had lingered, with Ridaln and Lan having taken most of them. That had left Jalyn and Nevarn—who seemed to be recovering, to the point where Sophie actually thought that he might be useful once again—as the only protection.

Well, along with Sophie. And Dannith.

Dannith continued to tap the wand, and power spilled out of it. Finally he took a deep breath, and he gripped the wand in both hands and then brought it down, setting it on the Raven Queen's chest.

Sophie reacted quickly.

She formed the prayer pose in her mind and sent it sweeping out around the Raven Queen. She interrupted

whatever power Dannith was using on the Raven Queen, and wrapped her own fully around her, keeping the Karell power from infiltrating her.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she demanded.

Dannith looked down at the Raven Queen. His wand no longer touched her chest, though it still glowed with the same greenish energy. “I told you I was trying to help.”

“You were trying to help, but you need to give me a bit of warning. I don’t know if I can trust you.”

Dannith started to smile. “I imagine she has found you quite difficult to work with.”

“I’m not trying to be difficult. I want to learn.”

Dannith looked up at her. “I have not betrayed you.”

“Other than by holding me captive in your palace.”

“I believe that was Ridaln’s doing, and not my own.”

“You could’ve had me released.”

“Do you resent what happened to you?”

Sophie opened her mouth to tell him that she did, but at the same time, she realized that she did not resent it.

Had she not been at the palace, and had she not had the opportunity to work with Ridaln, she might never have learned about her potential as a sorcerer, and she might never have connected to the power that she obviously had.

Wasn’t that something she should be thankful for?

And then, when she had gone to the tower in Valan, she had visited with Dannith, and he had revealed that he had spies in the tower, but he had never tried anything to harm her. She needed to trust him.

She looked over at Jalyn, who was standing guard, hand on her blade.

Sophie released the prayer pose.

Dannith seemed to notice the moment that she did, and he pressed the wand, which was still glowing with greenish

energy, down upon the Raven Queen's chest. The power swept out and into the Raven Queen. Greenish energy washed through her before it dissipated.

Dannith withdrew his wand and looked at Sophie. "Unfortunately, this is beyond my understanding. I only know the basics. Not nearly what some of the better trained Karell know."

"Did Oleda know?"

"She knew," he said.

"Was she trying to protect you, or was she trying to protect magic?"

Dannith frowned, looking around before turning his attention back to Sophie. "That's an interesting question, and it's one that I don't really have an answer for."

"Because you don't want to answer, or because you—"

"Because I don't have an answer."

That's interesting.

Sophie didn't know the extent of the Karell, nor did she know anything about the leadership. But Dannith had mentioned something about a council. It seemed odd for a king to defer to a council, but then again, maybe it wasn't.

"Did anything change?" Jalyn asked.

Sophie shook her head. "She's alive, breathing, but she's not coming around."

"What do you intend to do?" Jalyn asked.

"We have to get back to Hester," Sophie said.

"That's a long way from here," Jalyn said. "And we don't have our horses, and we have to go through the forest, and we have sorcerers out there hunting us, and—"

"And I know all of this," Sophie said, "but it doesn't change what we need to do. I don't know how we're going to do it, but we have to find some way."

They could head back the way that they'd come, but that way risked running into Darius. There was another possibility, and it was one that Sophie wasn't sure would be safe, but they could head through Dannith's lands. He obviously knew them quite well, and he could navigate through them easily. If he did, then they might be able to get the Raven Queen to safety by looping back around to Hester.

And there was still the issue of what Darius was after.

He had chosen this moment to come after the Raven Queen.

Why?

Commotion caught her attention, and Sophie hurriedly got to her feet, forming the prayer pose, sending power sweeping out, only to feel Ridaln and his soldiers approaching. They encircled the small clearing. Ridaln approached, and his brow was furrowed, irritation flashing in his eyes.

“Where is Lan?”

Ridaln glanced in her direction. “Your brother has decided to spend some time with the Taihg.”

Jalyn stiffened. “The Taihg are here?”

Ridaln nodded. “That is what we detected. Or should I say, what your *brother* detected before I saw them as well,” he said, looking over at Sophie as if asking her a question.

She found herself smiling at that. She knew what Ridaln was after: he wanted answers about what her brother could do and how he was connected to the Heart of the Grove. But that wasn't her story to tell. It might not even be one that Lan wanted to tell somebody like Ridaln.

“How many?” Jalyn asked.

“I didn't have a good count,” Ridaln said. “At least a dozen.”

A dozen Taihg.

If the Taihg could fight sorcerers...

She began to feel pressure building. It seemed to come from the air itself. It weighed down upon her, and this time, she recognized the source of it.

“He’s coming,” Ridaln snapped.

Sophie stood over the Raven Queen. If she needed to, she was going to fight to protect her.

“We should move,” Dannith said.

As Sophie formed the prayer pose, letting that power sweep away from her and out into the forest, she began to feel the source of the energy. It radiated toward her in a way that she couldn’t counter. She knew that they didn’t have much time.

Darius’s power was coming at them, and it was building.

Sophie shook her head. “There isn’t time for us to move. We need to fight.” She looked over at Ridaln. “Do you think you can handle Darius?”

“I cannot,” Ridaln said.

“You have to know something,” she said.

“I trained with him, but I never came close to mastering what he knew. I do not have the knowledge that he does.” His brow furrowed as he studied her a moment, and then he shook his head. “And I doubt that you do, either.”

Sophie braced herself, and she formed the prayer pose again. This time, she allowed herself to feel the power within it and allowed it to radiate through her and outward. This time, she was determined to form more than just the prayer pose, to summon so much energy that she might overpower what was coming at her, but she didn’t know if even that was going to be enough. She had felt the way that Darius could crush her magic.

“You don’t know what I’ve learned,” Sophie said.

“I know that you still use the prayer pose,” Ridaln said.

“Only because it’s basic, and basic can be powerful,” she said.

She was tempted to try something more, to try the forbidden pose, but she didn't know if that was going to be safe for her. Parvella had warned her against it, about what would happen if she were to reach for that power, and where that power would lead her. Sophie didn't want to draw upon anything that would limit her, or perhaps damage her.

And so she didn't.

But some deep part of her cried out, practically begging for her to attempt it, to use it in order to summon the necessary power to overwhelm what was coming at her. She could feel the energy building, and some part of it sweeping out and around her, but she couldn't do anything about it.

She stood motionless.

Ridaln joined her, and she felt the power that he was summoning, the way that he was trying to add to the energy that she was building.

"I doubt it's going to work," Ridaln said.

"Why not?"

"Because Darius will not be deterred."

"What is he after?"

"It—"

A burst of energy washed outward, and it forced Sophie to stay motionless, holding her pose. She strained against it, trying to maintain everything that she could, but the weight was starting to make it difficult for her. It was trying to press down on her from above, so that her pose would collapse. The more the weight built, the more she had a hard time countering it. She struggled against it, knowing that there had to be some way to overpower it, but all she could do was strain against it.

"Find your form," Ridaln snapped.

His command brought Sophie back to attention, reminding her of what she had felt when she had first learned from him.

Find your form.

Focus.

They were the same lessons that Parvella had taught her.

And Parvella...

She might be stern, but she also had a way with the poses. Precision. Real power.

“What do we have here?” a voice said from the edge of the trees.

Darius stood there. He was dressed in black, and yet rather than radiating the darkness that she had seen from him before, a reddish glow was building.

She felt Ridaln adding something to her pose, and surprisingly, it seemed to strengthen what Sophie had already built.

“We don’t have what you’re looking for,” Ridaln said.

Sophie was tempted to look over, curious about what he was going on about.

“I think you might be mistaken,” Darius said. “But perhaps you are correct at the same time. *You* don’t have what I’m after. *They* do.”

“What do you think we have?” Sophie asked.

Ridaln didn’t move, though she felt a blooming of power building from him. It was different from what she had felt before. And it surprised her. She knew that Ridaln was skilled, but she also knew that he had limits to his power. He wasn’t nearly as powerful as Darius, and not nearly as powerful as the Raven Queen. But for a moment, and no more than that, Ridaln had more power than she’d expected.

Darius chuckled. “There it is. Perhaps you do have one.”

“What is he talking about?” Sophie asked.

“You haven’t told her. How interesting.”

“What’s he talking about?” Sophie asked.

Darius took a step closer. “I’m talking about god stones.”

Ridaln said nothing.

“What are god stones?” Sophie asked.

“Stones the old gods once touched and left a part of themselves in. And then the new gods came, and...”

God power. That was what this was about?

Sophie didn't have a god stone.

Lan has it—if that is what it is.

“How long do you think you can withstand me?” Darius asked Ridaln. “The last time, I believe that I nearly crushed every bit of energy you had. It seemed to take you quite some time to recover. You're feisty—I'll give you that—but even you will eventually fade. I just want the stones. Then I'll leave you.”

“Why do you want these stones?” Sophie asked.

Ridaln had returned with the soldiers, which meant that Lan couldn't be that far behind. If she could keep Darius talking, maybe she could give Lan the time to get here.

And then what?

She hoped that her connection with Lan would be enough.

“The stones are power,” Darius said, looking toward Sophie. “But then, someone like yourself should know about power. You *did* help me access it in the first place.”

“I thought I helped you access the Shavln,” she said.

He started to smile. “And what do you think the Shavln is?”

“I don't know. It's a dark power.”

“It's a way to poison the gods,” he said. “And thankfully, it has been working just as it should. The gods have begun falling. They have been leaving the god stones behind as they retreat from this land. Just like they did the last time.” He stepped forward.

Sophie hadn't even realized that she had been withdrawing her prayer pose, the barrier fading.

“And I would have the rest. When it is done, I will do what needed to be done before. The gods must be destroyed.”

“You would *kill* the gods?” Sophie asked.

His statement sounded ridiculous, but the idea that they were talking about god stones, power left by the gods, was also ridiculous.

“The gods have failed us. It’s time their power was removed. And it’s time another took their place.”

“You?” Sophie asked.

“Yes. Me. Somebody who has seen firsthand what the gods have done and how they have failed us.”

Darius had been hurt. But so had Sophie. Maybe there was some way that she could get through to him, connect to him, convince him to call off this attack. And then...

He took another step toward her.

Sophie’s prayer pose was collapsing even more. Then she began to feel something.

And hear it.

There was a clatter of swords.

Darius turned, and whatever he was doing to Sophie faded for a moment. It allowed her to gather her own power once again and solidify it. As she did, she pushed outward against Darius. A flurry of movement came rushing toward her. She braced herself, ready to erect another prayer pose, but she saw a blazing white light streaking at her.

Lan had managed to come through her barrier?

And she hadn’t even seen or felt him.

He lunged at her, spinning so that his blade was pointed outward, toward Darius.

Lan nodded to her. “Use it.”

Sophie focused, and for a moment, she felt nothing different.

Then a wave of warmth began to flow.

It filled Sophie.

She hadn't felt anything quite like it before, but it seemed as if the power within her brother, power that was flowing from him and into her, was gifting her some aspect of him.

Then she pressed out with the prayer pose.

At the same time, Lan did something. He pointed his blade at Darius, and a burst of white lightning shot from the end, streaking toward Darius.

There was an explosion of light, wind, and energy, and then everything fell still.

When the debris settled, Darius was gone.

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CHAPTER 33

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“What just happened?” Lan asked before settling his gaze on his sister.

“I don’t know,” Sophie said. “Darius came, and I...”

She strode over to where Ridaln was standing in some strange pose. Sophie looked angry, and Lan hadn’t seen that flash of rage in her eyes before, but he understood it. “What’s going on?” she snapped, sweeping her gaze around before settling it once again on Ridaln. “It’s time for you to tell me about these god stones.”

Lan snapped his attention to Ridaln as he tried to make sense of what she was saying. “What do you mean, god stones?”

“That’s what Darius has been after. I don’t really understand it, but he came here talking about these god stones, saying that they are the key to whatever he’s after. He believes that the Raven Queen has some of these god stones, and...” She took another step toward Ridaln, who didn’t move. “And you have one as well.”

Ridaln tipped his head slowly, eyeing Sophie carefully. “I have one, and it seems you do as well.”

Lan didn’t move, but he reached for the strange metallic object in his pocket, cupping it carefully.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said.

Ridaln snorted. “Don’t you? You obviously have something powerful. Otherwise, your brother wouldn’t have been able to overpower him. Darius has been chasing these stones for many years. It took me a long time to realize what he was after.”

“And what purpose do they have?” Lan asked.

Ridaln glanced in his direction before turning his attention back to Sophie. “Oh, yes. We have your brother. One who has his own touch from a god.”

Sophie took another step toward him, and another burst of power flared within her.

Ridaln moved his fingers, and Lan recognized the sorcery in what he was doing.

Lan wasn’t willing to let Ridaln even attempt anything with Sophie, and he raised his blade, pointing it at Ridaln, and sent warmth surging out through the end of the blade. It struck Ridaln, and he staggered back a step.

The soldiers around them all shifted.

“Hold!” Lan called out. “Unless you want to be slaughtered.”

He knew that the Taihg around him would have heard that. And he also knew that Magnus would make sure that the Taihg were ready.

Nobody moved.

“We can talk,” Ridaln said, glancing at Lan. “We do not need to fight.”

“I’m not fighting,” Sophie said. “I’m trying to get answers from you, and you obviously have no intention of telling me what is going on, so I am going to stand here, with my brother, until you tell us what we need to know. You know something about Darius, and the moment you first came here, presenting yourself, you had an opportunity to reveal what was going on and what you knew about it, but you did not.”

Lan stared at Ridaln, wondering what else Sophie might do and say. So far, she had been irritated, but she had kept control

of her temper.

“I can tell you about the god stones,” Ridaln said, “but perhaps we should move away from here before we have this conversation.” He swept his gaze around and looked up at the trees for a moment. “I can feel something coming, and I don’t much care for the way it feels.”

Sophie frowned. Lan noticed that whatever she was doing had shifted, and she sent a wave of power sweeping out from her. It created a ring of energy that flowed outward, and the overall sense of it drifted out heavily before it settled.

She turned to Lan and pressed her lips together into a tight frown.

There were times when he wished he had taught Sophie how to communicate like the Taihg did. It would be so much easier to have a wordless way of communicating, to tap out a message to her, so that she could understand that what Ridaln had felt was thisten—or so he thought. Lan wasn’t entirely sure what the thisten were doing, as they had left them alone until now, but suddenly it seemed the thisten wanted to respond.

“Something is coming?” Dannith asked.

Ridaln glanced over at him. “It is an unfamiliar power, but I can feel it. And from the expression those two have, I suspect that they know exactly what it is, which makes it dangerous for us, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t think it’s dangerous,” Sophie said. “I think it’s probably safe. More than that, it might even offer us a measure of help.”

Lan wasn’t entirely sure whether that was the case, but at this point, he wasn’t about to argue with his sister, as she knew the thisten about as well as he did.

But there was a possibility that the Shavln had corrupted some of these thisten. Darish had mentioned something about the thisten and the connection they had, but Lan wasn’t sure what to make of that, nor about what connection *he* could have with the thisten.

“We can keep moving,” Lan said, “but I don’t know whether it’s going to make a difference. If this is the thisten coming toward us, they will likely follow. I don’t know if they are corrupted, but I will check.”

Ridaln frowned at the mention of the thisten. “I don’t know what a thisten is.”

“Oh, just a dangerous creature that could rip you apart if it wanted to,” Sophie said casually.

Lan wished that she had spoken a little differently, but maybe he should let Sophie take the lead, especially as these were people that she knew better than he did. He recognized the king of Lorant, and he recognized Ridaln, but she knew them far better than he did. At least, she had once known them far better than he did, though since they been away from Neylash, it was possible that Sophie had changed more than they had.

Lan turned to Magnus and tapped out a quick message, sending a warning to him, asking him to keep an eye on the Raven Queen, along with Jalyn. Magnus stepped forward, his massive, curved blade in hand, and joined Jalyn and Sophie.

Sophie was holding on to power, and there was something radiating from her, something powerful, but he wasn’t entirely sure what she was drawing upon right now.

When he headed into the forest, he could feel the soldiers that had come with Ridaln and Dannith, but he didn’t worry about them. He hurriedly moved through the trees until he reached a small stream. He leaned down, focusing on the energy within himself, and he pushed out with a bit of warmth. He didn’t know if the stream was corrupted, as it had not been tested, but he wasn’t going to be able to cleanse the water even if it was corrupted. Without having somebody like the Raven Queen, he didn’t know if he could do anything for it, but he was willing to try. He looked down into the water and then trailed his finger through it. He felt some warmth, but nothing more. There was no corruption here.

Lan continued, moving as quickly as he could, before realizing that it wasn’t just the thisten that he detected. There

was something else—equally familiar—and it made its way toward him.

Lan waited. He didn't wait for long.

A glowing visage came out of the trees.

Lan had not seen the Heart of the Grove since the attack on Valan, though he had felt her presence often.

He waited, sword in hand, looking around at the thisten, though they had not moved.

When she stepped out of the trees, still glowing as brightly as she had when he had last seen her, he was somewhat surprised, as she seemed to be taller than he remembered.

That might only be his imagination, as he had no idea if she was even capable of becoming taller, but at this moment, the only thing he needed was to better understand what she was doing and why she was here.

He wondered if he should bow. She was a goddess, so maybe he should bend the knee. Lan could feel the power, the connection they shared, and it filled him in a way that he had not felt before. He held on to the energy and the connection, and up close, he began to feel her warmth flooding into him.

“You are still so hesitant,” she said, moving closer and looking around at the thisten.

“They obviously aren't corrupted,” Lan said.

“Obviously,” she said, and she turned her attention to Lan himself. “But you knew that, didn't you? You have become quite the interesting soldier.”

Lan took a deep breath. “Didn't you tell me that I was more than a soldier?”

When he had seen her last, she had warned him that he was going to have to somehow fight the darkness. But wasn't that what he was doing?

“More than a soldier, of course,” she said softly, and then she leveled her gaze at the thisten. “And one who has done much more than I would've expected.”

“Are you here because of Darius?”

Her brow furrowed. “I’m here because I am called.”

“I didn’t call you,” he said.

She pulled his arm forward and pried his hand open. She didn’t take the stone out of his palm, which surprised Lan.

“This was on the Raven Queen,” he said.

“A powerful item,” she said. “And one that is not necessarily meant for you, but it seems to react to you.” She frowned, and then she took a step back, releasing his hand. “Or perhaps it doesn’t react to you. I can’t tell. Your Mark of Oodian confuses things.”

“There it is again,” Lan said. “What is this about Oodian? You didn’t give me your power, did you?”

She smiled, and it seemed as if she was grinning because he had just been let in on some secret. “Did you really think that it was mine?”

“I don’t know. I thought you were a goddess. And when I met Darish—”

“The Hunter likes to play games, doesn’t he?”

“He’s Darish,” Lan said. “What is this about god stones?”

“It is a way of touching old power,” she said. “Some are touched, like you. Like me. Like the Hunter.”

“But not all?”

“Not all are touched in that way,” she replied, “and those who are not would like to try to reach that power in ways that they should not, and they think that they can borrow it.” She shook her head, and this time, Lan felt a sense of irritation coming from her, which was odd, as he wasn’t usually able to feel her emotions, but he was aware of the way that she was directing her power. She was guiding it so that he could feel what she was feeling. “They try to steal what they should not. And sometimes they succeed.”

“You’re talking about the god stones?”

“Call them what you want, but they are a way to power.”

“What happens if somebody acquires some of them?”

“It depends upon the person,” she said.

“What about a sorcerer?”

“It depends upon the sorcerer.”

“And are you a sorcerer?” Lan asked.

“Perhaps I was once,” she said, and her voice was soft, as if she wasn’t quite sure what she was, or what she had been. “But now I am something else.”

“A god.”

“There was a time when I would’ve made that claim, but no longer. Some believe us to be more than we are, and some have permitted themselves to believe that about themselves. It is a mistake, but it is one that I can understand.” She looked at Lan. “We must make sure that Darius does not succeed in destroying the power he seeks.”

“How?”

“By using a weapon that he does not understand.”

She cupped Lan’s hands around the stone. He began to feel a steady thrumming of energy pouring through him. And he understood the source of it, even if he didn’t understand the purpose behind it.

She wanted him to use the thisten.

But how? And why?

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CHAPTER 34

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Sophie watched Ridaln.

She could tell that he was trying to hide something from her, the same way that she'd been able to tell that he had tried to hide something from her when she was still in the palace in Neylash. She continued to hold her pose.

“Would you like to stop and talk?” Ridaln asked. “Or do you think we should leave to ensure Darius doesn't regroup and return here?”

They had kept moving through the forest and reached a part where it began to thin out. Sophie was glad to be anywhere but where she had been, as she wanted to see more easily, and a part of her worried about Darius having an opportunity to sneak up on them again.

“I don't know if Darius is going to come back for us,” Sophie said. “We proved that we can stop him, but I don't know if we can keep him from reaching us. I worry about that.”

It might not even matter now. They had Taihg, and Lan had gone after something else. Maybe the thisten. If the thisten could help, they wouldn't have to worry about any sorcerers and their monsters attacking, would they?

They just had to worry about Darius.

She watched Ridaln. He let out a heavy sigh and reached into his pocket. When he pulled his hand out, he cupped a small object in his palm. He held it out to Sophie, glancing over at Dannith, who nodded.

“This is a god stone,” Ridaln said. “The power within it is quite remarkable. With it, I am—”

“You are able to draw upon more power than you would be able to draw otherwise. I felt it. I doubt that you would have been able to do much against Darius without that.”

Ridaln nodded. “I would not. It took me a while to realize what he was looking for. I thought it was all about the Shavln, but that is not it. It is much more complicated.” He took a deep breath and looked over at Dannith. “There are places where the old gods touched, and new gods captured some of that power. With the right spell...” He pointed to the god stone.

“What are you telling me?” Sophie looked at the line of Taihg around her. “You’re telling me these are dead gods?”

“Not necessarily dead,” Ridaln said.

Dannith chuckled. He stepped forward and scooped the god stone out of Ridaln’s hand, and he held it up for Sophie. “We have to trust.”

Sophie took it hesitantly. It felt warm, smooth, and...

“What are you telling me about this?” Sophie asked.

“I’m telling you that these are from places where the gods once existed, and they left a part of themselves in these stones. It’s concentrated power. And the right person may be able to draw upon that power and use it and—”

“And hope to destroy the old gods,” Sophie said.

“I’m not so sure that it’s a matter of destroying them so much as it is a matter of trying to draw that ancient power to summon something more.”

She thought about the stone that had been left behind when Parvella had disappeared.

A god stone.

And everything that Parvella had been doing, everything that Parvella had said, started to make a bit more sense to Sophie. Could Parvella have been a god?

It seemed impossible, but what other explanation made sense, given everything she'd seen so far? Parvella had talked about reaching for a deep and dangerous old power. Sophie's breath caught, and she couldn't even fathom what was happening or what she had seen.

"What is it?" Dannith asked.

She glanced down at the Raven Queen. "Nothing."

"If you're wondering whether she has a god stone, then the answer is likely yes," Ridaln said. "And I suspect Darius knows that. Everything that we know about the Raven Queen suggests that she is incredibly powerful—much more powerful than anybody of her ability should be. I thought that she was just a skilled sorcerer, and while that is certainly true, she has something else that makes her even more powerful."

Sophie had always assumed that the Raven Queen was a powerful sorcerer, but maybe there was another reason behind her abilities. Darius hadn't found a god stone on her, though.

"So she has a god stone," Sophie said, straightening and turning to Ridaln, "and Darius thought he could find it. What would happen if he were to get it?"

"I don't know," Ridaln said. "He's still in the collection stage. Once he acquires as many of them as he can, then..."

"Then what?"

"Then he will have power beyond what anybody can control. Not just sorcery," Ridaln went on, shaking his head, "but real power. God power."

"How many gods are there?"

She tried to think of all the stories that her nana had told her, and everything that she had learned when she had been chasing that knowledge on behalf of the Raven Queen, but there had not been enough time.

"It depends upon who is talking about them," Ridaln said. "There are plenty of stories about the new gods. Very few stories about the old gods. The old gods are the ones the children's stories are about. You talk about the life bringer;

you talk about death. You talk about the sun, the moon.” He shook his head. “You talk about all these powers. There is an entire pantheon of old gods that we see in ruins scattered throughout Lorant and Reyash, and even more beyond.”

“I’ve never seen anything,” Sophie said.

“Have you looked?”

She started to say that she had, but had she *really*? She’d visited ruins, but that was different from searching for answers. She had seen strange places of celebration, and those places were ones that the Raven Queen had been asking her to evaluate, but she didn’t know *why*, and she didn’t know what their significance was. More than that, she’d never visited anywhere beyond these lands to look.

“What do you know about them?”

“Nothing more than stories,” Ridaln said softly. “The kinds of stories that were told when you were a child, or by priests when they refer to how backward we once were. But there can be no doubt that there *were* old gods.”

“And the new gods?”

“Those of the names that you know,” Dannith said. “Sanash and Hesa and Phileen, among so many others.” He smiled as he spoke. “And there are some who think that they are real, or they were real people at one time, but very few people know anything about them.”

“Like Darish,” Sophie said.

Ridaln nodded. “Darish would be one of them. He’s the woodsman god, so this is the kind of place where he could be found. I suspect that is why Darius came here.” He looked over at Dannith. “We suspect Darius came here after Darish, as Darish is powerful in his own right.”

“Lan knows him,” Sophie said.

Ridaln looked up, and she shrugged.

“He’s known as the Hunter. He has talked with him.”

“Darish is real?” Dannith said, his voice soft.

“I thought you were chasing the gods because you believed Darius was after their power?”

“That’s why we came, but it is one thing to believe their power exists, and that the gods were once real, and another to meet them. We struggled to find anything about them in the first place.”

“So did I, and I even went as far as to go to a children’s library, but I didn’t find anything.”

“That’s because the knowledge has been suppressed,” Ridaln said.

Sophie found herself reducing her prayer pose, which led to some power seeping out, so that she was not holding quite such potent energy as she had been before. There was no point in doing so, as she was no longer convinced that Ridaln or Dannith was going to pose any danger to the Raven Queen. And Sophie was holding Ridaln’s god stone.

“How many other stones do you have?” Sophie asked.

“Only this one,” Ridaln said. “And that was by chance. I think we came upon it right before Darius. The Shavln corrupts the power, forcing those who have it to give it up.”

“Which god?” Sophie asked.

“It doesn’t work like that,” Ridaln said.

“You don’t know what god stone you have?”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have any way to identify which god is present in each stone.”

“What happens to these god stones?”

“Nothing happens,” Ridaln said.

“No,” Sophie corrected. “What happens to the gods?”

“I’m sorry,” Dannith said. “Once they turn into stones, their power is gone. Their influence is gone.”

The sacrifice hurt her even more than it had before. Parvella was gone.

She had left behind only a part of herself in the stone.

“There’s theoretically a way to draw them back out,” Ridaln said, “but it can only be done by one of the old gods.”

“I thought you didn’t know much about the gods,” Sophie said.

“I don’t, but that doesn’t mean that there aren’t stories about them, and ways that we can try to understand what the old and the new gods might ask of us.” Ridaln shrugged. “The new gods are only those who have managed to draw upon power.”

“What about others who have been given the gifts of the gods?” Sophie asked.

“You’re asking about your brother,” he said.

Sophie nodded.

“Well, I suppose it’s possible that he has been given the gift of a god. If given enough time, and enough understanding of the power, it’s possible he will eventually ascend, as it were.”

Lan would be a god?

Well, he would certainly hold that over Sophie’s head.

“That’s not to say that he’s actually going to become a god,” Ridaln said hurriedly, sensing Sophie’s shift. “It has more to do with the fact that he may simply have access to power he could not have otherwise. And if he were able to use it, and gain some mastery over it, he could have godlike powers. Whether he sticks around as one of the named gods, like Darish, is a different question altogether.”

“But he could become a god,” Sophie said.

“He could,” Dannith said.

“And if Darius learned of that…”

Sophie didn’t want to think about what that would mean for her brother.

She didn’t have to.

It meant Lan would be a target.

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CHAPTER 35

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Lan looked at the Heart of the Grove, trying to make sense of what she was telling him, and not having any real idea, though he could feel the steady drumming deep inside him. It was calling to some buried part of him that he had not felt before. He wasn't sure why she would activate the drumming, nor why she would want him to feel this energy.

“What is it about the thisten?”

All around him, there was a faint, steady glowing, which he made out through the trees, and some of it seemed to come from him, but some of it came from the Heart of the Grove. Surprisingly, he didn't feel as if the warmth radiating from him came directly from her, as he would have expected. He had thought that the power she had given him had come from her, but perhaps that was not the case at all. Perhaps instead what she had done was activate something inside him, so that he could feel the power, but it did not have to necessarily come from her.

“You have already saved the thisten once,” she said.

“Right,” Lan said, “when the Hunter—Darish—intended to destroy them. My sister realized that they could be saved.”

“In that form, it was surprising that they could be saved,” she said.

Lan frowned at her. The way she had phrased this troubled him. “What do you mean, in that form?”

“I simply mean that they are a bridge of power.”

He had heard that before, but who had he heard it from?

They were power—he knew that—and when he had first encountered them, and dealt with the danger of the thisten, he had believed that they were corrupted by the Shavln.

Had they not been?

“A bridge?”

Lan knew that he was taking too much time with this conversation, and that his sister—and the Raven Queen—was waiting on him. The longer he took here, the more likely it was that the dangerous sorcerer would return. And if he came while Lan was away, what would happen to his sister, and what would happen to the others? Did they have enough strength and enough sorcery to withstand him again? When he had attacked while Lan was there, it had taken every bit of his and Sophie’s combined magic to resist him.

“There are certain things that are clear to me and certain things that are unclear. Time makes it difficult to share them,” the Heart of the Grove said.

“What is clear?”

“The entities you know as the thisten are a bridge for a primordial power, a link between something old and something new. They have become a manifestation of that power in this world.”

It took a moment for those words to sink in for Lan, but even as they did, he wasn’t sure that he understood them.

“Are you saying that the thisten represent god power?”

“I am saying that they represent a manifestation of an ancient power, and they are a link to something newer. That is all. They can be summoned, and they can take the form that they need.” The steady drumming began to build again, and Lan could feel the energy deep inside him. The energy was building, as if the Heart of the Grove was calling to the thisten.

Only...

Lan wasn’t sure if it was her summoning the thisten or if it was something that he was doing. Regardless, he felt that

energy deep inside, as if the power of the thisten was drumming for him, trying to build in a way that it would detect him, and the power that was near him.

“I do not know why they took this form,” the Heart of the Grove said.

“Which means that there are other forms that they could take,” Lan said.

The Heart of the Grove bowed her head slightly. Some of the glowing within her began to shift, but it didn't seem to be quite as potent as it had been before. Was she losing strength?

And if she was, what did that mean for her, and what did it mean for what Lan had to do? He had known that the Heart of the Grove had been giving him power, and that through her power, and through the connection, he was able to reach for more strength, and perhaps even the strength that was necessary to withstand the kind of attack that they had coming for them. But he questioned whether that was the truth at all. Maybe everything that he knew about this power, everything that he had come to believe about it, was inaccurate.

“There are other forms. And unfortunately, that power can be just as dangerous in any form.”

“What of the Shavln?” Lan felt they were still struggling to understand the key to that power, as it was going to be the answer to everything that they had to deal with, but so far, he had not been able to learn anything useful about the Shavln. It was a corrupted sort of energy, but how so?

“That is not the same,” she said.

“How certain are you?”

The Heart of the Grove frowned, and then her power began to falter once again. Lan could feel the energy stuttering in the same way as it had before, the same way that he had felt his own energy stuttering.

“There are certain things that I know and certain things that I think I once knew,” the Heart of the Grove said. “I have wandered these lands for a long time.” She smiled at him. “And perhaps it is time that my wanderings came to an end.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just mean that perhaps I no longer need to wander.” She took a deep breath. “Use the primordial power. You are connected to Odian. Let that guide you. Draw it.”

She turned away from him.

Lan called after her. He couldn't let her leave, not yet, not before he had better answers. If he was going to get them, they were going to come from the Heart of the Grove, somebody who seemed to be connected to power in a way that he could not fathom.

But he wondered if perhaps it was the same way that he was connected to power.

“How can we help the Raven Queen?”

The Heart of the Grove paused and turned back to him. “Are you sure you want to?”

“Why wouldn't I want to?”

She watched him, and for a moment, he wasn't sure if she was going to answer. He needed to have this answer, as he believed it was going to help him.

“You must go to the guardians,” she said.

“I don't understand.”

“You must find them. They can provide you with what you seek.”

“And who are they?”

“They will provide you with the answers that you seek.”

He stared at her for a moment, and he began to contemplate a different set of questions, but he also started to wonder if perhaps the answers were already there.

Maybe he didn't need her to explain, because he had already heard the answers.

It was something that he remembered the Raven Queen talking about, something that he believed that she feared

facing, but perhaps that belief was incorrect. Lan simply did not know the truth.

“The Karell. That’s what you’re talking about.”

“That is what they are known as now,” she said. “But there was a time when they were known by another name, and they were referred to as the guardians.”

“But guardians of what?”

Even as he asked, he thought that he understood. The guardians of magic. To get the help they needed, he was going to have to convince his sister to bring the Raven Queen to the Karell.

Would she be willing to do that?

Knowing Sophie, and how stubborn she could be, it was possible that she wouldn’t even be willing to listen to Lan.

But if he said that the Heart of the Grove had directed him to do it...

However, that wasn’t exactly what she had said. She had implied that the guardians might be able to help the Raven Queen, but she hadn’t promised it. And it was possible that the Karell wouldn’t be able to help.

The Heart of the Grove disappeared into the trees, and as she went, her glowing faded.

Lan chased after her.

She reached a small ring of stones. It was old. Lan could feel that, and he could feel that it was some sort of ruin, much like what they had dealt with many times. There was an energy here, an energy that drifted over everything, filling him with a sense of it, though he could not tell the source of it.

The Heart of the Grove stopped in the middle of the ring, and she looked up at the sky. “The stars look so different than they once did.”

“I didn’t realize that the stars changed,” he said.

“Oh, yes. Like everything, the stars will change. And eventually, you will find that they change beyond what you

recognize, as will everything around you. Pray that you live that long.” She smiled at him.

“Pray?” He took a step toward her. “Who am I supposed to pray to? You?”

She smiled, and then she turned, holding her hands up. She began to glow, and all around Lan, the stones glowed as well.

“Not to me, Lannerdon. But pray nonetheless.”

Her power continued to build.

Lan could feel it swelling. She seemed to be drawing upon some of the energy and sending it upward with a burst of pale light.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“It is time that I stopped fighting the summons.”

“What?”

She looked at him. “You have the mark. You must use it.”

With that, there was a flash of light, and then she was gone.

Lan hurried over to her, or where she had been, and he saw a small stone glinting in the moonlight. He picked it up. It looked something like the starlight overhead, and he stared at it for a few moments before stuffing it into his pocket. It reminded him of what Parvella had left for them. And if it was like that, maybe it was powerful like that.

What had the Heart of the Grove done?

Could she have abandoned them?

Lan had thought that Darish had abandoned them as well, but maybe he hadn't.

The Heart of the Grove hadn't fully abandoned them, though, as she had given Lan some advice about what they needed to do—what he needed to do.

He had a weapon. The thisten.

Lan didn't know how he could use them, but he was going to have to make sense of them, because if he didn't, he might

not have the strength to handle the dangers ahead.

He stood in the middle of the ring of stones for a long time before turning away. There was something peaceful about it, but as he stood there, he found himself wondering if perhaps he was supposed to feel that way, or perhaps he was supposed to feel something different. Maybe sadness.

He didn't know.

The Heart of the Grove was gone. He tried to focus on the connection he had to her, power that he knew was there within him, and there was a bit of energy, but he wasn't sure what the source of that energy was. He could feel something flowing, some aspect of it that began to build inside him.

Lan made his way back. He could still feel the warmth within him, and he hoped that what he felt was tied to the Heart of the Grove, but he wasn't entirely sure if it was. He also didn't know if there was something else, something more, that he was supposed to find and feel.

He focused on the others. Surprisingly, it seemed as if an understanding of the forest came to him. He knew exactly where he needed to go, even though he could tell that his sister and the others were moving.

Lan hurried toward them, and by the time he reached them, he had begun to feel a different sort of energy.

Sophie frowned when he approached. "What is it?" she asked him.

"I think I know where we are supposed to take the Raven Queen," he said.

"We are heading to Hester," Sophie said. "She needs help, and we can't stay in the forest any longer. I don't know what's going to happen, but Darius seems to have some way of tracking us. If he catches us before we manage to get her to safety, and get her awake, I don't know if we are going to be strong enough to withstand another attack. Ridaln knows some things," she went on, glowering at the other sorcerer, "but not enough to counter that amount of power."

“I saw the Heart of the Grove. She suggested that we go to the Karell.”

Dannith was there, standing next to Sophie, and he nodded as if he completely understood.

“She wants us to go to them?” Sophie asked. “Even after what happened, and the way that Thea tried to use the Shavln power, betraying—”

“That was just her, not all the Karell,” Lan said.

He needed to get his sister past this anger, but he wasn't sure he could convince her to let it go. There were certain things that Sophie could be stubborn about, and in this case, she was being incredibly stubborn—almost too stubborn.

“I know,” she said, shaking her head, “but it's still hard. You have to understand that, Lan. She attacked us. She attacked Nevarn. She used power that should not have been used like that. How many others knew about what she was doing and didn't do anything?”

“You don't know that any others knew anything,” Nevarn said, sliding over to her and meeting her gaze. “I know how frustrating it is.”

Sophie shot him an irritated look. “You don't know anything. You were corrupted. You were barely aware of that time. How do you think you can help here?”

“Sophie,” Dannith said.

It surprised Lan that the old king used almost a fatherly tone for Sophie.

“Let it go.”

Sophie squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. “We get to Hester. We can see whether there is a magical or nonmagical way of helping her. That is where we need to go.”

“That's fine,” Lan said.

The Heart of the Grove hadn't told him where they needed to go to find the guardians, so it didn't matter to him if it was Hester or somewhere else. Besides, it wasn't as if Lan knew

how to find the Karell easily. They wandered, but more than that, in many of the places that they had visited, they had found slaughtered Karell.

“And we can regroup,” Sophie said, letting out a heavy sigh, as if realizing that she was being a bit irresponsible and unreasonable. “We can see what else we need to do, and we can counter any further attacks.”

Lan nodded. “That is fine,” he said.

“You are judging me.”

Lan laughed. “I am not, and I never would. Not when it comes to this. I understand what you are doing and what you are dealing with, and I understand your hesitation. But remember, we don’t know what Nana did, or how much she was involved with the Karell.”

Sophie regarded him for a long moment. “That’s not fair, Lan. You are going to use Nana against us? Against me?”

He shrugged. “I’m not supposed to? Isn’t that the kind of thing you would do to me?”

She glowered at him. “I suppose I would. I don’t like it. And right now, I’m not as sure as you, Lannerdon.”

He chuckled.

They continued making their way through the forest, nobody speaking as they traveled. Lan became distantly aware of Sophie and Ridaln working together. There was a quiet energy to them, and it seemed to spread and build as they worked. He couldn’t hear his sister and suspected that she had placed herself and Ridaln inside one of her bubbles of protection, but he was a bit surprised that she felt the need to do so around him. Then again, maybe she was concerned about some of the Taihg or perhaps some of the other soldiers listening in on their conversation. Or maybe she was more concerned about letting power escape. Whatever it was, he wasn’t about to argue with her.

They neared the edge of the forest, and Lan began to feel power building, though he wasn’t sure of the source of it.

There was a considerable sense of energy swirling around them.

He looked over at his sister and then stepped through the barrier that she was holding.

She looked up at him. "How did you do that?"

"How did I do what?"

"That is now the second time that you have managed to just bypass my protective barrier. So how did you do that?"

"I just stepped through it," he said.

"Oh, did you?" She snorted, shaking her head. "You just walked through it? As if there was nothing there for you to be worried about?"

Lan shrugged. "I suppose."

"Well, I am a bit surprised that you are able to bypass it so easily."

"It's because he is your brother," Ridaln said.

Sophie glowered at him. "That shouldn't make a difference with the kind of pose that I am holding."

"Why shouldn't it?"

"Because..." She frowned. "I suppose maybe it wouldn't make a difference," she said. "You are my brother, and you are gifted by the Heart of the Grove, so maybe she gave you some way to get past my power."

"I'm not exactly sure how that is," he said.

And at this point, Lan didn't know if he could use the kind of power that the Heart of the Grove had granted him, but it did feel as if it was a gift to him, something that he should be able to understand, but so far, Lan had not really grasped the key to it.

Still, there was something up ahead, and it was that which had him concerned.

He stepped forward, unsheathing his blade. Jalyn and Magnus joined him, both of them frowning. He found the

warmth inside him and wondered if it had changed, though he couldn't tell. Some part of it seemed a bit off, though Lan couldn't quite place what that was, but as he focused on the warmth, he recognized that it did not react quite the way that he had anticipated it would.

When he said something to Jalyn, she frowned. "You have been exerting yourself quite a bit lately, and it is possible that the gods have changed their connection to you."

"The Heart of the Grove said that she was getting tired," Lan said.

"Perhaps that's all it is," she said.

Or maybe there was something else to it, more than he already knew, more than he might be able to do anything with, but what would that be?

As he stepped forward, he felt a trembling.

And he wasn't sure what it was.

He began to focus on the power within his blade. The Heart of the Grove had suggested that he use the thisten, and though he thought he needed to, he couldn't tell where they were.

Some primordial power. He didn't even know what that word really meant, but it indicated something old, and something that he obviously had a link to. But what worried him was whether Darius, or Thea, had a similar connection. Maybe that was the purpose of the Shavln, a power that had been unleashed to grab hold of that ancient power.

"Something is out there," Magnus said.

"I feel it, too," Jalyn said.

They started forward, and as soon as they did, Lan pushed out his energy, letting it flow from him, and a beam of light erupted from him, showing the ground littered with darkness.

He whistled once.

Both Taihg stopped immediately.

He glanced behind him. There were other Taihg, and he had his sister, Ridaln, and Dannith. They all had their own form of magic, and it was possible that together they would even be strong enough to handle whatever was here, though it was a risk that Lan wasn't sure he was willing to take. It might endanger the Raven Queen.

“What is it?”

Lan pointed his blade. He angled it toward one of the darkened shapes. As soon as he focused, he sent a beam of pale light out. He felt trembling inside him, as if some part of him was awakening, and when the light struck the darkened shape, there was a horrifying shriek as it lunged forward, towering in the dark night, and began to howl. More and more shapes started to move, stretching and straining, turning their attention toward them.

“Did you have to wake them?” Magnus asked.

“I didn't know that they were all connected,” he said.

“Well,” Magnus said, “what now?”

“Now we either find our way through or find another place of safety.”

Lan looked back at his sister. He wasn't sure which she would agree to. Maybe neither.

But at this point, he wasn't sure that they had much choice in the matter. He couldn't run the risk of endangering the Raven Queen. And he had no idea what else they could do to get to safety, but it wasn't going to be traveling over the plains.

He motioned to the others, signaling them back toward the trees.

He watched for a while as the strange creatures howled. Distantly Lan could still feel the drumming thisten, but they weren't any closer. How could he call them to him?

That was going to be necessary, he suspected. If they were going to have to deal with strange creatures, he was going to need strange creatures on his side.

But how—and where—would he find them?

He reached the edge of the forest and shook his head at his sister. “We can’t stay here.”

“Why not?”

“You heard them. And I’m sure you saw them. The plains are littered with those creatures. I don’t know what they are, but if we try to fight our way through them, chances are we are going to lose some of our people.”

And it wasn’t losing the Taihg that bothered him the most—though it did bother him. It was losing something more than just the Taihg, someone much more important than any one soldier.

They had both Dannith and the Raven Queen traveling with them now.

That meant that Lan had to be doubly careful.

“What do you propose?” Dannith asked.

“A different way. If it involves getting to Hester, we can travel along the edge of the forest, looking for a different way in, but even that might not be enough.”

“I think that is sensible enough,” Dannith said.

“She needs help,” Sophie said.

“And we are going to get it for her,” Lan said. “But we aren’t going to do it by taking her this way.”

She looked over at Nevarn, and he locked eyes with Lan.

“I think he’s right,” Nevarn said. “My mother wouldn’t want to risk that. She needs to get back, but not this way.”

“Fine,” Sophie said, irritation clearly rising within her. “Let’s move quickly, then.”

Lan took the lead, focusing on his connection to the Heart of the Grove, but even as he did, he couldn’t tell if there was anything within that connection, anything within his power, that could provide him with any answer. Instead, he began to focus on the steady drumming of the thisten, wondering how to call to them, as that was going to be the key to getting to safety.

But how—and where—would they find safety?

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CHAPTER 36

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SOPHIE

Sophie kept looking over at her brother.

Something about him had changed. After he had gone off and spoken to the Heart of the Grove, he had come back different. She didn't know what it was, and she was secretly trying to use the prayer pose—or perhaps not so secretly, as she could tell that Ridaln was aware when she used her poses—to detect anything unusual within her brother. Yet anytime she sent power through him, it just rippled around him, practically sweeping past him, and it didn't even connect to him. Either the Heart of the Grove was protecting him, or Lan had some sort of innate ability to deflect the type of power that she was sending toward him. Whatever it was, it annoyed her.

Equally annoying was the idea that they couldn't get to Hester.

That was all she could think about right now.

They had been running for so long, or so it seemed. Ever since the Raven Queen had been hurt, they had been hurrying, trying to get back to a place of safety, to the point where now Sophie wasn't even sure what safety might look like. In her mind, it involved getting back to Hester, to a place where there were healers and...

And maybe nothing else.

Sophie had expected Parvella to be able to help the Raven Queen, but with her missing, who else would make a difference? The question was troubling.

Every so often, Nevarn would look in her direction, as if he wanted to say something to her, but he never did. He was keeping to himself, which, under other circumstances, she might have been happy with, but now that his mother was hurt, and his mother's adviser was gone—possibly having sacrificed herself as a god, though Sophie still found that difficult to believe—he had fallen silent, and that disturbed Sophie.

All of this left Sophie disturbed. But there was nothing she could do other than continue to follow her brother. And she knew that Lan was right. If the plains were dangerous because of those creatures, there was no point in endangering the Raven Queen—or Dannith, she had to acknowledge—by trying to fight their way across. She might be able to handle some of them using poses that Parvella had instructed her in, but it might not be enough to deal with some of the things that they had encountered so far. And if not, all she would end up doing was putting the Raven Queen—and the rest of them—in danger.

She didn't like walking along the edge of the forest, either.

Every so often, she would use her prayer pose, resorting to that one to try to trace power and detect any threats, but anytime she did, there was nothing to find. There was still that power far away from her, but Sophie didn't know the source of it, nor did she know if it was worth the risk to seek it out and endanger themselves. She wondered if perhaps there was something within that power that she was supposed to have learned from but could not.

“If we can get to Hester, how are we going to find the Karell?” Nevarn asked at one point, and Sophie had to look over in his direction, wondering whether he had really understood what he was asking. “I know that you don't want to go to them, and I know you are still bothered by everything that happened, but your brother is right. It was just one person. You have to find a way to forgive. Don't you have some story about that?”

She wanted to argue with him and tell him that she didn't have any story like that, but that wouldn't have been the truth. Nana had loved stories about forgiveness.

There was one about a merchant who had been cheated, but rather than getting his revenge, the moral of the story was that his forgiveness brought him and the swindler back together, only for the merchant to realize that it was his son. There was another story about a soldier forgiving the man who had hurt him during the war. She could easily come up with three more stories into which aspects of forgiveness had been woven.

“Fine,” Sophie said. “But I don’t like it.”

“You don’t like the idea of forgiving somebody, and in this case, you are going to have to forgive an entire magical group,” he went on, smiling at her, which only irritated her even more, “rather than just staying angry at them for the one person who harmed you.”

“Well, you harmed me as well,” she said.

“I didn’t... Fine.” He shook his head. “I didn’t want to harm you, and I didn’t do it on purpose, and I think that if you could find it in yourself to let it go and maybe even forgive me, you...”

She was laughing.

“I see. You have already forgiven me.”

“Well, you did bring me quite a few pastries after we left Valan. I hadn’t brought any, so I am thankful for that.”

“I guess it’s good that I went for extra supplies,” he said, smiling.

“Oh, I probably would’ve forgiven you anyway.” She took a deep breath. “We have to find the Karell somehow, right?”

“We do. Do you have any ideas?”

“Not particularly. The only times that I’ve ever been around them have been in the palace in Neylash,” she went on, looking over at Dannith, and every so often, she would catch a glimpse of his wand beneath his cloak, “or in the tower in Valan. Your mother didn’t have too many Karell around her in Hester.”

“I think that was because of you,” Nevarn said. “Of course, she never said as much, but I know that she knew how much they bothered you, and since you were still trying to learn, she didn’t want to antagonize you any more than necessary. She wanted you and Parvella to work together, and...” He shrugged. “And there was the matter of me. I don’t think she wanted to put me in too much contact with them, either, because she wasn’t sure how the Karell might react around me.”

“If you were recovered,” Sophie said, arching a brow at him, “it shouldn’t have mattered.”

“It didn’t matter to my mother, but I think she understood that it might have mattered to them.”

They continued on quietly for a while longer, and after a time, Nevarn frowned. “Your brother said something about the Karell around ruins.”

“So?”

“Are they summoned there?”

“I don’t really know.”

“Well, we have somebody we can ask,” he said, motioning toward Dannith, who was in quiet conversation with Ridaln.

Sophie had spent a little time with Ridaln, talking to him about poses, mostly because he had been interested in how much more Sophie had learned since the two of them had separated, but Sophie wasn’t interested in going through such things, much like she wasn’t interested in exposing some of the secrets that she had learned about the poses ever since leaving him. She didn’t know how much she could trust him.

Still, there was a part of her that was pleased to see him. She hated that, as she knew that she shouldn’t feel that way about Ridaln, but she couldn’t help it. He had been the first person to teach her sorcery, which had given her the means to learn more and more about the power that she possessed. Had she not had that opportunity, what would she have become?

There were so many thoughts that stayed with her, questions that lingered, about what would have happened if

her nana and papa hadn't been killed. Would she have learned to be a weaver? Would her nana have tried to bring her into the Karell, assuming that was what her nana had been a part of?

"Dannith," Sophie said, striding over to him. They were still marching along the edge of the forest, with the Taihg arranged along the outside of their group, interspersed with some of Dannith's troops. There were other Taihg in front, behind, and scattered throughout the trees, all to keep them safe. Jalyn stayed near the Raven Queen and the pair of Taihg who were responsible for carrying her. At a certain point, Sophie began to wonder if it was too dangerous to keep carting her through the trees.

Parvella had suggested that there was something to be said for getting her back to her realm. Sophie wondered if there was something that the Raven Queen had established inside the borders of Reyash. Regardless, she understood that what she needed to do, what the Raven Queen needed from her, was to move as quickly and safely as possible. That had been easier outside the forest. That had been easier before they had been attacked by Darius—again.

"Where do the Karell gather?" Sophie asked.

"I don't understand," Dannith said.

Sophie frowned at him. "You do. Where do the Karell gather? There has to be someplace where they get together, mixing and mingling, and some way that they have of finding each other. That's all I'm trying to understand."

Dannith glanced over at Ridaln before turning back to Sophie. "Weavers," he said. "I thought that you knew that."

Sophie frowned to herself. "That's how they find potential, but the Weavers' Guild isn't filled with Karell. There has to be something more to it."

Dannith shrugged. "I was identified when I was younger because I had a predilection for patterns. Then again, I was also royalty, so any predilection was fostered, and they wanted to take advantage of it, because they thought that I might be able to use it as I ruled." He looked over to where the Raven

Queen was lying on the makeshift litter. “At the time, we knew that we were going to have to deal with some sort of magic, though I’ll be honest: some of it was self-inflicted.”

Sophie snorted, looking back at the Raven Queen.

Self-inflicted? Was that all he wanted to say about the war?

“Anyway,” Dannith said, seeming to understand Sophie’s irritation, “I was identified by the Karell, but I never learned where the rest of the Karell gathered.”

“Lan has said something about ruins.”

“I suppose that makes a certain sort of sense,” he said. “Many of the Karell are intrigued by the old gods. All types of gods, really. The longer a Karell serves, and the deeper they get into the circle, the more they feel they have an obligation to gain knowledge.”

And as much as it irritated Sophie, that fit more with what she had heard, to the point where she was left questioning how much about the Karell she really knew.

Her grandmother. She had to have been tied to them. That was the part of all this that bothered Sophie the most. Not that her nana had been a part of the Karell. She didn’t necessarily care about that, though maybe she should. It was that her nana had been a part of the Karell but had not shared that with her. Why wouldn’t she have revealed to Sophie that she was involved with the Karell? Had she feared that Sophie wouldn’t have understood?

And maybe she wouldn’t have.

As much as that bothered her to admit, maybe Sophie simply didn’t know how to manage that issue.

“Many of the ruins have been damaged even more by exploration over the years, and perhaps even experimentation to uncover the power within them,” Ridaln said.

“That was Lan’s experience as well. I wonder why.”

Sophie had started to wonder when a shout rang out near them.

She looked around and saw her brother, along with several of the other Taihg, heading away from the forest, out toward the rolling plains.

An attack.

She stepped forward and stood for a moment, focusing on the prayer pose.

As she did, she began to feel power out there, and she focused on what she could detect of it. There was a strangeness, an undercurrent of energy, and even as she began to push power out, she wondered if what she could draw upon was going to be enough. Instead of holding on to it, she erupted with it, letting it sweep out from her. Hopefully, it would be enough to uncover the strange energy.

Something about it was familiar to Sophie.

Not thisten, she didn't think, though Lan had mentioned the thisten several times since he had returned from his visit with the Heart of the Grove. But there was something that struck her as similar to that energy.

She shifted her pose, creating the modified band of flame that she had used before.

Sophie was careful with it. She was able to hold the prayer pose mentally while also twisting in her new and modified aspect, so that she could detect the location of the Taihg—including her brother—and the strange energy. As she unleashed her power, the flame whipped out into the night, crackling against the darkness. It ripped through something. Sophie wasn't exactly sure what it was, but she could feel the energy as it tore through what was out there.

She tried to be careful, to guide her power, wanting to ensure that nothing more would get past her.

Then her brother let power explode from him.

It felt different.

She wasn't sure why that would be.

Sophie reacted again, holding the prayer pose, and once again noticed that there were more of those creatures, though

Sophie couldn't see them. She felt a little uncomfortable about attacking without knowing what was out there, but she also felt she needed to, because she needed to know what she was picking up on.

Only it seemed to resist her.

She wasn't sure why, and she wasn't sure what that meant, but the power that she felt continued to press against her.

Then everything went quiet, still.

Lan still blazed with light, as he had taken to doing from time to time, and Sophie stared at him, at his energy, until she tried to make sense of what she could feel. Finally he turned, whistling three times, and the Taihg that had followed him—more than she had realized—returned to march along the edge of the forest.

“What was it?” Sophie asked.

“Dark creatures,” he said.

“But what were they?”

“I don't have a name for them. Something like a sand spider, but...” He shivered. “They died. That's all that matters.”

“They felt similar to the thisten to me,” she said.

Lan nodded. “I'm not surprised. They are probably drawn from the same power.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“I don't know,” he said.

Sophie frowned, and as she looked around, she could feel more power here than she had detected before.

She shifted to the standard prayer pose, and before moving, she let it flow out from her. She felt energy. But more than that, she began to feel something pressing against her, drawing on her. It was distant.

“There is something out there,” she said to her brother.

“Sorcery?”

“I don’t think so, but to be honest, I don’t know. It’s possible that it’s sorcery, and if so, we’d better be careful, but it’s also possible that it’s another kind of magic.”

He looked over. “God magic?”

She started to smile, thinking that he was making some sort of joke with her, but she realized that wasn’t the case. Her brother didn’t joke about this sort of thing.

“Possibly,” she said, shrugging. “I don’t really know. I don’t know what that might feel like.”

“I don’t know what it might feel like, either,” he said softly. “But we should be careful.”

“At some point, we have to find a way to make it over to her.”

Lan nodded. “At some point,” he agreed.

Sophie wanted to ask him how and when, but she wasn’t sure that there was going to be an answer. Instead, she followed, and they continued moving, but as she went, that strange sense that she had been feeling continued to build. She wondered if perhaps it should be more familiar to her. It certainly felt as if she had sensed this kind of power before.

And then she realized why.

And she let out a relieved breath.

“What?” Nevarn asked.

“It’s strange, but I feel a bit of relief that what I detect now seems to be coming from Karell.”

“You feel them?” Ridaln asked.

“I think they are calling to us. I’m not really sure, but they’re out there, and they are drawing us in... me in. Well, maybe me. I don’t really know.” Sophie couldn’t tell any longer, but it did seem as if what she detected was trying to call to her, as if whoever or whatever was out there knew her in some way.

If that were the case, then which of the Karell was it?

She looked over at the Raven Queen, who still hadn't come around. Sophie had thought that by now she might have recovered a little bit. She realized that Nevam was troubled by her lack of recovery as well, and though he hadn't said anything about it, she also knew that there was not a whole lot that he would be able to do, anyway. Sophie suspected that bothered him, but he didn't say anything.

She forced a smile, and they kept moving.

It was late in the day when she noticed the forest changing.

Lan and the other Taihg had ranged ahead. Stone loomed over them. It was different from some of the ruins that they had visited before, and the power that Sophie felt from it was different from what she had noticed before. She approached carefully, focusing on the prayer pose, using that energy to ensure that she was alert to anything here.

But her brother surprised her.

He strode straight ahead, blade held up, light blasting out from him.

As it did, Sophie noticed contours along the stone. A pale greenish energy began to sizzle outward.

For a moment, she wasn't sure what it was, but she knew what she could feel from it, and it struck her as the tie to the Karell.

However, she worried about what it was, and she worried about the power, and she worried about what the Karell might do.

A burst of green washed outward.

Sophie frowned. "Relax," she said, raising her hand for her brother. She sent a wave of the prayer pose outward, looping around the ruins, but even as she did, she could feel the ruins fighting her, as if they were aware of her power and could counter anything she might do. That surprised her. That suggested even more power than the sorcery she could summon. "I know this person, I think. Something feels... familiar."

Lan glanced back. “I hope so, because she or he is not alone.”

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CHAPTER 37

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SOPHIE

Sophie moved forward, using the prayer pose to uncover the energy among the ruins, something that she was only vaguely aware of and could only vaguely detect.

Lan moved forward, holding his blade upright.

The pale green was all Karell energy, and Sophie began to focus on what she could detect within it, as she had started to question whether the power within it was something dangerous.

“What do you propose?” Ridaln asked, striding toward her.

“Are you really going to come along with me?” Sophie asked.

“Should I not?” Ridaln said.

“I don’t know,” Sophie said, and she looked over at her brother, who was quiet, his blade still held in front of him, the glowing light coming from it beginning to build. “I don’t know what this is, and I don’t know whether I want to deal with the Karell, or whether I want to run the risk of harming the Raven Queen.”

“I don’t sense anything dangerous here,” Lan said.

Another burst of greenish energy flowed outward, and then a figure emerged.

Sophie’s breath caught.

She would recognize the woman anywhere. She still thought about her often, about how she had always been kind

when Sophie had needed kindness, about how she had offered pastries when she'd been hungry.

Oleda.

Sophie had last seen her fighting Darius. Hadn't she died?

"Sophie Varison," she said, holding her wand in front of her, and it continued to glow with power. "And her brother, I presume. Who do we have here?" She turned and tapped her wand. Power began to erupt from it, and...

And Sophie could feel what Ridaln was doing.

He was tapping his fingers, as if he was trying to prevent Oleda from using her power to attack him. Sophie didn't expect Oleda to attack, as she thought that the Karell would want to talk.

More than that, Oleda and Dannith were friends.

Weren't we, too?

"How are you here?" Sophie asked, her voice a whisper.

"It's a long story," she replied, offering a slight smile, "but the short version is that I do not die easily. And Darius did not want to stay and fight. Perhaps wisdom on his part, and perhaps luck on mine." She tipped her head in a bow.

Sophie didn't know what to say to that. "You could have let me know."

"I am a Karell."

Was that really her answer?

Sophie took a deep breath. "Fine. And you aren't alone here."

"No," Oleda said. "There are three others with me."

"Have you been attacked?" Lan asked.

Oleda turned to him, and more power came from the end of her wand, though she didn't use it. "A strange question for somebody holding a sword like that," she said.

"I'm holding it because I have experienced danger at places like this," Lan said. "And unfortunately, I have seen

your kind slaughtered.”

Oleda frowned.

“We mean you no harm,” Lan said.

Sophie wasn't exactly sure if that was the right strategy, but then again, she wasn't about to intervene when her brother was doing whatever it was her brother wanted to do.

“But we do have need of help,” he continued. “We were hoping that you might be able to offer us some assistance.”

Oleda looked around. “You aren't alone. Soldiers.” She flicked her gaze beyond the ruins. “Other Taihg.”

“And we have the Raven Queen, along with Dannith,” Sophie said, glancing at Ridaln.

Oleda stiffened. “You have the queen?”

“We do.”

“What is she doing outside her realm?”

“We went looking for information. Why?”

“Where is she?”

“She is injured,” Sophie said. “I was hoping that you might know some magic that could heal her.”

Oleda breathed out slowly, and then she closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she looked at Lan. There was something in her eyes, something in the way that she studied him, that left Sophie a little alarmed for her brother. What was she thinking as she studied him?

Was it about the connection that he had to god power? Maybe she knew that he was connected to the Heart of the Grove.

But then, in the time that they had been traveling, Lan's power had changed, and the way that he was pulling on it seemed different. If it was a connection to the Heart of the Grove, and if that was what Lan had now, he may have done something else with that connection.

Oleda turned, and she waved her Karell wand, sending a brief surge of energy behind her. There were two others standing on the stone. The ruins here were far more intact than those in many other places. The structure of the buildings remained standing, and there was a small, squat stone building surrounded by what appeared to be a toppled wall, and it looked as if there might even be a few other buildings inside.

“Bring her,” Oleda said.

She strode away.

Sophie looked at Lan, who was frowning.

“Can you trust her?” Lan asked.

“Are you seriously asking me if I can trust a Karell?” Sophie asked, and she started to smile. “Yes. This... this is Oleda. She was kind to me. Like Nana. You’ll like her.”

Her brother turned to her, and his expression was one of complete seriousness. The boyhood Lan that she had known was mostly gone. In his place was the Taihg soldier, the one who was connected to a goddess, the one who had power that Sophie could not fathom.

She shrugged. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “If you ask if I trust any Karell, the answer is probably going to be the same: I don’t know. I would rather not trust them, but given that we don’t know if the Raven Queen is going to recover any other way, and I am starting to think that perhaps she won’t recover unless she returns to her realm,” Sophie went on, thinking that there was something strange about that whole concept, “we need as much help as we can.”

Lan nodded. “Then I will stand guard.” He whistled, and the Taihg began to take up positions around the ruins.

Sophie looked at Ridaln. “Let’s go get her.”

They brought the Raven Queen into the ruins, and Oleda motioned for them to go inside the main building. Sophie was hesitant, as she wasn’t sure if there was something inside the building that they had to be worried about, but she only found a stone platform.

“Set her down there,” Oleda said.

The other three Karell were already waiting inside.

Sophie was on edge. Ridaln was there, and he was tapping his fingers, and Sophie could feel the power he was summoning, even though she wasn't exactly sure why he thought he needed to draw upon it. Regardless, she felt herself growing concerned.

“What is this place?” Sophie asked.

“It is a place of old power,” she said. “It is a place that once connected to the gods.”

The gods. Of course it would be the gods.

“And what are you going to do with her?”

“Why, Sophie Varison, we will try to help her, but there are no guarantees.”

Sophie stared at her, as she had not seen Oleda in so long, and all she had was memories of her.

Dannith slipped into the stone building, and he smiled fondly at Sophie.

Oleda seemed not at all surprised by Dannith's sudden appearance.

“Did you know she still lived?” Sophie asked.

“I knew,” he said. “Or at least, I suspected. She has been providing information to Ridaln about Darius's movements. That is how we have tracked him.”

Sophie breathed out heavily. After all of this, she had been brought back to the Karell she truly cared about.

Maybe that was for the best.

But she didn't know what Oleda would do to the Raven Queen.

The Taihg, including Jalyn, set the Raven Queen down on the stone table in the center of the small room.

Jalyn looked over at Sophie. “Are you sure about this?”

“Not at all,” she said. “But Parvella said something about the power of these places, and to be honest, I don’t know what to make of it, nor do I know whether this power is something that we were supposed to find, or whether it is something that only the gods can access.”

“In this place, others can touch it, but it is difficult,” Oleda said. “But for her, I suspect it will be easier.”

“Why for her?”

“Hopefully, you will understand soon enough,” Oleda said.

The Karell took up positions around the Raven Queen.

Sophie stood back and watched. She focused on the power inside her, and she placed a prayer pose around the entirety of the strange stone room, which elicited a sharp reaction from Oleda. She shook her head.

“No,” she said. “It is not necessary. You will disrupt the flow of power here if you do that. You can touch your god connection later, if necessary.”

Sophie immediately released the prayer pose, the rebuke sharp enough that she couldn’t even think about reacting, but she wasn’t sure what Oleda meant about her god connection. At this point, Sophie did not know if she had any sort of god connection. But then, she felt...

She wasn’t sure what she felt, but she felt increasingly confident that there had to be some sort of power here, something that she needed to reach for, that she might be able to draw upon, if only she could feel it.

How could she find it?

She waited.

Gradually she began to feel the power building.

It came from all around.

Sophie focused, but she didn’t dare draw on any of her power, because she knew that if she were to reach for her own sorcery, and some connection to it, she might disrupt whatever

the Karell were doing. Instead, she was forced to wait and watch.

“She is skilled,” Ridaln said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Sophie said.

“It would have made no difference,” he said.

“But it does,” she said.

“Oh, does it really? You know better than to believe that my sharing something would make much of a difference.”

“Maybe not,” Sophie said, and as she thought about it, she realized that maybe he was right. What difference would it make? At this point, the only thing that really made a difference was the fact that they had found a place where they would hopefully get help.

But what kind of help would they get?

Sophie waited and watched and focused and felt the power all around them. And she began to recognize that there was something building. It was that greenish energy, but it seemed to connect to something different. It was building from somewhere that Sophie had never felt before. It came from deep beneath them, within the ground, but also outside this building. She couldn’t even follow it, but...

But as she focused on it, she began to recognize that there was some power within it, and she started to feel a flowing of energy.

And then...

And then she recognized what the Karell were doing.

It wasn’t that they were using the Karell power on the Raven Queen. Instead, they were somehow using the power of the ruins.

Lan stepped inside and frowned.

“They are drawing on the ruins,” Sophie said.

“I feel it,” he said.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I don’t, either.”

She continued to focus, to feel the energy, to detect a buildup of something, and then it faded.

It went out with a burst, and then dissipated, leaving nothing.

Oleda stepped back.

She looked around until she locked eyes with Lan, and surprisingly, she bowed to him.

Lan tipped his head in a nod to her.

Oleda came over to Sophie and took her by the arm, and she motioned for her to step outside the building. Lan joined her, as did Ridaln and Dannith.

“Tell me what happened,” Oleda said.

Sophie detailed what Darius had done, the way that he had trapped the Raven Queen.

“Dangerous,” Oleda said. “Trapping power.”

“Why?” Sophie asked. “Is it tied to how the Raven Queen is god-touched?”

“Is that what she said to you?” Oleda said, looking around the ruins.

From here, Sophie could see the other Taihg, who had stationed themselves around the remaining ruins.

“She mentioned that she was god-touched, and she claimed that Lan was, and she probably even claimed that I was, though I don’t know if that’s true.”

“An interesting way to describe it,” Oleda said, looking around. “And coming from the Raven Queen, perhaps accurate, but still surprising. Did she talk about the gods?”

“She talked about how there haven’t been any new gods in a while,” Sophie said, and she looked over at Ridaln, who was watching her. “She didn’t tell me why, but she said that something had changed.”

“Yes, I suppose she would have known.”

“Why?” Sophie asked.

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is that she is right. No new gods have appeared in quite some time.”

“And the Karell are somehow responsible for that?”

“We are responsible for keeping the faith, such as it is. For a while, we were responsible for protecting places like this. They began to collapse, crumbling over the last few years. I thought that it was tied to the Shavln, as did others, and we did our best to defend them, knowing that they bring a proximity to power. Unfortunately, we have not been strong enough to defend all of them.”

“This one still stands,” Sophie said.

“Not for much longer,” Oleda said. “We had to use power from it in order to help the queen, unfortunately. Well, not unfortunately. Her loss would be... well, it would be quite dangerous for the world. So it was a necessary sacrifice. And I imagine that you,” she said, looking at Lan, “have seen other places have fallen.”

He nodded. “Other places, the Karell.”

“Darius has been slaughtering the guardians,” she said softly. “And he has been destroying places that we were meant to protect.”

“Because he wants to destroy the gods,” Sophie said.

“It is possible,” she said. “He blames... Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter. Many people blame others for misfortunes, but in his case, he blames others for misfortunes that were not the fault of any but himself. When he was younger, and first learning to access the deeper powers of the world, he lost control. His loss of control meant that others suffered. A sister. His mother. We don’t know much about his father, but we think that he survived. Darius continued to train, but he learned more and more. He blamed the gods for what happened to him, and he blamed others for his persistent misfortunes.”

“Did you know about any of this?” Sophie asked Ridaln.

“He doesn’t talk about that. Or he didn’t talk about that.”

“Then what did he talk about?”

“He talked about training others. And he talked about sorcery and the gift and the purpose behind it,” he said, “and how difficult it is for some to have that link to power.”

Oleda nodded. “Which was the lesson that you took from him.”

“It is true.”

“It is,” she agreed.

“Why can’t sorcerers be found the same way that the Karell are found?” Sophie asked.

“Because the power is different. Sorcerers touch something deeper, and they use a different connection. What the Karell touch is an understanding of magic, and we draw upon some of that in order to protect the deeper connection. At least, most of us do.” She touched Sophie on the arm. It took Sophie some effort to avoid withdrawing, knowing that she shouldn’t, knowing that she couldn’t, as what had happened wasn’t Oleda’s fault. “I am sorry for what you experienced. I am sorry for what she did to those you care about. She betrayed her commitment.”

Sophie sighed. “I know.”

“Perhaps, but it changes nothing.”

“We have to stop him,” Sophie said. “And I don’t know how to do that, especially with Lan having this Mark of Odian ___”

“Your brother has what?” Oleda asked.

Lan was standing with his sword sheathed, but to Sophie’s eyes, he still glowed.

“I’m sorry, Lan,” Sophie said. “Maybe it isn’t my place to say.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Lan said.

“How do you know that you have the Mark of Odian?”

“Because the Heart of the Grove told me,” Lan said.

Oleda closed her eyes for a moment and whispered something, but then she opened her eyes. “Could it be?”

“Could what be?”

“I have wondered about your potential,” Oleda said, looking at Sophie. “When you first came to Ridaln, you acquired skill, and you demonstrated power that seemed beyond what I would’ve expected somebody with typical capacity to be able to summon. I had thought that it was tied to your youth, and the way that you were trained. Ridaln has a tendency to be a bit assertive.”

“It is the only way that I know how to teach,” he said.

“And I am not blaming you,” Oleda said. “But you have power, Sophie. Your brother, obviously, has his own power.”

“Power that he was gifted by the Heart of the Grove,” Sophie said.

“No. He could not have been.” She turned to Lan. “Can I see what you have?”

Lan glanced at Sophie before he pulled his sleeve up. On his arm, there was a birthmark. Sophie had seen it before, and she knew that it was unremarkable, but apparently, it was some mark of a god.

“Interesting.”

“Let me guess,” Sophie said. “You know the story of Odian.”

“Oh, yes. And I suspect your nana did as well. It is unfortunate that she didn’t have a chance to share it. Perhaps she always knew. Perhaps she took you in because she knew, and she was keeping watch. A guardian from the very first.”

“What are you saying?”

“I don’t know,” Oleda said. “But a mark like that is incredibly rare, and it is even rarer for somebody to actually find a way to touch that power. Odian was an old god, ancient, and considered something of a guardian of justice. That is, in

days long past.” She smiled. “There are better storytellers than I, but what many would say is that there was a time when there were other gods, the old gods, and Odian stood among them as the sword of justice.” She smiled at Lan. Then she turned to Sophie. “Of the other gods, one in particular controlled the flows of power in the world. Then again, these were gods, so some would say that they all controlled flows of power in the world. Lira had a different measure of control, though. She could control the flows of power, and she could disperse them. Some say that it was Lira who gifted the new gods with their power, or what we know as the new gods.”

“What happened to them?”

“Time,” Oleda said. “At least, that is what the stories that the Karell pass down would suggest. Time changes everything. Some survive over time, but most do not. It is unfortunate, but it is the truth. You cannot fight time. And with each passing era, magic began to shift. The old gods transitioned to the new gods, who eventually began to fade to time as well. Only a few still stood, showing themselves to the world, and now I suspect even they have faded.”

“And that is why the Raven Queen was searching for gods?”

“I’m not entirely sure why she was chasing power, but she must have known something.”

There was a commotion, and somebody came out of the small stone building.

“She is awake.”

Sophie hurried forward, with Lan and Ridaln accompanying her. Dannith came as well, though he seemed a bit reluctant.

If the Raven Queen was awake, why didn’t Dannith want to hurry in there, and why didn’t he want to know what was going on and whether there was anything that he might do to help the Raven Queen?

Perhaps he was afraid.

Sophie thought that she would understand that much, at least. Dannith had been held captive by the Raven Queen, so it shouldn't surprise her all that much that he would have some reluctance.

When she headed inside, she found the Raven Queen still lying on the stone table, though she was breathing regularly. And her eyes were open.

Sophie hurried around and took her hand.

“Sophie,” the Raven Queen said. “What have you done?”

“What do you mean?”

“You are here. Why this place? Why did Parvella not take me back?”

“Because Parvella...” Sophie squeezed her eyes shut. “Parvella sacrificed herself,” she went on. “I don't know what she was doing, but she was using a pose, one that she told me was too dangerous for me to use. She said that it was the only way to help you.”

“No,” the Raven Queen said. There was real anguish in her words. “She should not have done that.”

“She was a god, wasn't she?”

The Raven Queen's sighed. “I suppose you could call her that, though I imagine that Parvella would never have called herself that.”

“What... what happened?”

“I made a mistake. I thought that I could see the truth. I did not realize that he had already begun to summon something different, something darker, and something dangerous. I was not able to counter that.”

“Summon?” Sophie said.

“Like the thisten,” Lan said.

The Raven Queen started to sit up, squeezing her eyes shut. When she did, she glowed slightly. Finally she managed to sit upright, and she looked around.

“Like the thisten,” she said. “I didn’t recognize it at the time, but the thisten were attached to this old power. Darius should not have been able to call them. I did not recognize it, and I don’t think Parvella did, either. But once we saw the truth, we realized that he was after something much worse than the Shavlñ, a power that should not have been as deadly as it was.”

“He’s after power to kill gods,” Sophie said.

“I suspect he is.” The Raven Queen looked around. “Where are we?”

“We are at Ur’anianl, Your Majesty,” Oleda said.

The Raven Queen closed her eyes tightly, and when she opened them, there was an intensity in them that Sophie had not seen before. “We cannot protect this place any longer.”

“That is what Oleda said,” Sophie said. “Apparently, it has been drained.”

“That is what I see.”

“What do you mean, that is what you see?”

“That is my gift,” the Raven Queen said. “What my god-touched ability is. At least, it is now, as Parvella has passed it on to me.” She breathed out heavily. “Which she should not have done.”

“How did she pass it on?”

“One touched by that power can pass it to another if they so choose. It is rarely done, but we have tried to understand why it has been done so infrequently. There should be more drawing god power these days than there are. It is why I have gathered the Taihg, as they all have the potential.”

It took Sophie a moment to realize what the Raven Queen was implying. Potential. Potential to gather power. God-touched power.

“But if Darius has been using the Shavlñ, or perhaps something worse, to destroy that power, perhaps all hope at it transitioning has gone.”

“We have to stop him,” Sophie said. “But I don’t know how to find him.”

“We don’t find him. We draw him,” the Raven Queen said.

“How do we draw him?”

She squeezed her eyes shut again, and when she opened them, she looked past Sophie and at Oleda.

“At the Palace of the Guardians.”

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CHAPTER 38

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SOPHIE

They had been traveling for the better part of two days, and moving quickly. Apparently, the Palace of the Guardians was magically hidden, and only now that the Raven Queen had taken on Parvella's gift—and now that they traveled with Oleda and three other Karell—could they track it. It was difficult regardless. Sophie remained on edge, speaking to the Raven Queen as much as she could, but the queen rested for long stretches of time, as if she had not fully recovered. When she said as much to Oleda, the Karell woman frowned.

“With what she has been through, it may take days or weeks for her to fully recover.”

“She was given Parvella's gift?”

Oleda nodded.

“Does that mean that she is a god?”

“It is possible,” Oleda said. “Most of the Karell have long suspected that she has that potential. It is why we serve her as we do, why we serve others as well.”

And as they traveled, the Karell continued to serve the Raven Queen, attending her far more than Sophie had seen them doing before.

If she was a god, then their behavior made sense.

Sophie spoke with Ridaln as well. He didn't seem to be particularly troubled about all of this. What seemed to trouble

him was the idea that they were going somewhere to summon Darius.

“It is a mistake to call him to us,” Ridaln said.

“Do we have much choice in the matter?”

“There is always choice, Sophie.”

“If we let him continue to acquire god stones, we will never be able to stop him.”

“It might be too late to stop him anyway,” he said.

At first they had headed south, through the forest, but when it had opened into a vast meadow, they had moved west. The Raven Queen and the Karell kept guiding them, and they seemed to be taking a roundabout path. Every so often, Lan would pause, reach his hand into his pocket—for the god stones, Sophie suspected—and then focus, glowing ever so slightly. They still had not talked to the Raven Queen about the god stones, nor had they spoken to Oleda about them. Lan had several, she now knew, more than the one they had taken from Parvella.

When they stopped one evening, Sophie tapped her brother on the arm. “We need to talk to her about what we have encountered,” she said.

“Yes,” he said.

They made their way over to the Raven Queen, who was seated with her legs crossed, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes closed. Oleda glanced at Sophie before moving away, giving them space. Sophie settled down on the ground across from her and waited until the Raven Queen opened her eyes and acknowledged her.

“Parvella left something behind when she disappeared,” Sophie said.

“She would have,” the Raven Queen said. “I suspect that your brother has it with him.”

“He does.”

“He should keep it.”

“What if you need it?”

“I doubt that I will need it,” she said. “Parvella gifted quite a bit to me, and I suspect that she gifted that stone to your brother or to you. She was looking to ascend, but if she gifted me a part of her power and left the stone behind, I suspect that she never found what she was searching for.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No,” the Raven Queen said, and she smiled. “I doubt that you do, nor that you can. Not yet. But if all goes well, you will.”

She didn’t explain anything more, and Sophie didn’t care for the silence.

After a while, Sophie got to her feet and spoke to Oleda. “Do you have any way of reaching more Karell?”

“Not easily. And I do not know how many remain. From what your brother told us,” she said, looking to where Lan stood now, talking to Jalyn, “Darius has been destroying the guardians.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Destroy the guardians, then destroy the connection to the ancient power.”

“What happens if all that power is gone? Does that mean that sorcery will collapse?”

Oleda frowned. “I don’t know. I don’t think even Darius knows. For all his bluster and all his claims of wanting to understand power, I suspect that there is much that he cannot see.”

They moved on, and with each passing day, they got closer and closer to the Palace of the Guardians.

Sophie traveled alongside Ridaln. She wished that she had more time to study with the Raven Queen, but she still appeared too lethargic to help. Every so often, Ridaln would pause to show her something, as if he wanted to teach her still. Sophie ignored him, as she didn’t feel as if she was his student any longer. But then she realized something. It wasn’t that he

was just trying to teach her. He was trying to trade knowledge with her.

“You want to know how I can form poses while walking?” Sophie asked.

“I was hoping that you might show me something. You’ve studied with her,” he went on, nodding to the Raven Queen. “And that has given you an opportunity to know things that I simply do not.”

“The Raven Queen helped me understand how to do some poses, but Parvella helped even more. Parvella was the Raven Queen’s instructor,” she said softly. “And she taught me.”

“If she was a goddess, as you claim, then she would have been a skilled instructor.”

Sophie arched a brow at him. “That’s an unusual statement.”

“Is it any less true?”

“I suppose not. It’s just strange.”

“That you trained with a god or that she is no longer with us?”

“Both.”

They traveled farther and reached the edge of a vast meadow that rolled out in front of them. Flowers dotted the meadow. Sophie had no idea where they were or how far beyond the Raven Queen’s realm or Dannith’s kingdom they were. As far as she’d been able to determine, they were well outside either country.

“Is there a technique she preferred?” Ridaln asked.

“Visualization,” Sophie said. She smiled to herself, thinking about the lessons that Parvella had given her all that time ago, and the way that she had talked to her about visualizing a pose. At first Sophie had thought that it was just Parvella’s way of punishing her, but over time, she had come to see that it was more than just that. Visualization was the key. “You have to visualize the pose and just visualize how power flows through you, in the same way that it would if you

were forming the pose physically. I find it easier to do than actually holding a pose, and then I start to release it, while holding it in my mind at the same time.”

“I’m not holding a pose any longer?” Ridaln asked.

Sophie looked over, and it seemed to her that he was actually asking a question, not simply musing aloud.

“Did you ever learn to use power the way I do?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I went from physical poses to forming them mentally.”

He nodded to himself. “I wonder if that was the problem for me. Darius wanted me to use these interim poses so I could focus on something, but now I wonder if perhaps he did so that I wouldn’t be able to overpower him.”

“I think that you should forget about what Darius taught you. Well, maybe not the poses, as those are still the core of what you need to do, but maybe forget about what he taught you about the interim poses.”

“Just visualize it,” Ridaln said.

“Visualize it.”

They continued to travel, and it was late in the day on the third day since the Raven Queen had come around when Sophie noticed something in the distance. She wasn’t sure what it was, but she felt power. Not only that, but she could see something rising on the horizon.

Oleda stopped next to her. “The Palace of the Guardians,” she said softly. “I never expected to see it.”

“Why not?”

“Few have found it. It is something that only comes when needed.” She smiled. “I realize how that sounds, but it is true nonetheless.”

She headed over to talk with the Raven Queen.

Lan and some of the other Taihg had taken the lead, now that they were getting closer.

Sophie could feel something deep, distant. Maybe it was power. As she stared, she noticed that the entire palace had a faint greenish energy flowing from it. It truly was a place of power.

Sophie wanted to understand it, and so she focused on the prayer pose.

“Not that one,” Ridaln said.

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that you are using the wrong pose. For this, what you need is a different sort of detection pose. That one is fine, but not as diffuse as you probably need. Try this,” he said.

She followed the way that Ridaln was modeling his pose, and then...

Then she realized what he was doing. It was one that Parvella had shown her. She hadn't been sure what it meant, but she had seen the woman standing on top of the palace, holding this pose and letting power fly from her. Sophie had not known the source of the energy within it, nor had she known how to control it. So she followed Ridaln, only this time she didn't need to use the pose by standing and positioning herself, as she could hold herself in the position mentally. And she did.

As soon as she did, she began to feel the energy sweeping out of her. It was a detection pose, but it was a pose that she had never heard named before.

“What is it called?”

Ridaln looked over, seemingly realizing that she was not forming the pose the way that he was. He frowned at her. “You have mastered it so quickly?”

“I don't know if it's mastered,” Sophie said. “But I can feel the energy within it.”

“You really *have* become quite skilled,” he said.

“I am just doing what I have been taught.”

“Which is still quite impressive,” he said.

Sophie continued to focus on the power within herself, and she continued to try to make sense of it, thinking that there had to be some sort of energy in the pose that she might use, but then she detected the power in front of her. The Karell magic swept ahead of her, and it twisted into a spiral. It was incredibly potent, in a way that Sophie thought she might be able to understand, but it would take a different sort of touch to make sense of it.

She had to try again, and again she pushed outward, focusing on the detection pose. She identified the twisting energy within Karell magic, and the more she pushed, the more she felt that energy, and she recognized that there was something familiar about it. She had felt this weave before.

But her grandmother had taught her something else about weaves.

Not just how to make them but how to unravel them.

She frowned.

“What are you thinking?” Ridaln asked. He must have seen the frown on her face, the way that Sophie was focusing. She was trying to find any sort of weakness within the magic. She thought that she could make sense of it and that there had to be something in it that she might use.

“I can feel the weave,” she said. “I’ve never felt anything quite like this before, but I can tell it is there now, and I can feel the way that it is wrapping around, and the power and energy within it. I might be able to find the key to unmaking it, though I don’t know if I’m supposed to do that.”

There was a bit of concern in Ridaln’s eyes. “You can feel the *weave*?”

“The Karell,” she said. “They use a different sort of magic, right?”

“It depends upon which Karell you talk to,” he said, before shrugging, “but I suspect you are correct. It is magic, but a different sort of magic.”

“But it still touches upon the same source of magic.”

And maybe the weave that she had learned when she was younger was key to it.

They kept making their way toward the palace, and they reached it in darkness.

The palace consisted of a tall wall encircling a tower that reminded Sophie of the one in Valan. The wall itself was crumbling, and sections of it had collapsed over time. The tower, though, looked mostly intact. When they reached it, Sophie expected to go inside, but Oleda told them that they could not.

“Only the ancients can go inside the Palace of the Guardians. The guardians have kept it safe.”

Sophie looked over at the Raven Queen. She frowned. “What about her?”

“It is possible,” Oleda admitted, “but I don’t know. And we will not be able to test it safely. It may be too dangerous.”

“What do we do, then?” Sophie asked, looking over at Lan. He was glowing, though these days, he often glowed, as if he was continually touching upon the power of the Heart of the Grove, even though Sophie now questioned whether that was what he was doing. He may have some way of drawing upon power directly. He had the Mark of Odian, something that even Oleda now believed was tied to something more powerful.

“This is where we will draw him,” the Raven Queen said.

“What if we aren’t strong enough?”

The Raven Queen looked up at the massive tower behind her. “We will draw strength from those who came before us.”

She smiled at Sophie, but Sophie wasn’t convinced.

Sophie turned to her brother. She wasn’t sure what he or she might need to do. She could feel something around them, though. She could feel power.

It was coming off her brother. But it was also coming from another source, one that she hadn't expected. The Raven Queen.

There was a distinct signature to it. Sophie recognized it, and she felt a whisper of fear. She hated that she did, but she couldn't shake it.

"She's calling to him," Sophie said to Nevarn, who stood next to her.

"I suspected as much," he said.

"Aren't you worried about it?"

"It needs to be done. He is responsible for so much destruction, and if we can stop him here and now, then we need to."

"What if we can't?" Sophie asked.

Nevarn looked over. "You doubt my mother?"

"I know that I shouldn't," she said, "but it is difficult not to think that he is powerful enough to handle anything that your mother might throw in his direction. I doubt we will be able to deal with something like that."

"We just have to have a little faith," Nevarn said.

Sophie arched a brow at him. "Now you want me to have faith?"

"Well, shouldn't I? It seems my mother has become a god." Nevarn grinned.

"You are not taking this very seriously."

"My mother has been incredibly powerful for my entire life, and I guess I never knew that she had this potential, but it doesn't surprise me. So if she can do this, I suppose that I should just let her." He shrugged. "And I should be thankful that I got to meet you through it all."

Sophie groaned.

"Too much?"

"A little."

“Fine. I will buy you more pastries once we get back to Hester. Is that what you want to hear?”

“That’s better,” she said.



Sophie didn’t sleep much that night. As far as she could tell, no one did. By morning, the Raven Queen was still doing something that summoned power, but so too was Lan. When Sophie went over to him, she realized that he had the god stones clasped in his hands, and he was drawing power through them.

She didn’t interrupt.

It was around midday when she noticed movement.

It started to stream from the direction that they had come from, but it came from others as well.

It was a darkness.

Lan got to his feet, headed over to the Raven Queen, and said something to her before unsheathing his blade, glowing with a vibrancy.

He joined Sophie.

There was more power in him than she had seen before. She was left wondering if he had somehow grasped even more power, or if he had always had this kind of power.

“What do we do?” Sophie asked him.

“He is summoning power,” Lan said. “I feel it, though I wonder if I can summon power as well. The Heart of the Grove suggested that I could. I’m trying, but I don’t know how.”

“What kind of power could you summon?”

“The thisten,” he said.

“Maybe we could do it together,” Sophie suggested.

“Possibly,” Lan said.

Then he strode forward.

Sophie hesitated, though she was the only one who did. Lan joined Jalyn, Magnus, and the dozen or so Taihg that had been traveling with them. It wasn't just them, as the Lorantian soldiers who had mingled with the Taihg stood alongside them.

It wasn't going to be enough.

Maybe Lan could be, if he was able to draw enough power, but the others...

The massive dark creatures that were swarming toward them left Sophie knowing that they wouldn't have enough strength, or power, or anything. And that left her unnerved. She used a modified prayer pose, radiated power outward, and knew that she could help. It would take strength, and Sophie feared that she would quickly fade.

She felt a surge of energy coming alongside her as Ridaln joined her.

"I'm not letting you have all the fun," he said.

"Do you really think that this will be fun?"

"Perhaps not," he conceded, "but I can feel what you're doing, and I know that you have one of the god stones."

"I don't have any god stone," she said.

He frowned at her, then glanced at her brother, marching ahead of her, leading the Taihg into battle. Sophie had seen him handing the stones to the Raven Queen. And Lan didn't have either of them now.

Which meant...

Which meant that whatever power was within Lan and Sophie was going to be all they had. And without the god stones, she didn't know if they would be strong enough to handle anything that Darius brought to them. He had summoned some dark power. There were probably sorcerers out there, and many of them would be incredibly powerful.

The only way that she could counter Darius was through faith.

Did she have the right kind of faith?

She thought of stories that her nana had told her years ago, stories about fighting impossible odds, featuring people of incredible power. Lan was one such person. She could feel it. It radiated from him. So was the Raven Queen, who Sophie could feel behind her. If she had the god stones, then she would be able to draw on plenty of power, wouldn't she?

What about Sophie?

She didn't have some impossible power, like her brother or the Raven Queen.

But that didn't mean that she couldn't fight.

That didn't mean that she couldn't help.

And at this point, Sophie knew that she had to, regardless of whether she was strong enough.

When all of this was done, this would one day be a story. Sophie would play her part in it.

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CHAPTER 39

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Lan could feel the power all around him but still could not summon the thisten. Increasingly, he felt the need to draw that power to him. Otherwise, what would they be able to do? He was one man—perhaps god-touched, but still just one man. And though he had the Taihg alongside him, he didn't know if they were going to be enough.

Sophie caught up to him.

Lan looked over at his sister. "This is a terrible idea. You aren't trained to handle this sort of thing."

She smirked at him. "And you are? Look at what we have coming at us, Lan. These aren't soldiers. These are monsters. And I suspect this is what you were asking about."

He nodded slowly. "I don't know what to make of all this," he said. "I don't know what they might do, or what we might need to do, but..." He shrugged. "There is power here, and if we can find a way to draw the thisten, maybe we will be able to handle them."

He didn't get a chance to say anything else.

The surge of creatures came at them. They were of all shapes and sizes, some with massive claws, others running on all fours, some that stood twice as tall as any man. All of them radiated a dark energy. Lan braced himself, holding on to the warmth inside him, wishing that he had taken one of the god stones so that he could deal with the power, but he had not. He had left them both with the Raven Queen, who had claimed that she needed them.

What did she intend?

Lan pointed his blade, and he blasted the creatures, sending bursts of magic out. After he struck each one, he had to turn, to move to another.

Sophie did something surprising.

He had seen her do this before, so he supposed that he shouldn't be terribly surprised by the power that she possessed. She let energy radiate out from her in a band of flame that arced toward the creatures, burning through them. Each time her fire struck, it spread, jumping from one to the next. She clenched her jaw as she continued her pose, and Lan knew better than to intervene.

All along the line of Taihg, the soldiers were fighting the monsters.

"There are just so many," Sophie said.

"I'm sorry," Lan said. "This isn't the kind of sorcery that you wanted to do."

"I want to help. I want to get through this. I want to tell this story."

Lan laughed. Sophie glowered at him.

She stumbled, and he was there.

He hooked his arm under hers. When he did, he felt the connection that he always did when he was so close to his sister, the connection that he had known since he was young. And up close, connected to Sophie now, he felt the power blooming from her in a way that he supposed that he should have known before. He sent a surge of power outward, toward the creatures, keeping himself and his sister clear. So far, Lan hadn't even needed to use the blade of his sword.

When he touched Sophie, there was a strange trembling.

He had been feeling the thisten ever since he had visited the Heart of the Grove, but he had not been able to call that power, despite every desire and attempt to do so. But now, with his hand resting on Sophie, he felt closer to the power of the thisten.

“What would happen if you were to hold your power and my power?” Lan asked.

Sophie frowned at him. “I don’t think it works that way.”

“We need the thisten, don’t we?”

“I suppose.”

“That’s what the Heart of the Grove said. We need to draw that power, and we need to have an understanding of it, so that we can summon something more. I don’t know what that’s going to be, and I don’t know what that’s going to look like, but it has to be tied to the thisten. Somehow.”

Sophie shook her head. “I don’t know any pose that will help with that.”

“Just use your power.”

Lan didn’t know what else to tell her, but he felt the energy within him, energy that he knew was within his sister, and as he felt what she was drawing, he recognized that there was something more coming from her.

She was trying to draw on more energy, and he could feel it.

Lan started to draw on his own energy, sending it out through him. In doing so, he could feel some part of it flow, something more that built, some connection that Lan recognized.

Did Sophie recognize it?

Maybe it didn’t even matter.

He pressed his connection through, and as he did, he felt a blooming of energy.

They had been trying to find that bloom of energy before, but now he recognized that it had some focus. And he heard the steady drumming, the steady buildup of power, something that he had felt before.

Could he call to it?

There did seem to be some aspect of it that should make sense, and yet even though he strained with it, wanting to make sense of it, he did not.

He tried again. And again he felt the pressure.

The dark creatures were almost upon him. He was going to have to do something now, but he didn't know what that would involve. He started to pull away from his sister, but she grabbed his arm.

"I hear them," she said.

"You can hear them?"

"It's faint. I don't know how, but I can hear something."

"Can you call to them?" Lan asked.

She frowned. "I think so."

"Then do it. You need me?"

"I don't know," she said.

Lan stepped forward. He had his blade unsheathed, and he had power within him, so he hurried forward to reach the nearest of the creatures.

As he did, he could feel the energy in him, and he let it blast away from him. Once he did, there was more power, and another burst of light exploded away from him.

It was the power of the Heart of the Grove.

More than that, it was the power of Oadian.

Somehow Lan was connected to that. It was a connection to power that he still did not fully understand, and it was a power that he had no way of controlling, not easily.

But maybe he didn't need to.

He had been fighting for control, fighting to understand the energy and the magic, fighting so that he could battle, but perhaps that had been a mistake.

He relaxed.

Power exploded through him.

A burst of light shot from the end of his blade, uncontrollably. It ripped through a line of the monsters coming toward him, and he swept his blade from side to side, pushing the creatures back. It gave the soldiers breathing room, little more than that, before the creatures surged forward once again.

Distantly Lan heard and felt the steady drumming that he had been feeling for quite some time. At first he thought that it came from these monsters, but then he realized what it was. It was Sophie calling to the thisten.

He moved forward. His blade still glowed, blazing, and he allowed himself to draw on that energy, to feel the power coming to him.

“I think it’s working,” Sophie said.

“It is,” Lan said.

The drumming continued to build.

He felt it in a different way than he would have expected. It came from...

Behind him.

He swept his blade in an arc, shooting light from it, giving himself a bit of space and time to look behind. When he did, he saw the tower rising high above, and from the tower—or more accurately, from the wall around the tower—streamed thisten.

They looked different, and they rumbled ahead, bearlike, powerful, and terrifying.

He worried what would happen to the Taihg if they were to see them, and yet he need not have. They streamed toward Lan and Sophie.

He moved back to his sister. They stayed side by side, and the thisten began to swarm outward, heading toward the monsters. He felt them strike, and with each one that battled, more and more power built, bloomed, and...

And the thisten were pushing back.

“I don’t know how much of this I did,” Sophie said.

“Maybe you just helped, or maybe the Raven Queen helped, but it doesn’t matter. They are here.”

“Will it be enough?”

Lan shrugged. “Maybe. We have to fight our way through this, create enough space to ensure that the Taihg can handle them, but once we do that, I don’t know.”

“I’m scared, Lan.”

“Of course you are. But you are strong, too.” He took her hand, squeezing it.

The thisten gave them a little bit of room, but not much. He was going to have to fight again soon. And he suspected that his sister was going to have to fight again. Still, they had time and space. More than that, Sophie had an opportunity to recuperate. And so did Lan. He had been drawing on more power than he had anticipated, and though he had the strength to do it, he could still feel power.

“You’ve always been strong,” Lan said. “I remember when I first trained as a soldier, how hard it was, and I kept thinking that you would be able to handle the things that I couldn’t.”

“Lan...”

“So prove me right.”

She took a deep breath, then positioned herself, arms spread out, fingertips touching, making a ring, which she began to move steadily. As she did, a faint light flowed from her.

He had seen it, and he had felt it, and he knew that it was powerful. He knew that it was destructive as well. He didn’t know how much control she had over it, but this was Sophie, and she had trained with the Raven Queen and Parvella. She could handle this.

As her power began to flow from her, Lan stepped in, filling the gaps that she formed. He cut down some of the other creatures, dancing in between the thisten, carving through the monsters. He had thought that it would be harder

than this. He was filled with power. There were limits—he knew that—but right now, he still had not met those limits. Eventually, when he felt that limitation fade, he was going to do something different. But for now...

“Lan?” Sophie said.

“What is it?”

“I feel something. It’s different.”

“What?”

He asked the question, but then he realized what it was. He could feel it as well. It was coming toward them, moving through the creatures, through the thisten, and building power.

At first Lan thought that it was sorcery. But that wasn’t it at all. It was something else. Something familiar.

It was the Mistress of the Woods.

He breathed in deeply, focusing on the power inside him, and then he darted forward.

Sophie would want to be a part of this fight, but this was his. Thea was the one who had attacked him, targeted him in the forest, and she was the one who had tried to turn the thisten against them, and against the gods. Lan was not about to allow her to escape again. She had evaded him long enough.

He darted forward, and as he felt the drumming around him, he summoned three of the thisten. Lan had no idea how he did it, but he pressed out through the connection that he felt, and three of them joined him.

They circled him.

“Look at you now,” Thea said, striding toward him.

She was dressed all in black, and she radiated a dark, hazy sort of energy. She still held her Karell wand, but there was no longer the pale light that he had seen within her before. Now it was a different sort of energy, one that Lan feared. It was the Shavln, if he wasn’t mistaken. And that power was beyond his understanding. Still, he had defeated her once, hadn’t he?

But he hadn't been able to cleanse the Shavln from the streams, not the way that the Raven Queen had, and not the way that even his sister had been able to.

If Thea were to use the dark Shavln power on him, he may not be strong enough to handle it.

She watched him, tilting her head, her dark eyes radiating power. "Where is your goddess now?" She smirked, and then she snapped her fingers. In her hand was a glowing orb. A god stone. "Did she disappear, like so many others? I was once like them," she said, nodding toward the tower behind him, "but I learned that serving as a guardian was not quite as satisfying as taking their power."

"I don't understand why you did this," Lan said, "and it doesn't matter. It ends now."

"Oh, it does. For you. You see, when the Heart of the Grove gave you her gift, I knew that I would need to take it. You have proven stubborn, but..."

She waved her wand, and a greenish energy sizzled out from her. The thisten moved close, but when the energy touched them, they began to dissolve, as if the power in the Karell wand was some sort of acid that ate away at the thisten.

One of the thisten cried out, and Lan could feel their energy changing in a way that he couldn't quite comprehend.

He wanted to call to them, and he thought about calling to some of the others, but that would be a mistake.

Thea turned, twisting her wand toward him, and then more greenish power came streaming toward him.

Lan held up his blade, and he sent out a burst of pale light, letting it flow from him. He didn't even know if it would make a difference, but he felt he had to try something. He pushed, drawing on the open connection that he had to power, and let it pour out of him. Lan considered whether it might be unwise to push too much from himself, and even as he attempted to do so, he could feel some of the power starting to fight him.

"A mistake," Thea said.

“No,” he growled. But even as he spoke, he didn’t know if it was a mistake.

His power bloomed around him, but the energy that he was pushing somehow pushed back.

It clashed with itself.

Thea smiled. “So young. So inexperienced. And so touched.” She said the last with a hint of malice, and it left Lan trembling.

Touched.

He was god-touched.

But he was touched by O dian.

The power connected to Lan was older than that of the new gods.

He had no idea what that meant for him, and he had no idea who O dian was, but wasn’t he a warrior?

That was something that the Heart of the Grove had suggested to him, that he needed to serve as a soldier in order to find peace.

But O dian wasn’t a soldier.

He served as justice.

Lan held his sword.

It was the sword that he had made.

It was filled with power. He could feel the power within it. He could feel the way that he had curved the blade. He could remember the way that Darish had adjusted the angle of the blade, the power within it, and he could still feel how he had shaped the metal. He had put some part of himself into it. And Lan knew what he needed to do now.

He pushed through the blade.

Rather than pushing power out, he pushed the metal out.

It started to expand.

Thea tried to fight, and he saw her greenish power starting to eat away at the light glowing on the blade, but that wasn't what Lan was trying to use.

Instead, he used his connection to the blade—his weapon—and sent the metal forward. With another burst, he pushed more, and then he lunged, driving the elongated blade into Thea and then sweeping it up. She cried out, and then the dark energy within her faded, collapsing down into nothing.

He withdrew his blade, drawing his power back in, and as he did, he found out how easy it was to do so.

Thea was down.

But this wasn't over. There were still hundreds upon hundreds of monsters.

And not nearly enough thisten.

Lan hoped that he could be enough.

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CHAPTER 40

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SOPHIE

Sophie wanted to help her brother, especially as she had seen him darting toward Thea, but she knew now wasn't the time. The thisten were pushing back these strange monsters. She could feel the energy coming from them, and it was a strange sort of energy. The entire plain on which the tower sat was awash with these terrifying monsters and thisten, and there were also the Taihg who had somehow survived to continue fighting, Sophie, and her brother.

But they weren't the only ones fighting.

Somewhere nearby, Sophie could feel Ridaln and his magic.

It was a steady tapping, a rhythmic movement of energy, which she had become familiar with when she had been in the palace in Neylash all those years ago. He still hadn't managed to visualize his magic, but Sophie thought that he should be able to, as she had given him as much advice as he needed.

The tapping suddenly stopped.

Sophie's heart hammered.

She looked over at Lan, who was facing off against Thea, but he had a few thisten around him. Lan was fine.

But Ridaln...

Ridaln was dealing with something worse.

Darius, she suspected.

She raced toward what she had felt of Ridaln's power, and she found him down on his knees, unable to move. Five sorcerers surrounded him. And behind those five sorcerers was Darius.

Sophie reacted.

She hated using her magic like this, but what choice did she have?

She looped the band of power that she had started to embrace, and flames circled Ridaln quickly, catching the five sorcerers. Then she whipped the band back, pulling it with a surge of energy, and all five sorcerers suddenly fell.

She spun, sending the same power outward, hoping to catch Darius with it. If she could catch him, she could end this now.

He merely absorbed the power.

The flames crackled, drawn into his hand, and then, with a flick of his finger, he sent the power back at her.

Sophie barely had an opportunity to react, and she sent the prayer pose outward, using it to brace herself and avoid the sudden attack—her own magic used against her. She could feel the energy rolling over her, and...

And she was thrown back.

Ridaln cried out, and she felt his magic pick up again. There was the steady tapping, the rhythm of his magic, and he pushed against Darius. Sophie managed to get up to see that Ridaln stood apart from Darius, but he wasn't strong enough.

Maybe she could help.

The monsters had been pushed away from them, so she didn't have to battle them, and somewhere distantly she was aware of the Taihg fighting, but what could Sophie do?

A burst of greenish energy struck Darius.

It gave Sophie and Ridaln a break.

Sophie raced toward Ridaln.

“Sophie?” Ridaln asked.

“We need to move,” she said.

“I thought...”

“I know what you thought,” she said. “The god stone isn’t enough. At least, not one. I have a feeling that he has quite a few, and we need to keep moving, because I suspect he will continue to use them upon us, so we need help.”

She looked around. They were isolated from the rest of the fighting. Darius was the only sorcerer nearby, which Sophie found strange, until she realized that one of the Karell that had traveled with them from the previous ruins was off fighting with one sorcerer, as was another. There was no sign of Oleda, but Sophie suspected that she was back with the Raven Queen.

The Raven Queen.

They needed her.

She was strong enough, wasn’t she?

She had Parvella’s power, which meant that she was now some sort of god. If they could get to her...

She grabbed Ridaln, dragging him. When she felt a buildup of power behind her, she immediately tried to form the prayer pose again, but the power slammed into her, sending her staggering forward, and she nearly lost the pose. Thankfully, Sophie had been holding it as a mental pose, but she worried that it wasn’t going to be enough.

She reached the wall surrounding the tower. At the boundary of the Palace of the Guardians, Sophie worried that there wasn’t going to be enough power here.

And as soon as she reached it, she began to question whether this was a mistake. If they let Darius get too close, there was a very real possibility that he would use his power to destroy this place.

Flames began to crackle, rolling toward Sophie. They were orange and black and green and purple, the colors sickening to her. More concerning, though, was the fact that she could not overpower them. She attempted to use several poses, to fight

through them, to suffocate the flames, but anything that she tried faded without effect.

Ridaln gave her a shove, and she fell through a gap in the wall.

It was just in time. Flames crackled toward the wall. Ridaln stood up, spread his hands outward, and pushed.

It shouldn't have worked. It wasn't any sort of pose, but somehow it pushed the flames away.

He glanced over at Sophie, grinning at her. "I did it. I held it. I managed—"

Ridaln was thrown back. He landed horribly, his head cracking against a stone.

Sophie didn't want to look. She worried about what had happened to him, but maybe he wasn't dead.

In the gap in the stones, Darius strode toward her.

Sophie tried to fill the gap, to pour more of her magic out at him, thinking about which pose might be effective. She attempted flames, but those had been deflected by him before, and then she tried the prayer pose, as that was the easiest one for her to hold, but she knew that wasn't going to be enough, and she knew that she didn't have the necessary strength to withstand anything that Darius could send at her.

He stood in the gap.

"This is the prize," he declared, "though not the last. Surprisingly, not the last. But now that I have this, I should have little difficulty finding the rest of them."

"Why?" Sophie asked.

"Why? Because the power that they give must be taken. And I will take it. I will choose who else gets the power. Not some god that has not set foot on the earth in generations. I will make that choice."

Sophie tried a different pose, but it didn't work. She pushed power out, and each time she did, she felt Darius practically swallowing her power.

He grinned at her. “You really do have potential. I am surprised that he,” he said, nodding toward where Ridaln was lying motionless, “managed to see it in you.”

“He saw it, but she taught me.”

“Oh, that is right, the Raven Queen,” he said, her name a sneer. “One who chased the power of the gods, who believed that she could ascend the way that others have ascended.”

It was more than the Raven Queen who’d taught her, but Sophie wasn’t going to tell him that. “You’re wrong.”

“Am I? Look at her,” he said, and pointed.

Sophie turned, looking over her shoulder. She still held her prayer pose, creating a rim of power, though she feared that it wasn’t going to be strong enough. Still, as she held it, she could feel something. It was powerful, but it came from the Raven Queen.

Sophie saw her gripping the god stones. She had no idea how many stones the Raven Queen had, but she suspected that she had Parvella’s stone, along with whatever else Lan had given her. How many could she have?

“She clings to that power. And yet she thinks that her paltry few stones will be enough.”

“You don’t know what she wants,” Sophie said.

“She wants the same thing that I want,” Darius said. “And yet she thought to wait, to draw the power to her, staying in her realm because she thought that she could serve it, the way that others have served, and in doing so, she could gain the power of that realm and—”

Sophie sent a burst of power at him.

She wanted nothing more than to quiet him, to give herself a chance to think.

Darius managed to catch the pose power.

He had done that before, sweeping it toward himself, as if he could handle anything that she sent his way.

But it was because Sophie was using standard poses, wasn't it?

What had Parvella told her?

She had to find her own power. She had to find her own pose.

Sophie didn't have an opportunity to do that. Darius sent some strange looping of power that sent the earth slamming toward the Raven Queen, pinning her to the wall of the tower.

He grinned at her. "Did you think I wouldn't know your tricks? Did you think that I wouldn't have anticipated that you had taken some power and thought that you were strong enough to handle it? Did you think that you could overpower me?"

He strode toward her, and Sophie was surprised, especially because the Raven Queen did not even fight. Sophie could feel something within her, and it seemed the Raven Queen accepted her fate.

Was she sacrificing herself?

No. She couldn't do that. That couldn't happen, because the Raven Queen had just returned to them.

But she was also weakened.

Why would she have been so willing to come out here, knowing that she didn't have the strength to handle this?

Sophie tried not to think about that, tried not to think about just what the Raven Queen was willing to do, the sacrifice that she was willing to make. Nevarn had believed that his mother would be able to handle this and that she was not in any danger.

And Sophie was going to be the reason that his mother fell.

She lunged toward Darius.

She couldn't reach him, though.

Sophie tried, but when she neared, he used some invisible band of power to keep her from him. He glanced over at her, seemingly dismissing her as a threat entirely.

And she was not a threat to him.

He took another step toward the Raven Queen. “I will take these stones. I will take more as I finish with this place, and other places like this. And then I will be the one who chooses.”

“Who would you choose?” the Raven Queen asked. “You would give your lackeys power? Power they cannot control, power they have not worked to understand.”

“I would choose,” Darius said.

“There is a reason that the old gods make that choice,” the Raven Queen said. “It is because they see what you cannot.”

“They have not walked this land in—”

The ground rumbled. Darius staggered back.

Sophie hadn’t seen anything from the Raven Queen, but she wouldn’t have needed to. The Raven Queen was powerful in her own right. And she had god stones.

Darius snarled, and then the earth that he was controlling looped up and around the Raven Queen. It buried her.

Sophie cried out.

Darius turned to her. “And you. One who has proven to be far too troublesome. You will no longer cause me any difficulty.”

He started to push the earth at her, and Sophie began to hold the prayer pose, but it wasn’t going to be enough. She could already feel that it wasn’t enough. She was drawing on power, trying to summon something, but she could feel some part of her power, some part of what she could draw, flickering and fading, to the point where there was very little remaining. Sophie wanted to do something, but what was there for her to do?

Strangely, though, she felt another source of energy nearby.

Sophie wasn’t sure what it was, but it seemed to tremble and react with her. At first she thought maybe it was Lan, as

what she felt reminded her of when she and her brother combined their power. Unlike her brother, though, this felt close, and potent.

And she was reminded of what Parvella had told her.

There was one pose that she could use. One pose that was powerful. One pose that was dangerous.

And Parvella had been surprised that Sophie had been able to use it.

Why?

Because Sophie was god-touched.

She suspected that Darius must be god-touched as well. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to access sorcery or use the god stones, but was he truly connected to the gods the way that Sophie hoped that she was?

She moved, holding the prayer pose in her mind, and she pressed one fist down to the ground and held one up.

Darius smirked at her. "What did that old woman show you?"

"You will never understand," Sophie said.

And then she began to feel the power form.

It was a pose that she couldn't hold in her mind, but at this point, Sophie didn't think that she wanted to. It was a pose that she had to hold physically, a pose that she could feel within her, energy blooming, and it was a pose that filled her with power.

Then she felt something. It was a trembling.

It came from somewhere deep, somewhere close.

And she thought that she understood what it was. She thought that she understood where it was as well.

The tower.

The Palace of the Guardians.

That was what she was feeling. That was what she was tapping into.

Had Parvella drawn upon the power of a ruin, or a place of the gods, or had she drawn upon something else, something deeper?

It didn't matter.

Sophie felt an explosion of power. It was so overwhelming.

But what was she going to do with it?

She had to use it. She had to send it out. But she couldn't form another pose while she was holding this one.

Other than in her mind.

The only one that came to her easily was the prayer pose, but there was another one that she had been using lately, one that required her not only to hold it but to move it. Could she do that in her mind?

If she could, maybe Sophie could be the one to end Darius.

She had to try.

She formed a loop of energy in her mind, and then she pushed it outward.

Flames began to crackle, burning, and the band of fire was unlike anything that Sophie had ever seen before. It formed a massive, towering ring around Darius. He tried to tamp it down, but Sophie twisted her ring of power in her mind, and a ball of flame started to form. She continued to hold it. There was pressure against her, and for a moment, Sophie didn't know if she had enough strength to hold the power, but this place, and the power that was here, gifted her the strength.

And as she drew on it, she could feel she was connected to something greater and deeper than she had ever experienced before. She understood why Parvella had warned her that this pose was dangerous, because she would want to draw upon this power indefinitely.

But it was also draining. Sophie could feel it starting to work through her, much like she could feel the way the power was stretching, filling her, and making it so that all she wanted was to hold it.

But she didn't need to hold it. She could squeeze it down.

And so she did.

The ball of flame continued to squeeze, constricting, burning brighter and brighter. The resistance to her ball of flame began to fade. Sophie squeezed one more time, and all of that resistance died. The light exploded, like the sun flashing out of existence, and she blinked.

For a moment, she feared that Darius would still be standing across from her.

There was no sign of him.

She nearly staggered but knew that she couldn't give in.

The Raven Queen needed her.

She didn't know any poses that could move earth like Darius had.

But maybe she didn't need to.

She pushed at the earth, pushed at the tower, using nothing more than the prayer pose. It was basic. Basic was strong.

She felt the tower tremble again, power crumbling within it.

Then the earth fell away.

The Raven Queen was still there. And surprisingly, she seemed unharmed.

She stepped forward. She smiled at Sophie, then paused in the middle of the burned section that surrounded where Darius had stood. She crouched down, grabbed several items off the ground, then made her way toward Sophie.

"Here," she said, handing something to Sophie.

She took it. It was a fistful of stones. More than Sophie could easily count. She had to cup her hands together to hold them.

"What are these? God stones?"

"Yes," the Raven Queen said with a smile. "I will keep Parvella's stone, but you should keep the rest."

“I don’t understand.”

“No,” the Raven Queen said. “I see that you don’t, but I see that you will.” She turned, looking toward the gap in the wall. “Now. How about the two of us end this fight?”

Sophie licked her lips. She wasn’t sure if she had any strength left, though she wondered if she could still draw upon the Palace of the Guardians. She didn’t know if it would be possible, or if it was something that she even wanted to do.

When she joined the Raven Queen at the wall, she realized that it didn’t matter. Lan and the others had taken care of the creatures.

The fight was done.

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CHAPTER 41

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Lan looked at the outside of the building. It wasn't at all what he had expected, as he had expected Sophie to be in a much nicer place than this, but he had been gone from Hester for quite a while, making a sweep of the land with the rest of the Taihg—and the remaining Lorantian soldiers—to ensure that any remaining resistance was removed. They had found a few pockets of dangerous sorcery, but nothing that he couldn't handle.

He had been tempted to see if Sophie would come with him, but the Raven Queen had made it clear that she did not need to go. Lan wanted to object, but this was the Raven Queen, and a part of him questioned whether she was now something greater than just the Raven Queen.

It had been a month since the battle with Darius, and he was tired. He had made a point of bathing before coming to see his sister, thankful that the barracks had been mostly empty when he had returned. Jalyn had taunted him about how he still smelled after he climbed out of the bath, and that he was a proper Taihg soldier because of that, but he was at least as clean as he could make himself.

For some reason, he found himself nervous.

Why should he be?

“Are you going in?” Jalyn asked.

Lan looked over. Her red hair was pulled back, tied behind her in a braid, and she was dressed in a clean Taihg uniform. The blade sheathed at her side was the one that Darish had

given Lan, and the blade sheathed at his side was the one that he had made for himself. The strange modifications had become easier to control the more he had fought. And now if he had to deal with another unruly Karell, it would be even easier.

Much like it had been easier for him to handle the strange creatures they had encountered.

It had surprised him, but the thisten had disappeared.

Perhaps it shouldn't have.

Now that he understood that they were some sort of bridge to power, he realized they must have been summoned at some point by the Heart of the Grove or by Darish, and then they had become corrupted by Thea using her Shavln power. He still didn't understand that power, but the Raven Queen had claimed that her understanding of the Shavln was that it was some corrupt form of power that had been created to destroy the gods.

"I'm still trying to decide what to do," he said.

Jalyn chuckled. "It's been a few weeks. Your sister has been back here for that time, while you have continued to patrol, so I think that you should just get this over with. At least you've taken a bath, but I'd like to relax a little bit."

Lan arched a brow at her. "I'm not doing anything that's keeping you from relaxing."

"Oh, I realize that you aren't," she said. "And to be honest, I don't really know what I'm going to do. We have peace with Lorant unlike any we've ever had. I don't know what to do with that."

"It's a bit more than just peace," Lan said.

They had taken to training together.

Magnus had volunteered to lead the training, as there weren't as many Taihg remaining following the attack. Lan had been surprised that Dannith—the Lorantian king—had wanted to ensure that the training was done according to the Raven Queen's wishes. But maybe he shouldn't have been

surprised. Considering that Lan did not know what to make of the Raven Queen any longer, it was possible that Dannith felt the same way as Lan.

“I’m sure we can still find some trouble,” Lan said.

“Well, you are the one god-touched.”

He snorted. “I think we are all god-touched.”

Jalyn tapped her chest. “Perhaps, but I think I’m touched by the new gods, whereas you and your sister are touched by the old gods. At least, that’s how I have come to understand it.” She shrugged. “Not that I can really make much sense of it. The Karell don’t know how to explain it, either.”

“Oh, I’m quite sure that they would be happy to explain it if we were willing to stay with them.”

Jalyn wrinkled her nose. “Can you imagine? They would just force us to sit while they told us stories.”

“You don’t like stories?”

“Occasionally, but not like they want to tell. I never knew how boring some of those stories could be.”

Lan laughed. In the days after the battle, they had sat on the battlefield, near the base of the tower, while they recuperated. The Raven Queen had needed time to grow stronger. It wasn’t just her, though, as Sophie had needed time to recover, though Lan still didn’t know just what she had done. Oleda had taken time to share stories with them about gods and their power, in ways that made Lan long for his nana’s stories.

Sophie, being Sophie, had no difficulty with it and had seemingly been thrilled to sit and listen.

“I think I’m ready,” Lan said.

“It took you long enough,” Jalyn said with a laugh.

He took another deep breath and pulled open the door.

On the outside, the building didn’t look like much. It was situated in a rough part of Hester, and he was surprised that his sister had chosen to come here. But on the inside...

The inside changed everything. He understood why Sophie would come here. His mouth watered immediately, and the smells reminded him of Nana, but it reminded him of the time before that as well. It was almost as if he could remember his childhood before they had lost their parents.

He stood in the doorway for a few moments, breathing.

“Get in and close the door, or head out and close the door. I don’t care which it is.” The voice from behind the counter seemed annoyed.

Lan stepped inside and was followed by Jalyn. He headed over to the counter, where he saw a chalkboard with various options on it.

“What do you want?” The woman looked up at him, frowning. “Don’t get too many soldiers in here. Taihg?”

Lan frowned. “How did you know?”

“You have that look about you. Besides, she’s got a uniform on. Well, I suppose you do, too. And you feel like something.”

“What do you mean, I feel like something?” Lan asked.

He found himself smiling at this woman, wondering who she was and imagining his sister having a good time with somebody like this.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter.”

He thought about telling her that it probably did matter, but he decided not to. Instead, he flashed his most charming smile—at least, as well as he could—and leaned forward. “I’m looking for someone.”

“I thought you brought someone here.”

“Not her,” Lan said, glancing over at Jalyn.

“No? I imagine quite a few men would wish that they were with her.”

Lan resisted the urge to look behind him, though he could feel heat rising in his cheeks. There were plenty of people who would want an opportunity with Jalyn.

“I’m looking for my sister,” he said.

“Ah, well that’s a different matter. Don’t know if I know your sister.”

“I was told that she might be found here. Sophie Varison?”

The woman frowned. She turned and headed away from him, through a door behind the counter, which sent more smells drifting out into the room.

Lan looked over at Jalyn. “That was strange. I mean, it’s not just me that thought that seemed strange, right?”

“Definitely strange,” Jalyn said. “But again, if this is a place your sister frequents, I expect we will get some strangeness.”

The woman came out moments later, carrying a baking sheet filled with different types of pastries. Some of them were frosted, some covered with chocolate, and others looked to be baked with cinnamon and sugar. They smelled amazing.

“Over by the fire. Take this to her. She’s going to be plenty upset if you don’t bring her a treat. I was supposed to get over there sooner but got a little busy, and…” The woman shrugged.

Lan took the tray and found it unpleasantly warm, and he carried it toward the fire.

He hadn’t even realized, but his sister had been there all along. She was seated with her back to him, so when he brought the pastries over, setting the tray down on the table, Sophie nodded and waved a hand.

“Thanks, Bryn.”

“I’m guessing that Bryn is the woman behind the counter,” Lan said, glancing over before nodding to his sister. “But I’m not her.”

Sophie jumped to her feet, and she lunged toward him, wrapping her arms around him. “Lan! You’re back? And Jalyn.” She grinned, stepping back, and plucked one of the cinnamon-and-sugar pastries off the tray, then took a bite. “Was there anything out there?”

Lan shook his head. “Nothing that I saw. Nothing that you needed to deal with. At least, not that I would say.”

“That sounds pretty vague,” she said.

“I suppose it does.” Lan realized that Sophie hadn’t been sitting alone. Nevarn was in a chair next to the hearth as well. Lan tipped his head in a nod, then leaned forward. He supposed that he shouldn’t be terribly surprised that his sister was sitting with Nevarn, as the man had certainly been attentive to her on the journey. And now...

Now Lan wasn’t sure what to say, or how to feel, but he was no longer angry with Nevarn, though maybe he never had been.

“Sit,” she said, pointing to a chair by the hearth.

Jalyn grabbed a pastry, then took a seat.

Lan was a little slower, but when he did take a seat, he let out a long sigh.

It was nice being reunited with his sister. It was nice for him to feel like things were settled, even if it was only for a little while. The threat of sorcery, and the threat of the Shavln, whatever that might be, was over. For now. He had no idea what he would do other than continue to train, to serve as a Taihg, and to try to understand what his connection to O dian meant.

“It’s been so busy here,” Sophie said, waving a hand as she took another bite. “What with Ridaln staying with us so that he can learn how to use sorcery a little more effectively. Well, first he had to heal, but now I am teaching him.” She chuckled. “It feels a little strange.”

“I’m sure it does.”

“And you,” she said. “I understand you are now training soldiers in Lorant.”

“Not yet,” he said. “But maybe eventually. Magnus is doing it now.”

“Oh,” Sophie said. “When you go, I might go with you. I’d like to see Dannith, and I’d like to visit Oleda.”

“Did she go back with him?”

“Not to serve in the kitchen,” Sophie said, looking behind her, “though maybe she should have. She did make the best pastries. But she went back to help Dannith. And she went to serve as the guardian of Lorant, whatever that means to the Karell.” She shrugged.

Lan smiled. It was nice seeing his sister like this again. She had lost some of the seriousness that she had taken on during their journey.

And more than that, he could feel the power emanating from her. It was considerable.

Not that he was surprised by that, as his sister had been skilled even before they had left Hester.

“It’s nice to see you,” Sophie said. “I was worried about you. But I knew I didn’t need to worry that much. You were too powerful not to survive.”

“I don’t think that’s how things work,” he said.

“That’s how it works in all the stories, Lan,” Sophie said. “Weren’t you paying attention?”

He took a bite of his own pastry, chewing slowly. It really did taste wonderful. He sighed. It was good to be here with his sister.

“I was always paying attention,” he said softly, “because I liked stories just as much as you did.”

“You did not,” Sophie said. “And don’t even pretend you did. But it doesn’t matter. I like them enough for both of us.”

“You know who else likes stories?” Lan asked. He glanced over at Jalyn. “She does. Why don’t you tell her the one about the Pale Princess?”

Sophie grinned. “Oh, I’d like to tell that one. That’s one of my favorites.”

“I don’t need to hear any stories,” Jalyn said.

“I could tell you another one, then. It doesn’t feature the Pale Princess—or at least, what others think of as the Pale

Princess. It's a story of sorcery and swordsmanship, and a story of the gods."

"I'm not so sure that I need to hear that story, either," Jalyn said.

"Why?" Sophie asked, grinning as she looked at her brother. "You don't want to hear our story?"



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Their fates remain intertwined, and together they defend the combined kingdoms. This time, the coming threat may be more than even they can overpower.

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All my best,

D.K. Holmberg

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