

Protector of Tranquility

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The woman ran for her life.

Whispers ran with the woman, tracking her. The small child swathed in a loose cloth, cried in the woman's arms. The woman held the bundle with the desperation of a mother trying to save her child.

The blackness, a formless mass, continually detached an inky hand that tried to take the child from the mother as she ran. Continually, the black mists reached for the child, but each time they got close a blinding white light erupted from the small bundle, making the black apparition screech. A horrible wail shivered the air.

In a sudden burst of renewed energy the woman jumped from the ground to one of the low hanging tree branches. The tree stretched its great branch down to her, welcoming her presence on its bark. Immediately the woman started to leap from branch to branch at a speed would kill her if she fell. The blackness howled and continued to follow the woman and child through the trees, never slowing down.

Despite the woman's efforts, the black malice grew in power. The black nucleus seemed to be pulling dark traces of its power. Before the woman had travelled far, the malice behind her had grown four times as big. The woman shot a quick glance behind her and instead of showing fear, an unnamed emotion filled her eyes. Suddenly a horn sounded in the distance. The black cloud came to an abrupt halt, hanging in the air. The woman never slowed, but instead quickened her pace, still

carrying the child. In the distance, five men waited at the bottom of the forest floor. They carried no banner and no weapons. They sat on fresh mounted war horses keeping their beasts calm despite the massive black cloud that hung a few yards away.

With a soft thump, the woman landed onto the ground from a branch twenty feet above. Without pause she dashed towards the men. One leaned down and took the child that she held up to him.

There were a few hurried whispered words, and then the men spun their horses and galloped away into the night with the woman's child.

Suddenly a piercing screech filled the quiet night. The woman whirled around and stood there, turning her back on her only means of escape. The black mists raced towards the woman. She stood confidently, silent as she stared death in the face. When the mass of evil was almost upon her, the woman tilted her head back and laughed as the darkness of the world, enveloped her.

I sat up with a jolt.

Frightened, I looked around my room. Through the window, the early morning light was just making its way into the sky. Pale rays of sunlight scattered themselves throughout my bed chamber, making it appear dismal and lonely. I took a shaky breath, held it for a moment, and then let it go. My bed covers were twisted around my legs and when I reached up to run my hand through my hair I found it beaded with sweat. Suddenly angry at myself for allowing a simple nightmare to scare me, I hurled myself out of bed only to trip on the edges of my sheets.

I started to head towards the window, when something caught my eye in the mirror. My hair a mess, my night gown crooked on my shoulders, and my eyes still contained the power of sleep. My gaze traveled down until I noticed the thin silver chain peeking out from underneath my gown. I reached down and pulled on the chain. I heard a slight humming start within my head when the metal touched my bare palm. Power traveled through my fingertips until my whole body shook with the overwhelming sensation of magic. I knew the feeling but had never felt so much power contained in my body at once. My room seemed to get brighter as my eyes became superior to those of any normal human's. The silky cloth covering my body suddenly seem coarse and rough as my sense of touch amplified. I smelled the sweet aroma of the incense I had burned last night even though several hours had passed since it had ceased burning.

My eyes returned to the thin silver chain that I held and the bright light that was emitting from it. With reverence I took out the rest of the silver from the folds of my night gown and noticed a faint light coming from the end of the chain. At the end of the chain was what anyone would consider a simple locket with the name, Saphron, engraved into it.

But to me it represented my past, my present, and my future.

Chapter 1

One, two, three; thrust, jump, turn.

One, two, three; cut, pivot, slash.

One, two, three; dodge, feint, strike, Dead.

I finished the tora with a flourish, taking delight in the natural feel of the movements on my tired body. I had spent last night patrolling the perimeter of the Brotherhood school to make sure nothing unexpected happened in the night. With the new reports of the war moving closer to the Brotherhood, I was making sure the mention of war stayed out of the school's protected atmosphere.

I slid my sword back into its leather sheath on my back and plaited my dark hair into a loose braid that fell down to my lower back. I gazed up at the sun from the open roof of the arena to estimate the time, and was surprised to know that I had spent three hours doing toras. I looked around the field and noticed that twenty or more students were starting practice now that the hour wasn't outrageously early.

I bent down to start picking up my scattered practice equipment when I noticed a figure moving across the practice fields out of the corner of my eye. I couldn't quite make out the definition of the figure but could tell who it was by the behavior of the other young and old mercenaries as they hurriedly stepped out of the way for the black shape. I knew that my infamous black Ustani leopard was taking great delight in the fact that everyone was stopping their toras in order to make room for her "royal" passage. Or so she thought. It was an old argument of ours that I didn't believe would ever be resolved. Irene thought that her natural beauty and command of attention was the reason everyone made a path for her special presence. I suspected that the students knew that Irene was known to be one of the most dangerous predators in the world. That information would certainly be enough to convince people to get out of Irene's way. But Irene refused to accept this. I suppressed a groan. She always had to make a grand entrance to draw attention to herself.

As I waited for Irene to finish making her debut, I packed my bow, arrows, weights, and other equipment into my shoulder bag. I swung the heavy pack over my shoulder, and turned around to find Irene innocently staring at me. I regarded her with contempt but made no comment. Deciding not to make a scene in front of thirty or more Brotherhood students, I walked past Irene and headed to the stairs that lead off the elevated practice fields. Irene followed. When we were out of ear shot of the other students, I swung to face the leopard.

"Are you expecting applause, Irene?"

"No. Why?"

I huffed at her exclamation of innocence and continued to descend. I heard soft footfalls and knew Irene followed. I pretended to be angry at her, but inside I secretly laughed at the reaction my leopard produced in people. What did they think she would do? Eat them? Just because her species could be listed as the number one most dangerous animal in the three lands didn't mean that they were only capable of destruction. If that were true, then I would have been dead years ago. I chuckled audibly so Irene could understand that I forgave her and we could move on. It became a too much of an effort to stay made at her for long.

We both walked down the quiet dark stone hallway that led to our private rooms in companionable silence. I breathed in the sweet smell of early morning air and savored the sound of birds chirping to their young. I didn't pass many people on my way through the halls because of the early hour. The sun had barely crested the horizon but I always awakened before it. Watching the wildlife awaken to the sun's first morning light.

Every mercenary had their own set of rooms based on their level and achievements. Pages were housed on the first floor, Juniors the second, and so on until the highest level, Masters on the fifth floor. This was the floor that I headed towards. As I rounded the corner that led into the east wing where the private chambers were, I noticed a group of Juniors huddled against the left side of the hallway. Irene and I weren't on the ground floor of the school and therefore could tell that the boys were engrossed with whatever interested them below. All of the hallways on the upper floors had open windows that looked out onto the spacious courtyards, gardens, and practice fields. The fields weren't sectioned off by level because the retired

Masters believed that the younger students could learn more by watching their superiors. I believed it distracted everyone, as the Juniors demonstrated now.

The group of adolescents hung out of one of the many windows in the east hallway. They hadn't noticed me, so I continued to silently walk up to them until only a few feet separated us and could I could hear their excited whispers. I came up behind the excited little group and hung my head out the window exactly like they did. Not one of the boys noticed my looming presence behind them and I desperately had to suppress a giggle of laughter. Irene stayed quiet so I knew she wanted to see the reactions of the boys when they noticed a Master had quietly joined their group. When I tapped the eldest on his shoulder, he immediately jumped and spun around to see who had caught him. When he saw my face, his astonished face paled. Little did he know that he had just revealed to me whether or not he and his little group had really misbehaved.

"What are you doing?"

I kept my tone soft so as not to frighten them out of their wits. The whole group of boys now had their undivided attention on me instead of the two professors down below. One of the younger ones answered me before the others registered that they had been caught. The boy's big blue eyes stared up at me with reverence.

"We was trying to figure if we was being moved, Master Saphron, miss."

I couldn't help but smile at the boy's southern accent. The professors will force the poor boy to grow out of his cute

habits and make him into a strong adolescent. But despite his incorrect grammar, I understood what the boy meant when he said 'move'. Every year there were trials held for each class. Retired Masters judged who they thought skilled enough to move to the next level. It appeared these boys were trying to eavesdrop on their teachers to see if they were going to be moved.

"Isn't that supposed to be kept secret until the lists are posted?"

The whole group of children noticeably cringed by the tone of my voice. I hadn't meant my comment to sound so rough but they couldn't get by with their misbehavior. I really wanted to tell them helpful clues on eavesdropping that I had learned as a child but then the teachers would catch wind of it and I didn't want to deal with the problems that situation would cause. But if I threatened them enough so they would be terrified to even think of my words, then maybe I could get away with helping them.

I would only threaten them a little, not enough to send them screaming down the hallways, but enough to ensure their loyalty to secrecy. Although it didn't help at all to have Irene next to my side. I kept catching several of the young boys glancing at Irene with naked fear in their eyes. Irene and I had that affect on the younger students. Even some of my peers treated me with admiration and Irene with open reverence.

While keeping my gaze on the miscreants who I could tell were desperately trying to find a convenient excuse to leave, I turned my head to the right. I caught the faint sound of footsteps on the stairwell. I also caught a faint swishing sound

of a robe on the stone steps and I grimaced in annoyance. I brought my attention back to the boys and lowered my voice to a whisper.

"All right, I need to get going. If you want to find out if you've been moved, eavesdrop on Master Vinceel. He will talk endlessly to the retired Masters about his class and who he believes deserves to be moved. Only send one or two people to listen on either side of his study door. Don't travel in groups. Now, if you relay this information to anyone, I can assure you that Irene here would love to know your room numbers and visit you from time to time."

With their spines ramrod straight and a determined look on their faces, the group of boys saluted sharply. I nodded my approval and turned to leave the little gossiping huddle when I noticed professor Briggum heading towards me. I pretended not to notice his wave of acknowledgement and started to walk down the now brightly lit hallway in the opposite direction. I heard the group of boys and the professor exchange greetings not too far behind me.

Subtly, I quickened my pace. Irene glided into a loping trot besides me. She didn't ask me why we were trying to avoid the professor. Irene knew that I hated the professor's nagging "scientific" questions about my abilities. The stairs that led to the next floor were only a few feet away when I heard Briggum shout my name across the hall so that everyone within a mile's radius could hear him. I stopped. It appeared that I could no longer escape Briggum if I didn't want the whole Brotherhood involved. He only yelled when one of his "experiments" became scientific law or when he wanted someone's attention. Irene and

I turned around and waited for Briggum to reach us. I did not meet him half way to make him realize that I didn't want to be disturbed from my regular morning routine. The professor shuffled over to where I stood and bent over to rest his hands on his knees. I hadn't thought I walked that fast, but to an old professor I guess I did. After taking a deep breath the old scholar regarded me with a mix of humor and anger; his normal expression when looking at me. He didn't like to consider himself old even though he could be my grandfather.

"Mistress Saphron Swordmaster."

He held up his hand and once more leaned over to place his hand on the wall to catch his breath. I waited.

"Professor Briggum, stop pretending you're going to faint. I can tell you're faking it."

A bark of laughter escaped the man and he quickly discarded his act of old age and fatigue. He looked at me again with his big wise brown eyes and chuckled.

"Ah, what happened to the days when I could fool you? Do you remember the time when I used this same ploy and you ran to get the nurse, the hospice doctor, and chief Master Yulum?"

"I'm afraid I don't, professor Briggum."

"Oh what a shame. I don't think I've laughed nearly as hard as I did that day. Now enough of games, I have some urgent news for you, Saphron."

I sighed. There used to be a time when professor Briggum's games amused me but not anymore. Responsibility had settled its weight on my shoulders and didn't allow childish games to

dismount it. Briggum's "news" was either deadly serious or comical. I judged from his greeting that the news was going to be today's horrifying lunch plan or the new prank being played on the librarian. I crossed my arms and sat in my hip, showing Briggum that I needed to get going with my body language. Irene sat on her haunches, her tail sweeping the floor, and waited for the urgent "news". Professor Briggum took a deep breath and looked at me with grave seriousness.

"Saphron, you have been summoned by the king of Lydinya. The Council is waiting for you in the war chamber."

Irene rose from her nonchalant crouch on the floor and started to growl deeply in her throat. The startled professor stepped away from the Ustani leopard. The hair on the back of my neck suddenly stood on end. I could feel blood drain out of my head. I clenched my hands into tight fists and shook with suppressed emotions. I had misjudged Briggum's news.

This was Briggum's way of delivering serious news.

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Irene pushed open the doors to the war room with her head. I followed. I looked around the room to see who was present. All the retired Masters and Masters on duty were there as well as a few outsiders I didn't recognize. I glanced at their uniforms.

Their breast plates depicted an eagle with a golden crown in its claws. The emblem of Lydinya.

The occupants of the room sat silently around a rectangular table that took up most of the room. Gigantic maps of various countries, oceans, and isles covered the walls. The only source of light came from a single window that overlooked the front entrance of the school. The air seemed soaked with apprehension as I walked down the rows of seated Masters. None of them spoke. They watched Irene and her every movement. Four years had passed since Irene's arrival to the Brotherhood, and the Masters still hadn't gotten used to her presence. They tolerated her and gave me permission to keep her only because there hadn't been any incidents within the building.

I took my seat at the head of the table. Briggums has said that I was the person summoned so it was my right to be at the head. Irene settled herself next to my chair. I reached over my armrest to pet her head. I kept my hand there for assurance as I opened my mouth to speak.

"Why have I been summoned?"

My voice seemed to snap everyone out of their trance. There was the shuffling of papers, scraping of chairs, and mumbling before any of them answered my question. I waited patiently as one of the teacher Masters stood up from his position directly to my left.

"Mistress Saphron Swordmaster. You have been summoned by the king of Lydinya. His squire will now give you the details. The Council has already made its decision but we would like to hear what--- you think about it."

The Master sat back down. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the squire make his way from the back of the room until he stood directly in front of my line of vision. It remained quiet until the squire started to speak in a rehearsed and precise voice.

"To Mistress Saphron Swordmaster, from his majesty King Tivoll of Lydinya."

Before the squire could continue with his elegant--and I imagined long--speech I held up my hand to silence him. By reading the surprised anger in his eyes I could tell he disliked being interrupted. I smiled sweetly. Personally I didn't understand what aristocrats considered rude and didn't particularly care if they considered me to be an undignified female. In the Brotherhood people were judged by their skill not by their gender. I paused. An unbidden memory came to my mind contradicting the statement that I had just made.

When I had been a student at the Brotherhood I had had to fight for equality just because the Brotherhood had never had a female student before me. Most of the Masters had grudgingly accepted me, but the students were the real problem. I had spent endless tiring days practicing, only go home to my rooms and be quick and alert for all of the pranks laid for me. My rooms had been the main prank house for the other boys in my class. King among them had been Kelvin, the one person on this whole island who couldn't infuriate me more.

"Excuse me Swordmaster, but did you wish to say something to me?"

The squire's voice broke through my thoughts and I dragged myself back into the war chamber. I was being summoned by the king himself and I couldn't focus for five minutes. I realized that my mouth had turned into scowl from the mere thought of Kelvin. That was probably what had the squire so worried.

"Yes, I just wanted to tell you that you don't have to go through all of the fluff in your speech. Just get to the point and I think more than one of us in here will thank you. Court speeches can be quite -- long."

Shocked faces slowly turned towards me from both sides of the table. I glanced at Irene by my feet and she gave me a sympathetic glance then went back to grooming herself. I guessed that I had just done something rude. The Masters of the school could be hard headed, blunt, and particularly mean when their opinions were contradicted, but when it came to diplomacy and manners they were a bunch of philosophers that would willingly argue for hours on a single subject. But I didn't want to be stuck in the war chamber when I could be practicing or scouting for trespassers. With a sigh I turned back to the squire and put on a happy smile that I really wasn't feeling.

"His majesty prepared this speech especially for you Saphron Swordmaster. It would please him if his word could be expressed to you. But maybe I could shorten the speech if it pleases you, Lady Saphron."

"I'm sorry if I offend you or your king, Imperial squire, but it would please me if the speech were shortened. The sooner I know what my quest is the faster I can decide if the king's special request is worth my time."

I said it lightly but I put an undertone of forcefulness in my voice. I would listen to the squire and even listen to the king's offer but only if it interested me. I worried more about the protection of the school than the king's personal troubles. If he had sent another request to join the war, then I would send another refusal. I didn't want to have anything to do with a war that killed innocent animals and civilians.

"I will continue then, but get to the heart of the matter like Mistress Saphron Swordmaster ordered. As you all know, the war between Lydinya and Zithoania is getting out of control quickly. Before long the king estimates that Zithoania's army will successfully make it across the ocean to the Mercy Isles. We are warning you. The Zithoanians will be at your front doorstep by early winter this year."

Cries of outrage and denial rang through the chamber as angry Masters flew from their chairs. Many of the retired mercenaries reached their hands towards the short daggers that habit forbade them to discard. I felt my own hand starting to reach towards the table in order to grab the long sword that I had removed from my back, but I forced the impulse down. The noise woke Irene from her pleasant nap and she sat up, alert, by my right arm. I stayed in my chair and watched as the Masters of the Brotherhood school grabbed the imperial squire by the front of his shirt. When one of them went so far as to raise his fist, ready to strike the boy in the face, I gasped in surprise. I hadn't expected one simple comment to rally the anger of the Council so quickly. I swiftly stood up from my chair and amplified my voice to carry through the room.

"Stop! You will not harm the messenger. He is only carrying his master's words."

The Masters looked at me with surprise. I had used one of the Brotherhood's lessons that they taught to the juveniles on purpose. I wanted them to see the folly and useless gusto of their rash actions. Men were easily roused into anger and never stopped to think about the benefits of acting calmly. The two Masters who had been holding the squire quickly let go of his shirt and returned to their seats. When all of the men were calmly waiting for the meeting to resume, I too sat down and nodded curtly to the nervous squire who nervously fixed his disarrayed uniform.

"As I was saying, the Zithoanian army will be at the Mercy Isles by early this winter. The king wishes for you to understand the gravity of our situation. We do not have the man power or a large enough army to stop them from invading further. We are pressed as it is with protecting our own border. The council of Lydinya has decided to ask the Brotherhood for its military support. The king understands your desire to remain neutral but in the risk of the destruction of your school he knows that you will put every effort in maintaining its welfare. The king has asked that Lady Saphron Swordmaster consider viewing Lydinya as a part of her beloved school and join the war effort of protecting—"

"Absolutely not. I will not participate in the war. The only thing a war accomplishes is destruction and poverty. Whatever your king asks I am afraid I cannot help him."

The room fell into an awkward silence. The Masters didn't know how to deal with my blunt and, I imagined, rude comments.

Most of the time they simply fell into mutterings about protocol and discipline, but I had learned to ignore them and they did the same. But this time one of the retired Masters whom I recognized from my Page days in the school slowly stood up on his boney knees. He looked at me with those same wise old eyes that I remembered penetrating me when I failed to meet his expectations in his literature class. I acknowledged him with a nod -- a little curious as to what he wanted to say -- that gave him permission to speak.

"Saphron, have you really turned into such a selfish child? Where is that little girl that wouldn't let anyone harm what belonged to her? The Mercy Isles are going to be attacked and you say no to helping them? What are you thinking?"

That was not what I was expecting. I stared at old Arunty and tried to come up with an answer before he thought I meant to ignore him. But no words or quick witted remarks came to my mouth. Not once in my life has someone called me selfish. I had had nothing growing up. No family, no money, no future. I had grown up alone, unwanted, and bullied. I had been forced to fight my way through the levels and had learned some of life's harshest lessons too early for my age. I had been described as being hard headed, blunt, and suspicious of everyone. I had suffered humility, defeat, loneliness, and now the Master standing before me was calling me selfish? I found myself utterly speechless.

"Why will you not fight for the greater cause, Saphron? The people praise and worship you and in return for their gratitude you will not fight for their homes and lives?"

A flash of anger simmered in the bottom of my stomach. I knew the feeling. I sometimes enjoyed the feelings and the emotions that came with it but at other times, it meant that my magic was enflamed. Old Arunty regarded me with solemn eyes. I stared back at him and let some of the magic that was itching to escape enter my blood stream. I felt the power envelope me and the feeling thrilled my senses. I was in total control and I thrived at the simplicity of it. I continued to stare at the man who had dared challenge my loyalty to the Brotherhood. I felt the braid at my back slowly unravel. Static electricity hummed through my body and made my hair stand on end. I once again rose from my chair and opened my mouth to answer Arunty's questions. The old man slowly dropped back into his chair and I gained the floor. It was deadly quiet and I could feel the tension of the Masters as they realized that I had released my magic. They gave me their undivided attention.

"How dare you call me selfish? I am refusing the summons because I would rather stay and help protect the borders of the school than protect those of a foreign land. How is it selfish to refuse an offer that could propel my career and gain the favor kings? Masters you accuse me of abandoning the people. Do you consider Commitment a virtue or a fault, Masters? I am committed to my people, my Brothers, and my country! I will protect them in a way that **I** think is most beneficial. And that way is not war."

I couldn't keep the passionate anger from entering my voice. The squire, unnoticed, stood in a corner off to the side of the room and regarded me with wonder. I gave him a quick glance but then turned away, seeing the fear in his eyes. Apparently this was his first time seeing magic unleashed. He

had relayed his information and now needed an answer to send back to his king. I opened my mouth to tell him my decision when I was again interrupted by old man Arunty.

"Lady Siphon, it is not your loyalty that is in question here. It is your view point on the situation. If you were to join the Lydinyian army, couldn't you stop the invading army before it even reached the Mercy Isles? Couldn't you lead squads of soldiers to defend villages from ruin instead of running off into the night and saving ten or so lives? Couldn't you do more by joining the army instead of trying to do it on your own like you always do? You need help Saphron."

"I believe the squire specifically explained that the army has already arrived and will be here by winter." My voice slightly laced with sarcasm.

"Yes but you could stall it or even defeat it. Force the army to retreat back to Zithoanian borders. I would not put it past you, Saphron. I don't think any of us would."

His reasoning made me hesitate. If I really could defeat the army, then the war would be over, and many of lives would be saved. Not to mention the safety of the Brotherhood secured. The stubborn part of me wanted to deny that Arunty was making sense but the other half of me realized that the old man was correct. If joining the war would create a way to not only fight the invading forces but also help the people in need of rescue, then it would be better if I joined them.

I looked down at Irene and read the expression on her feline face. Over the last four years I had become accustomed to Irene's silent council. At first I had thought myself insane to

trust an Ustani leopard more than a human, but Irene had proved her loyalty to me more times than I could remember. That was more than any human I had met. I read Irene's eyes and smiled. She would agree to any decision I made and support me the whole way, but she believed Arunty's statements. I should take the summons. I tried to muster up the will to deny her and go on with my plan to stay on the Isles but in the depth of my heart I knew she was right. I couldn't hide from my responsibilities any longer. It was time to take action and stop a war. Despite myself, I felt a little giddy at the thought of traveling again with only Irene as my companion and to my surprise, my magic had retreated without me having to force myself to gain control over my emotions.

"Fine," I said, "I will take the summons and join the Lydinyain army."

Suddenly, the crazy idea of making an acceptance speech entered my mind. I sat in my chair for a moment, thinking about the idea of making the formal speech of acceptance, which I hardly ever did. But I felt that a quest of this magnitude deserved a proper acceptance. And if any of the Masters had any hints of a doubt about my success, then a speech would clear away their worries. I cleared my throat and got the attention of everyone in the room instantly. I started quickly and got right to the point. My speech wouldn't be long or eloquent, but it would be powerful.

"If I don't stop the war within a year, then I will formally proclaim myself a Tylick and go into exile."

I paused to let my words sink in for dramatic effect. Tylicks were the mercenaries that had failed their assigned

quest or task. If a Brother died while trying to complete his task then a formal and honorable funeral was held. But if a Brother abandoned his quest no matter the reason, then he was no longer considered a Brother and was banished from the school.

I gazed at each Master in turn to make them believe my words. I drew their attention, and that of the lonely squire, completely entranced by my words. For a moment I thought about giving encouragement speeches more often but quickly dismissed the idea. Intelligent words didn't come to me often and I didn't want to embarrass myself by trying to force the elegant sentences out of me.

"But if I do succeed, and you can bet my long sword that I will, then I want every man, woman, and child to know that they are under my protection and will never hear the mention of war again! The Mercy Isles does not take threats well. We are not the kind of people who sit around and let our people be slaughtered by savages! We will fight either under my banner or combined with Lydinya's. The people of the Mercy Isles are not cowards. We are fighters. Relay that to your king, squire, and tell him that I will arrive at his palace tomorrow evening at the latest. Council, you are dismissed."

The Masters smacked their fists on the table and bellowing laughter flowed out of them to show their approval. I smiled a genuine smile and joined their revelry. Brothers did not necessarily enjoy going to war, but rather enjoyed the thrill of conquest and danger. Soon the whole school would hear the news and preparation would begin in earnest.

I got up to leave, but Master Briggum stood up hastily. He glanced at the water-clock and shook his head in remorse, but

cleared his throat to start speaking. I sighed in annoyance. I hadn't planned on leaving for another quest so soon, and needed to collect some provisions before the day was over.

"I am sorry to keep you, Saphron, but there is one more matter that needs to be addressed. The Council has made a decision that we know you will not be happy with but we feel it is necessary. If you were killed or severely injured in combat, this school would suffer a great loss. Too great a loss. This is why we have decided to assign you a Bodyguard; someone who is trained in medical emergencies and defense toras."

Briggum paused to see how I would react. I was irritated that the Council had "decided" to assign me a Bodyguard who would just get in my way and slow me down. On the rare occasions where Irene and I were alone in the wilderness, I felt peaceful and free. But with someone tagging along it would only invade my rare privacy. I huffed in annoyance but realized that the Council did have a point. On one of my last quests I had received a blow that had broken two ribs. The hospices had been terrified and doing everything in their power to keeping me from dying but I had assured the doctors that I felt quite alive and would recover quickly. Irene had thought it ironic that the patient had told the doctor what to do but I knew it was more complicated than simple irony that had had the doctors' fear of failure.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. Who do you have assigned, and how in the world did you bribe him to become my Bodyguard?"

There were a few mumbled replies and some muttering but I couldn't make anything out of it. Either the bribe had been enormous and the Council didn't want to humiliate me, or there

was something going on that the Council was afraid of; or more accurately, afraid of my reaction to the something going on.

"What? Who did you hire to be my Bodyguard? If I am going to start spending most of my time with this person I need to at least know his name."

"Squire," Arunty spoke gently, "you are excused. Please send Lady Saphron's response back to King Tivoll."

That was a bad sign. If Arunty was afraid of the squire seeing my reaction to the name of the Bodyguard, then the Council was really scared of my response. Who could they have picked?

The door clicked softly as it shut behind the departing squire. I wondered who would summon up the courage to tell me who was my Bodyguard. I knew it was going to be Arunty who was still standing when I took an overview of the Master's faces. Most of them had found a particular dust particle on their clothing to investigate or the beautiful scenery outside the window. I checked my reserve of magic to make sure it was dormant. When I reached inside myself to feel for the sphere of magic that was always on the edge of my mind, I only felt a rush of coolness that meant my magic was not active.

"Saphron, we know you are not going to agree with our choice, but I assure you he was the only option."

There was a collective silence in the room as the Council held their breath. I found myself sharing their anxiety and gripped the sides of my chair. Whoever they had picked must have been either really hard to find or had cost the Council a terrible amount of money.

"We chose Kelvin Mylark to be your Bodyguard, Lady Saphron."

My blood roared in my ears and my temper erupted in flames that danced before my eyes. The magic that hummed through my body escalated into a crescendo that pounded the inside of my head. The power of pent up energy in my body created an aura of blue light that danced around my fingertips. Slowly I rose to face the Council who had backed away from my chair. Their eyes held terror, where mine held fury.

The doors to the war chamber were flung open. My head snapped towards the person who had dared interrupt a Council meeting.

"Well, Council of the Brotherhood I know I'm late but don't go—"

He froze when he saw me. We stared at each other in silence. One with angry blue sparks shooting in random directions, and the other with complete shock on his face.

Kelvin Mylark had just made his entrance.

"Wonderful," My voice was laced with barely contained hatred, "now the world will really come to an end now that you have Kelvin trying to save it."

Chapter 2

By Madeleine Kenney

I marched through the halls, my temper fuming, and tried not to burn anything with my exploding magic. Servants hurried out of my way when they saw who was coming. Irene tagged along side me and seemed to be enjoying herself. Actually, I thought to myself, she was enjoying the noisy spectacle that they were making through the whole school.

I could only imagine what the servants must be thinking as they saw the dignified Saphron the Swordmaster being followed by thirty Council members who were doing their best to stop the running magi. With their long rich robes getting in their way, the Masters were having trouble keeping up with me as I sprinted through the halls. And by judging the angry tinge of red on their faces as I glanced back I could tell that they wanted me to stop so they could catch their breath and reprimand me without embarrassing themselves.

Little did they know that I wasn't going to stop any time soon.

I turned sharply to the left and picked up my pace. I admitted to myself that I was deliberately running away from a situation where I should have been more in control, but I didn't mind. The tension in the war chamber had been so high, that I was desperate to get out and be free. I knew I was going to pay

for this later but I didn't slow down. I was headed towards the front entrance of the school that was the quickest way to the forest. That was the only place on the whole Isle where no one bothered me. It was known that once I had entered the forest, it was impossible to find me. I was exceptionally good at hiding and I credited that to my childhood spent hiding from Kelvin's devious pranks.

At the thought of Kelvin, I realized that I didn't hear his voice in the shouting crowd behind me. I had passed him on my way out of the chamber but had lost track of him since then. I kept running at my neck breaking pace but wasn't winded so I asked Irene where she thought Kelvin had run off to.

"Well, you did push him through the window, so it was a bit difficult to tell where he went. I imagine he is visiting the hospice."

I glanced down at Irene with amusement despite the situation we were in and grinned.

"I pushed him out of the window, did I? Well, it's a pity that the war chamber is on the ground floor."

"Saphron, Kelvin is not your enemy any longer. He is now your Bodyguard."

I shook my head and felt my anger returning.

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

* * *

A few minutes later I was in my favorite tree, my magic settled and an amused smile on my face as I sat looking at the confused and outraged Masters as they tried to find me outside the front of the school. When they went back inside dejected and furious at my behavior, I sighed in relief and leaned back into the familiar, rough bark of my tree. I closed my eyes and listened as Irene settled into her own spot above and a little to the right of where I sat. Birds sung to their mates, squirrels scouted for nuts, and deer walked with their offspring down hidden paths. I opened my senses and sucked in a breath of pure air that was laced with the scent of pine. I was content and happy. This was my home, my family, and my protection. This was what I had spent the last three years protecting.

I thought back to the meeting in the war chamber and the assignment I had just agreed to do. I would still join the Lydinyian army but without the aid of a Bodyguard. I had survived before without one and could do so again if the Council insisted on Kelvin. In my contemplation, I snorted in disgust. When Kelvin had walked into the room I had immediately reached towards my left arm. At the time, I had resisted the painful memory that wanted to overwhelm my mind, but now that I had finally been given privacy, I let it the memory come.

During one of Kelvin's silly pranks the fun had gone too far. The self-righteous thief had tried to take my precious locket. The one thing that I treasured above all else, he tried to steal. When I had realized that my locket had been taken, there had been no question in my mind as to who had taken it. Foolishly, I had publicly challenged Kelvin, who was two levels above me, to a duel. The match had ended with Kelvin the victor

and me the ashamed loser with an arm and two ribs broken. Kelvin had defeated me, but he had not defeated my hatred towards him. In the hospital, I had had lots of time to run the duel over in my mind. That had been the time when I had sworn to myself that I would prove to Kelvin that I was not to be treated like a piece of dirt. Then Irene had walked into my life, my other precious gift. My new found friend had helped me keep my word and become the best Master in the Mercy Isles and the land of Lydinya. A slow smile spread across my face as I remembered the glorious day when I had been named. Saphron the Swordmaster, Protector of Life, Keeper of Honor, Lady of Hope.

"May I ask what is so funny?"

My eyes flew open. I unsheathed the daggers at my wrists and held them in one hand as I pulled my long sword from my back. No longer sitting, I was crouched in the direction of the familiar yet unwelcome voice. I mentally scolded myself for not paying attention to my surrounding and at the same time, I was utterly still and tense; waiting.

A soft rustle came slightly to my right and I hurled both of my daggers in the direction. Before the metal had hit its target two more daggers were in my hand, ready to be used to kill. I didn't like being surprised and had honed my skills to the point where it was nearly impossible. But when I was, habit took over me.

Whoever was hiding behind the tree was going to get it.

When barely suppressed laughter exploded from behind the tree I tensed until it dawned on me who it was that was laughing. It could only be one person. Kelvin, my ex-Bodyguard.

"And what do you find so amusing, Kelvin?"

Emerging from the giant tree, Kelvin propped his hip on one side of the trunk. He crossed his arms over his muscular chest and gave me a flat stare. I could tell it was fake.

"Well, for one, being thrown out of a window by the power of your magic was frightening but extremely fun. Two, seeing the whole Council run after you like their lives depended on it was also highly amusing. And three, witnessing the marvelous smug smile on your face as the Council lost you in the forest--"

I tapped Kelvin on the shoulder and cut him off mid-sentence. I was amazed to notice that the buffoon still hadn't noticed my absence on the opposite tree. Only someone who was so absorbed in himself would not notice when the person they had been talking to was no longer listening. My slight tap though had startled him and as Kelvin started to spin around to see who had just interrupted him, he forgot that he was not on solid ground, but forty feet in the air.

He lost his balance and started to fall.

I rolled my eyes in disgust at Kelvin's stupidity as I quickly grabbed the rope that was always around my waist. Without planning or second guessing I jumped off of the branch and threw myself at the falling Kelvin. Leaning back I tossed the rope and the small hook at the end caught around the thick mid-rift of the branch I had just leaped off of. In mid fall I grabbed Kelvin's wrist and gasped at the pain as I was pulled in two different directions. I hadn't realized the jerk from the fall would hurt so much and guessed I would pay for it later.

Now suspended, I contemplated how we were to get down. I hadn't thought past the idea of saving Kelvin's worthless life and how it might affect my own. Looking down, I gritted my teeth in anger. Kelvin was smiling back up at me with bright hilarity in his eyes. He was enjoying this, even though we were stuck hanging in mid air forty feet off the ground without any help for miles.

"Well, not that I'm enjoying the view from this angle, but how are you going to get us down?"

Annoyed, I snorted without the humor in my voice that was evident in his.

"Simple. I am going to drop you and then hoist myself back up to the branch. Then I am going to celebrate your death."

"Seriously, Saphron. We can't spend our lives up here although it would be a pleasure for me. I don't know how you would feel about it, well actually I think I do know--"

"Oh, would you be silent for two seconds so I can try and figure a way out of this? My shoulders are splitting apart."

He fell silent and I finally had some quiet so I could think. My initial idea was to wake Irene so she could help us but what could she do? Grow arms and haul us up? I didn't think so. My second option was to drop Kelvin and save my own life, but I didn't want to have the guilt that I had ended his life on purpose.

"Here, Saffy, start swinging and when we get high enough, I will jump onto the branch and then you can hoist yourself up."

"Don't you dare call me that. We are not friends or fellow comrades. I don't even consider you an acquaintance. And may I remind you that I am the one holding your pathetic life in my hand."

"Stop complaining and start swinging. This will work."

I was starting to seriously consider dropping him and going to get lunch, but something within me resisted. It was a very small part of me, but I listened to it. I started to swing my legs back and forth, using my weight and momentum to get us swinging. Soon enough, Kelvin had leaped onto the branch and was now helping me get onto it myself. I shrugged off his hand as I crested the branch and rolled my shoulders. I grimaced. It was not going to be a pleasant ride to Lydinya with a sore back.

I whistled to Irene, who was unaware of the scenario Kelvin and I had just been in, bounded from branch to branch until she was besides me. I looked down at her and felt a spark of love ignite inside me. Irene glanced up at me and opened her mouth in what I had learned was her way of smiling. I was about to head back to the Brotherhood to start packing for my unexpected journey, when I heard Kelvin clear his throat behind me.

"Saphron, I thank you for saving my life. It was much appreciated."

I didn't look back at him, but just from the tone of his voice I could tell he was serious. It was rare to see Kelvin without a smile and even more so to hear him being serious.

"Don't expect me to do it again."

"I won't. But it is now time that I return the favor; by becoming your Bodyguard--"

"The day you become my Bodyguard is the day that I will die. Do you understand me perfectly? I will handle the war on my own."

"Oh come now, let us--"

I ignored him and pushed myself towards the school that was a few miles to the north. As the wind played with my hair and the familiar feel of being airborne entered my body I relaxed and breathed deeply. The forest was my home, my haven. I was sad to leave it, for I knew that ending a war was no quick task. I locked the feeling away in a mental box and shut the lid. I had left it before and I could do so again, I reminded myself. There was no need to get so attached to a couple of trees and the scent of pine. I needed to start packing and didn't want to waste any more time speaking with Kelvin or spend time in a place I was reluctant to leave. Hopefully I would never hear Kelvin's voice again, and visit my beloved forest soon.

* * *

I snuck past the group of gossiping servants that crowded the hallway as I tried to make my way to my chambers unnoticed. I didn't think that my behavior was forgotten by either the school staff or the Council and thought it best if I simply made myself disappear for awhile. It had worked before.

Silently, I slipped my key out from my belt pouch and unlocked my door. I kept my eyes on the servants as I turned the

key and a soft click echoed down the corridor. They didn't turn around or cease talking. I sighed in relief and quietly entered my rooms. I held the door open only long enough for Irene to enter and then shut it without a sound. I leaned my back against the door only to stand straight up again as my back protested. I cursed myself, but then realizing that my ache wasn't particularly my fault, I cursed Kelvin instead. Afterwards, I felt much better.

Irene padded over to her special chair and sat down in it. I took the comforting sight in, and then widened my gaze to encompass the rest of my chamber. It was empty. Not of overstuffed luxurious chairs, couches, and draperies, expensive rugs, furniture, or the decorative candleholders and miscellaneous objects. It was empty of laughter, joy, and light. The curtains were closed, the hearth bare, and cluttered papers piled on the eating table. As I passed the two chairs that were surrounding the mantle, I passed my hand over Irene's head and heard her start to purr. If it weren't for Irene, I would have packed up and moved my things into the forest were the sound of life could comfort me.

I pulled myself out of my sullen thoughts and stoked the ashes into a blazing fire. Heat started to warm the room and I walked over to the massive windows to let in the light. I pulled the heavy dark blue draperies aside and looked down to find a small baby hummingbird on the outside of my windowsill. Carefully, I unlocked and pulled the window until it reached my shoulders. I offered my little finger and kept myself still while the little bird settled herself onto my hand. I brought the window back down and locked it quietly. I reached for my dormant magic and only pulled a little strand from my vast orb

of power. I touched the frightened creature's mind and spoke calmly and softly so as not to scare it.

"Hello, friend. What information do you have for me?"

Its little black eyes stared at me up at me with fear. It wasn't scared of me, but scared of the news it brought. It wasn't very good timing, but if a village needed my help I could delay my trip to Lydinya. I braced myself for the frightened creature's news. Hoping it wasn't what I feared.

"Protector, to the south side of the Mercy Isles border, the army has destroyed. The trees are bright and many Twos have been died."

Translating the hummingbird's words, I repeated them to myself. The creature was trying to say that the southern part of the Isle's forests were on fire and her family's offspring, the "Twos", were dead. I gritted my teeth.

I had started tracking the army and its whereabouts on my own ever since the war started. Squads of ten or twelve erratically came into the Isles and caused nothing but mischief to the villages and people. I made it my personal quest to stop the Zithoanian squads and their enjoyment of tormenting others. Recently I had asked the wildlife if they could keep me informed of the army and the movements of any of their squads. My call for help had spread throughout the Mercy Isles.

In my youth, Kelvin and his gang had broken my self-confidence and that had made me lose all interest in communicating with people. I could still remember the day when I had first entered the forest and started talking to random animals for comfort. Little had I known then that I was talking

to animals and they were talking back. At first, I thought it was my imagination and desire to have friends and a family. But as the years had passed, it dawned on me that animals were speaking to me, telepathically and verbally. Elated satisfaction had spread through me. The fact that I could do something unique and extraordinary had lifted my spirits considerably. From then on, the forest and the animal world was my secret home.

I looked down at my hands and saw that the hummingbird was drifting off to sleep. By the exhaustion the little bird was expressing, I could tell it must have flown from the southern border to the Brotherhood in less than a day in order to get news this recent and urgent to me. I headed towards my bedroom with the little bird still in my hands. When I opened the door, a range of all animals flooded into the main living area.

My bedroom had turned into a kennel over a year ago. I kept them secluded inside my bedroom which was off limits to the servants that cleaned my room. I did this so the recovering animals could sleep without being kicked outside. During my expeditions, I had rescued the injured animals and had brought them back here to help them recover. I enjoyed taking care of them and it made good use of the rooms when I wasn't here living in them. This was the most recent batch as well as every single cat that lived at the Brotherhood. I didn't mind the company. It got a little crowded but I loved them all and considered them my part of my strange family.

I ducked as a swarm of birds passed over my head and dropped the humming onto a little padded shelf where all of the birds slept. The bird could safely sleep there away from prying cats until she felt rested. He was so light that his little body

sunk slightly into the soft sheets. The bird didn't waste any time and fell asleep with its head tucked underneath its wing. I smiled.

The smile quickly faded however as I remembered the information that the little creature had desperately tried to give to me in time. I couldn't be in two places at once. Lydinya and the southern border were in opposite directions. I had already committed myself to the king's summons but this was on a much more personal scale. The war couldn't wait but neither could the villagers whose town would be overrun by Zithoanians in less than two days. I would simply have to decide.

I reached behind me and opened the engraved doors of my armoire. Inside was everything that I needed on a quest. Over the years I had accumulated enough riding gear, saddle bags, and cloaks that could equip a small brigand. I pulled out my favorite riding habit that I had designed myself with the help of the school's seamstress. The bodice was shaped like a normal dress but the full length skirt had a split in the side that went from the middle of the thigh, to the ankle. I had started to split my dresses with my daggers but as soon as the master seamstress Jakleena had seen me, she went into a crazy fit. Now I had five new riding outfits ready to be ruined, ripped, and soiled during my quests.

I went through my packing routine quickly and efficiently. In less than half an hour I had everything I needed packed and ready to go by the door. I had propped open the window to let the recovered animals out and injured ones in so I wouldn't come back and find a hundred animals making their home in my chamber.

As much as I loved them, I still needed to keep my rooms clean if I was to escape the detailed notice of the cleaning servants.

Irene was already waiting by the front door, ready to go. I didn't usually pack anything for her except extra blankets. She was a wild animal and natural instincts would help her survive in the wild. I slung my packs over my shoulder and turned around to survey my now combusting rooms. Cats, mice, raccoons, birds, and many other types of species were making themselves comfortable in my living room. My rooms still looked like it had when I first walked in, despite the many furry creatures that dominated them. I didn't bother myself with decorating because I barely spent a week here without being summoned half way across the country. If I did spend more than a fortnight, then it was usually because of injuries.

I mentally said good bye to everyone and exited my chambers. There was a few heartfelt responses to my farewell but most ignored me and continued on their hunt for food and a cozy napping place.

Locking the door behind me, Irene and I turned and made our way down the hall. It was lunch hour. Almost everyone who lived in the school and who had a grumbling stomach would be in the kitchen or in the Dining hall. It was safe to expose myself without getting reprimanded. Before the day was over I would be halfway to the border of Lydinya.

But before I could make my escape, I needed provisions and the only way to get those was to visit the kitchens. I looked down at Irene.

"Should we sneak in and pilfer Harriot's precious kitchen, or wait and find an inn somewhere and pay for provisions?"

Irene suddenly became solemn, thoughtful, and very still. If I didn't know her as well as I did, I would have backed away in fear for my life. But I did know her well, and I waited for her sarcastic reply.

"Not that I wouldn't enjoy annoying Harriot, but I think it would be wise as your senior to give you intellectual advice. Therefore, I am coming to the conclusion, that we should purchase our provisions and meat at a different location."

"Irene, how did you learn to speak like that? You're a wild leopard. And we are not going to buy meat unless it's dried."

"Yes, but a very smart leopard. And we are going to buy some meat because I want some."

We started at each other; seeing which one of us would forfeit first. Soon, I got bored and gave in to her request with a chuckle. Irene could stare at a rabbit hole the entire day and not get bored waiting for the rabbit to appear. I tended to get impatient with just searching for a rabbit hole.

"All right. Two pounds of meat are coming your way."

As we continued walking down the hall, I glanced out of the corner of my eyes and noticed a spring in Irene's step. She had won a round of will power and was enjoying her minor victory.

Soon, we came to the Great hall. The Masters weren't very clever in their titles of the halls, but when it came to architecture, they were geniuses. The ceilings soared fifty to sixty feet above and were capped with a domed roof. Delicately

painted scenes of famous battles and war heroes decorated the dome and cast shadows of beautiful color into the far corners of the Great hall. Mosaics of the seven founders of the Brotherhood circled the hall's walls and tables were burdened with their hero's weapon. I could hear the soft click as servants, scholars, and students traversed the hallways. My own footsteps were silent as I walked across the impressive hall. I wore soft leather boots specially designed only for myself. Masters always wondered how I had perfected the art of sneaking up on people unnoticed and I think they would be both humiliated and jealous if they knew that the key to my secret was a very mundane adjustment. Boots that didn't make noise.

I reached the other side of the Great hall and opened the heavy wooden doors to the outside. A fresh breeze of crisp air touched my cheeks and played with my hair. I breathed a deep refreshing breath and then made my way out of the court yard. The stables were directly east of the main courtyard so that any Masters that needed a horse immediately didn't have to go very far to get one. The Brotherhood was funded generously by many minor kings, diplomats, wealthy merchants, and the like. One of the more known and admired families, was the Mylarks. Kelvin's family. As much as I hated to admit it, Kelvin's father did provide splendid mounts. I owed my beloved stallion to his thoughtfulness. I considered the donor of my charger to be one of very few kind aristocrats but nothing more. Although he was the sire of Kelvin and deserved to be pitied.

Sucking in a deep breath, I let out a piercing whistle. Irene flattened her ears in annoyance but I took pleasure in the sound. It was my way of letting Indigo know that I needed him. It was popular for Masters to devise a unique way of summoning

their beast but out of them all, mine was the most efficient. Of course, the Masters didn't know that I could communicate with Indigo even if he wasn't standing directly in front of me.

Soon enough, a brilliant black war stallion came prancing with delight. Flicking its mane in greeting, Indigo projected into my mind happiness and pride but I couldn't quite understand what he was trying to say. I opened my mind to better understand his speech.

Sugar lady! Where are we going to gallop today?

I smiled at my favorite stallion. He never got tired of the numerous quests that I took him on. In his point of view, his status in the herd elevated every time he went on an assignment with me. Brotherhood horses evaluated themselves differently in their herds than in normal herds. Indigo was at the top of his herd because of the number of quests he has been on, not his strength or beauty. Although the Brotherhood's horses were by no means ugly. Indigo's coat was completely black almost to the point where it looked blue at night. The first time I had seen Indigo at night his pure and majestic beauty had taken my breath away. The blue sheen of his coat had inspired me to name him Indigo, after the rare blue die from Burka.

We have been summoned to Lydinya. The king has asked us to help stop his war. The road will be tough and long and I know you do not like battles, but I will only have you as my horse. Will you carry me?

Indigo reared up onto his back legs and pawed the air with his massive hooves. The bright afternoon sun glinted off his silky

coat, exposing the blue undertone. He was a beautiful sight. And he belonged to me.

If Sweet Lady wishes it, I will carry her. As long as there is breath in my lungs and hay in my stall, I will carry you. Together, we will be triumphant!

I laughed. Indigo could make a better acceptance speech than I could. It didn't bother me. In fact I took great pride in my horse's intelligence. He was the smartest beast in the stables and the fastest. For three years now, Irene, Indigo, and I had succeeded in every assignment we had been given. Failure to us was not real, but simply an obstacle in the road to great victory.

I heaved my three saddle bags onto Indigo and was pleased to see that he was already harnessed and ready to go. It seemed the stables boys knew my whistle and had saddled Indigo without instructions. Smart lads.

I pulled myself onto Indigo's back and looked down at Irene. She stared back at me and I couldn't suppress an overwhelming feeling of love for her. Without the support and friendship of Irene, my life would be nothing but duty and work.

"Irene, South or north?"

I didn't need to elaborate. I knew she understood what I was trying to say without my emotions getting involved. She knew that I wanted to save the village and wildlife that were on fire in the south. The people had named me their loyal Protector of Hope and put their undivided trust in me. I feared that by ignoring their cries for help, I was misusing their loyalty and trust. But at the same time, I couldn't go back on my word and

abandon my quest that awaited for me in the north. People were dying in the north as well and needed the feeling of safety once again. The only difference was that they were protected by the Lydinyain army and strong solid walls that crumble easily like those in the south did. I needed to hear Irene's opinion although in the depth of my heart I knew her well enough to know her answer.

"North, dear one. We must travel north if the villages in the south are to be saved."

From the top of Indigo, I looked down at my mysterious leopard that I knew so well and cherished. I sometimes wondered if Irene had prophetic vision. Over the years Irene had made certain comments that seemed irrelevant to the present situation but revealed their meaning later on. I had asked her once when I was young if she was some kind of Seer, but Irene had not answered. Despite her unusual answer, I trusted her with my life and would heed her words.

I dug my heels into Indigo's sides and he took off down the cobblestone path that led to the gates. The guards that stood like carved stones saw me coming and gave the command to open the massive steel gates. The Brotherhood was known throughout the three lands for its impenetrable gates. It took fifty men to open the solid steel plates that were more than ten feet thick. Quillic Nardom, the founder of the Brotherhood, was fabled to have built the front gates with his sweat and will power alone. Only those who have become Masters and taken the Oath know the truth.

I didn't slow Indigo's excited pace as we got closer and closer to the opening of the gates. It was important for a Master to

constantly remind the people around him of his authority and dedication to the school. I showed my skill in a much more mature way than some of the other Masters but I still dedicated myself to ensuring respect for Irene as well as myself. The only ones whose respect was hard to earn and keep were the guardsmen. They always seemed to find something to complain about and blame their discomforts on the Masters. I kept myself away from those arguments and remained neutral. But in the past years my success and fame of my many quests had spread among their ranks and had instilled a kind of brotherly respect for me. Therefore, despite the odds that the distance and speed I was traveling did not guarantee enough time to get the gates open, I was confident that the soldiers would have them open when they realized who was coming.

Irene easily matched Indigo's break neck speed and through our mental link I could tell she was enjoying the exercise and fresh air. I lowered my upper body until it was even with Indigo's mane. I could feel the working of his muscles underneath me and I enjoyed the familiar feeling. I relished the feel of the wind wiping across my face and on impulse I reached back and undid my hair from its braid. My waist length long dark hair flowed behind me and I realized I was making quite a show. I had no doubt that the Council was watching me from their balconies as soon as they had heard my whistle.

With a little grin, I realized I was enjoying myself. It wasn't often that I left the school in a grand performance and it was about time that I give one. In the cloudless blue sky, the cheery sun glinted off of the steel gates as they opened wider. Irene dashed ahead, a streaking black dot against the

gray of the pathway. I didn't push Indigo to catch up and let Irene run to her heart's content.

As we neared the entrance of the now completely open gates, I called forth my magic. I flared to life inside of me and I welcome the feeling of warmth as the power spread through my body. The rush of adrenaline I was feeling fueled my magic and the force of its power sent sparks flying through my hair. I could feel the ends of my hair stand on end and I smiled as I imagined the sight the school must be seeing. A woman with her hair sticking straight out from her with a long sword strapped to her back and following a Ustani leopard that streaked across the courtyard while riding a war stallion was quite a sight to behold.

My **fun ending**, I passed through the gates and continued galloping into the forest beyond. When I was far enough away from the school so that I wouldn't cause any harm, I formed a massive ball of energy in front of me with the power of my magic. Sweat dripped down the back of my neck but I didn't mind. It only took a couple of minutes for the ball in my hand to get to the size I thought large enough for my purpose. Soon it was so large that my control was wavering. With one last push, I sent the glowing ball directly above my head. When I knew that the Master and Council of the Brotherhood could see my ball of power, I cut the small thread that I had kept connected to my body. As soon as the small thread was cut, I reined in Indigo and called to Irene and turned around in just enough time to see my magic explode above the forest canopy. The sound was deafening and the colors exquisite. My ball of magic would reinforce the rumors of my power. I had worked hard to get to

the top and I wasn't going to let someone else take it my title from me when I was away.

My show and performance over, I urged Indigo into a trot towards the north.

Chapter 3

By Madeleine Kenney

The late afternoon sun began to make its slow descent as Irene and I arrived at Tivoll, Lydinya's capitol and the home of their king. I could tell the majestic gates were still open to travelers but would soon close due to the setting sun and late hour. I spurred Indigo into a trot and he willingly complied because he knew that the palace had luxurious stables and sweet

mints. In a horse's world, a stall, sweet hay, and mints were an absolute necessity.

As we passed through the magnificent wooden gates carved with the legendary crest of the country, I couldn't help a tiny spurt of excitement bubble through me. My travels didn't bring me close to Tivoll very often and on each of my rare visits, I had made it a tradition to visit their famous markets. Merchants from all over Lydinya came to trade and sell their wares in the capitol of their city. Every afternoon, specific streets were closed off for three hours to let the city prosper and do business. I didn't enjoy being sequestered in crowds, but the marketplace of Tivoll was so grand and large that it enabled people to move about freely.

It appeared that I had come too late and would have to wait until tomorrow for the market. As much as I hated to admit it, I loved to shop and explore through markets. I didn't like talking to people and gossiping, as so many of the women did. I enjoyed running my hands through delicately weaved fabrics and feast my eyes upon the array of colors. The smell of thousands of freshly baked bread always drew me to purchase a loaf and pretty pasties enticed me to sample their sweet flavor.

As our little group passed through the twin gates, the loud noise of street vendors betting on prices did not greet my ears, but neither did silence. The city of Tivoll proceeded with its normal business of closing shops and ports. Traffic had eased and quiet peasants made their way towards humble homes and happy families. I watched the activities from the top of Indigo's back and wished for a brief moment that my life was as simple as the towns' people around me. I loved traveling and taking on

challenging quests in far away cities, but I never stopped. My life continued to flow without rhythm or normality.

I pulled myself out of my sullen thoughts and urged Indigo through Tivoll's cobbled streets. I turned onto the main thoroughfare and let Indigo take the lead. He had been here before and knew where to go. To pass the time, I admired the structure and set up of the fortified capitol. The city resembled the shape of a circle. Dividers sectioned off certain parts of the circle by class. In the heart of the city was the king's palace, Ivoire. The buildings on the outer most ring started out as simple one story wood huts but closer to the palace, elaborate stone mansions displayed their owner's wealth. Covered carriages instead of rugged wagons transported aristocrats to their homes or to the palace itself.

I waited by the corner of the main street as two black coaches passed me then followed behind in their wake. The street was narrow with both of the carriages travelling abreast. I tried to be patient, but the carriages were moving excruciatingly slow. I needed to arrive at Ivoire before the gates were shut and I had to find an inn to spend the night. Irene was content, but I knew her soft paws weren't used to the rough cobblestones. I looked in front of me and gave a little sigh of frustration. I then checked the position of the sun and noticed it had gotten darker since I had first entered the city. I eyed the gap between the two massive coaches and contemplated whether Indigo could fit in between them. My irritation rousing, I grabbed the reins and pushed Indigo into a quick trot. Irene got the hint and we passed through the coaches easily.

Just when I thought we were all clear, the driver of one of the carriages called out to me rudely. I imagined the night was too dark for the man to see Irene next to me and didn't know he addressed. I didn't bother me. The more people who didn't fear me, the better.

"Young Lady, don't you know have any respect for your superiors?"

I turned in the saddle to answer the man, but didn't stop Indigo. The palace was only a few minutes ahead and that meant, a warm bed and a rest for Irene.

"Sir, I have every respect for my superiors, but only if they will give me respect in return. And blocking the road so a commoner cannot pass is not respect. Good day, sir."

The coachman was astounded by my rude reply but at that moment the curtains of the other carriage were ripped aside. The noise startled me and I twisted sharply to pull out a dagger in my left sheath. Kelvin's face popped out from the carriage window. When he saw me, our gazes locked. I felt my jaw drop in astonishment, heard Irene chuckle, and saw a slow smile spread across Kelvin's face. I couldn't believe my horrible luck.

"I thought I recognized your voice, Saphron. Do you think its luck or fate that we met in a city with over one thousand people in it?"

I sheathed my dagger and turned until I faced front in the saddle. The palace hadn't seemed far away before, but now that Kelvin traveled beside me, the trip would last forever. Of all people, Kelvin was the one in the coach. He was a noble and would be welcomed in Tivoll, but that didn't explain why we were

on the same street, on the same day, at the same hour. Only one answer entered my mind.

"Kelvin, you are not going to be my Bodyguard. You can go home."

A burst of laughter came from behind me. The hair on the back of my neck prickled in annoyance. Why couldn't he take anything seriously? How many times did I need to pound it into his thick skull that I would not have him as my Bodyguard? I looked down at Irene while Kelvin kept laughing behind me. She felt my eyes on her back and turned her head to return my gaze. Irene didn't seem upset with Kelvin's presence or his loud unending laughter. She radiated calmness. I took comfort from that. If Irene could bear Kelvin, then I could put up with him until we reached the palace gates. Then we would go our separate ways, and I could get some peace and quiet.

On the opposite side of Kelvin, the other coach's window draperies opened. I sighed. Hopefully, the aristocrat would tell Kelvin to keep it down but I knew he wouldn't. Despite Kelvin's comical appearance, his family held a position of great influence in the Lydinyian court. An insult to Kelvin could be taken as an insult to the king. I heard someone clear their throat.

"Lord Kelvin, is this the Lady Saphron Swordmaster?"

"It is, Lord Renwick. Why do you ask?"

"Well then the stories must be true! Lady Saphron was hired by the King to save our country's honor. And she is as beautiful as they say she is. What say you Kelvin? Do you think her beauty can be compared to the Goddess herself?"

"Well, her beauty certainly, but her personality definitely not."

I couldn't stand it. I dug my heels into Indigo's back and he reared in surprise. Irene took the signal that I had given her a minute before and dashed towards the palace. I turned back to the two startled men and smiles prettily.

"Please excuse me, Lords, but I have decided leave you two to your conversation on womanly beauty. Inform me immediately if you discover anything significant."

* * *

Indigo followed the young stable boy and I watched them go in silence. I had no doubt that Indigo would be taken care of but I envied his happiness. The doorman cleared his throat and I looked at him. Without speaking, he motioned with his hand that I should follow him to my rooms. I nodded and as we proceeded through the palace I took the time to admire the splendor.

The front entryway reflected every shape of gold created. The polished marble floors were white, but gleamed with the warm honey colored veins running through it. Fabulous golden murals covered the walls with angels and saints. Exotic treasures were

arranged around the room for visitors to admire their perfection.

As the footman led me through another set of doors the colors changed to blues and greens. I remembered that the palace followed a color system. The color of the decorations and walls represented a certain area of the palace. The sea-green color of the hallway symbolized the guest suites.

The footman led me through endless, but familiar, twisting passageways. I had never been summoned by the King himself, but by some of his dignitaries and nobles. Nonetheless, the staff housed me in the same suite of luxurious rooms every time I visited Tivoll. I appreciated the kindness. The staff of Ivoire palace knew my quirks and didn't complain. Irene loved it too because the staff didn't seem to be afraid of her dangerous reputation. I respected the staff simply because their consideration to Irene's feelings.

The footman stopped at the third door on the left and took out an elaborate key to unlock the door. He opened the heavy door and gave me a little bow. I smiled. The palace staff still kept to their word. I didn't like being bowed to, and they didn't like not bowing to a lady. So a compromise had been made. The staff bowed, but not to the point where their head was touching the floor. With the corner of his mouth lifted in amusement, the footman handed me the key.

"Here you are, miss. Please let the maids know if anything is not to your liking."

I smiled openly and thanked the footman. My first experience at Ivoire had been a dark day for the palace staff. And after the

third or fourth visit, I realized that the reason the staff put me in the same rooms was not because I needed to be pleased, but because Irene and I had specifications that would be too hard change in each room I stayed in.

Irene darted ahead of me and entered the suite. She settled herself onto her own personal pallet that the servants had arranged by the enormous fireplace. Stuffed with expensive goose feathers and covered in deep blue silk, the pallet was only one of the many unusual distinctive assets Irene and I had made to the chambers. The chairs and settees that were artistically placed around the hearth were all in different shades of blue. When I had off handedly mentioned to one of the cleaning maids that my favorite color happened to be blue, my entire chamber was re-done and painted to complement every shade of blue that existed.

I settled myself onto the chaise longue, and let out a little moan. My back throbbed from the three day journey on horseback from the Brotherhood. The blame could be rightly put on Kelvin, since the buffoon had almost killed himself. I shunned those annoying thoughts and let my muscles relax. It would be awhile until the servants delivered my bags and I worshiped the time Irene and I had to our selves.

A knock sounded at the door.

I looked at Irene and she looked at me.

"Why can't people leave us alone for one hour to sleep?"

"People leave me alone. It's just you that gets all of the attention. But I can't blame them since you are always calling negative attention to yourself."

I scowled at Irene as I headed towards the door. My hair resembled a rat's nest, my clothes were soiled from travel, and my eyes were probably bloodshot from lack of sleep. I hoped that no one terribly important waited behind the door. Letting out a little sigh, soft enough not to be heard, I twisted the knob and looked up. The sight that greeted my eyes warmed my heart. Issik, my old training Master from the Brotherhood, stood outside the door with his hands on his hips and a grumpy smile on his face.

"Issik!" I cried as I threw my arms around his neck and pecked his cheek with a fatherly kiss.

Joy filled my heart at seeing my favorite Master again. Two years had passed since I had seen him last or shared a meal with him. I had completed my training with him over five years ago but Issik treated me like more of a daughter now than a successful student. When a page at the Brotherhood reached a certain level, a Master had to take him as an apprentice if the student wanted to continue receiving any training. Issik had been the only Master who had been willing to take me as his apprentice and from that day forward, our friendship would become one of the things I treasured most.

"Saffy, I am deeply offended. Why did you not immediately come to see me once you reached the palace? And don't blame it on Irene, that poor cat is innocent as a kitten."

I removed my arms from around his neck to cross them in front of my chest instead. Penetrating him with a powerful look that he had taught me how to do, I answered in a disgruntled tone.

"Scoundrel, I didn't even know you were back from the war. It's been two years since I've heard from you. I should have known you wouldn't keep your word about writing."

Chuckling, Issik shook his head in wonder.

"Ah, well, the war kept me busy. And I heard you kept yourself busy as well what with all the rumors flying around about your successful quests. Is it true that you have been summoned over one hundred times in just two years? I shouldn't expect anything less from one of my students."

Before I answered his long list of questions, I stepped inside and motioned for him to come in the suite. He obliged and settled himself into the ice blue chair closest by the fire. Shutting the door behind him, I returned to my seat and crossed my legs into my lap.

"Yes, Issik I have been summoned by the King to help him stop the current war with Zithoania. Could you give me a description of the armies and their numbers? I don't want to go into a meeting without information."

Issik propped his leg over his knee, threw one of his arms over the couch he was sitting on, and regarded me with an amused smile.

"They didn't tell you, did they? Figures, those smug—"

"Issik," I sat up in my chair, "What do you mean, they didn't tell me?"

Silence filled the room, and the echo of it rang in my ears. Irene slept behind Issik, but I could tell she only faked it. Despite her outward appearance of a lazy domestic leopard, Irene constantly kept all of her senses open for information. She often picked up on things in meetings that I missed or simply didn't notice. Her feedback had already saved my life twice.

Issik broke the silence by propping his elbows on his knees and leaning his chin on his hands. He let out several deep breaths before he spoke. All of these actions were a sign that Issik feared my reaction. I braced myself as Issik took his last calming breath. I would use the little control I had over my temper so as not to embarrass my teacher. I was a Master of the Brotherhood after all, and knew how to control my emotions.

"Saphron, you and two other Masters were hired not to stop the war--" Issik held up his hand to silence me as I opened my mouth. "No listen to me, and hold your tongue. This is going to take awhile."

I mumbled curses under my breath, but remained seated and quiet. Pleased with my partial obedience, Issik continued.

"As I was saying. You and two other specially trained Masters are going to go undercover to stop the war. The King won't give any more details until the meeting tomorrow, but I do know that your mission is not to become the army's commander if that is what you were told."

"The squire said my summons were to join the war effort, become its commander, and defeat the threat of the Zithoanian army." I ground the words through my teeth. Issik nodded as if I had just responded politely, and rubbed his chin in thought.

"I see now. I think the King knew you weren't going to be persuaded easily. You are as hardheaded as a mule. Anyway, that a different matter. The squire only told you part of the truth. The King doesn't want you to become the commander of his army to help stop the war. He has a different assignment for you."

"Issik," I slowly got up from my chair, "I did not travel for three days, abandoning a southern village that needed my help, only to discover my summons were a lie."

Hot anger flushed my cheeks and my hands clenched into fists by my side. My attempt at controlling my anger was failing but Issik didn't seem to notice or care. He understood me better than I did myself. He could even tell when my control on my magic wavered. Issik didn't react to my temper unless he thought(think of a sentence without "was")

"Your summons weren't a lie, Saffy. They were only a partial lie. If I knew all of the details, I would tell you but the King is keeping this matter quiet. I know you don't like the court or politics but tomorrow the King is expecting you at high table. Did you bring a dress?"

My temper now forgotten, I stared at Issik in astonishment. Only my teacher could totally dismiss a topic that determined the fate of a country.

"Issik, I was expecting to head out towards the ranks *tomorrow*. Of course I didn't bring a court dress. Are you insane?"

"No I am not insane, Saffy. At least not yet. I am just concerned about your welfare. Things have changed since you last came to Tivoll. People know who you are and what you have done. Gossip is already spreading through the palace about your

arrival."

"Okay, and what does this have to do about a dress when a moment ago you were telling me about how my assignment is really a confidential mission?"

Issik sighed, and rubbed his hands over his face. I knew I frustrated him, but I needed answers, not court dresses. I opened my mouth to voice my opinion even further on the matter when Issik cut me off. He stood up and put his huge hands on my shoulders. Despite my growth since childhood, his hands still felt like weights that kept me in place. Issik looked into my eyes and I stared back into his gray ones. His tone resembled the one he used to use when I became too much for him to handle. Times and maturity didn't change habits, I guessed.

"Saffy, I can only tell you what I know. The King has asked me to inform you of the meeting tomorrow and his invitation to dine with him tonight at high table. That is all he is telling me."

I looked away because I couldn't meet his eyes any longer. Instead I focused on Irene, curled into a tight ball on her personalized pallet. My anger and annoyance vanished as I gazed at her. Issik removed his hands when he felt the release of tension in my shoulders. We stood there for some time before either one of us felt like speaking.

"Irene, what do you think about this?"

I wanted to hear what Irene had gotten from the new information. My question didn't seem to surprise Issik so I knew he hadn't been fooled by Irene's act. I waited patiently as Irene stretched herself. As she yawned, her mouth expanded until

I could fit my whole fist inside her jaws. Her awakening ritual done, Irene walked over to me and sat at my feet. She looked at Issik then spoke.

"The squire couldn't have revealed the true nature of Saffy's mission otherwise she wouldn't have accepted the quest. It was imperative that she accept the quest for the benefit of us all."

Issik seemed to be digesting this information, but I couldn't quite grasp the meaning of Irene's complicated words. I looked down to see Irene casually licking a paw.

"Irene, could you say that again?"

Irene paused in mid-lick to answer me.

"You were duped for a reason."

Issik slapped his knee and started to laugh until he saw the look on my face. But, he decided to ignore my glare and continued on laughing. The one person in the world, who never succumbed to my piercing gaze, was Issik. Only because Issik could give a glare that sent a person running for the exit while mine only had a person stepping back a few paces. I often felt sorry for the person who got on Issik's bad side because I knew how it felt to be on the receiving end of that look.

Before I could go on a diatribe, Issik stood up and fixed his garments. I stood up as well and gave Irene a look. The forcefulness of the glare was only half-hearted though, because inside I was laughing. My witty leopard brushed my look aside to continue licking her paw.

"Well, since you didn't think to bring a court dress, I'm going to have to find you one. How about we visit the seamstress? She'll be more than happy to loan you a dress—"

"And ridicule me about how I don't keep my hair nice, and ask me why I became a warrior, and make me wear loud uncomfortable shoes."

Issik regarded me with a mixture of contempt and absurdity. He looked me up and down. I stood still under his examination and waited for his verdict. With Issik, I never could tell what he was going to say next. He crossed his burly arms over his chest, and I did the same. Finally, he shook his head and patted me on the head. I hated when he did that, but I rarely saw Issik anymore, so I let it the annoying gesture pass.

"I guess that's what you get when you raise a girl to become a mercenary. But despite your opinions, an invitation to dine at the high table does not mean you can wear a soiled riding habit. Come with me and I will make sure the seamstress doesn't make a stuffed doll out of you."

* * *

"Well, if you would only brush it once or twice, untangling these knots wouldn't hurt so much."

I grabbed the table with both of my hands, as the seamstress behind me gave my mass of hair another tug. The woman was strong and stubborn I could give her that, no matter how many times I told her my hair wouldn't be tamed, she just tugged harder. My

head screamed with pain as my hair underwent the agonizing transformation. I erratically took the time to brush my hair but according to the woman tugging on it, my few attempts were not enough.

After my curly hair pleased the seamstress, she reluctantly handed me over to one of her assistants. She didn't leave the room, but seated herself so she could see what her second in command put on me. The assistant helped me onto the round stool that I would be spending some time on, and told me to wait. Behind me I could hear the head seamstress complain of a sore arm and I couldn't hold back a small smile of satisfaction.

The assistant returned with of colorful dresses in her arms that made a small mountain when she dropped them on her working desk. I groaned. Why hadn't Issik explained to the seamstress that I only needed one dress for one day and that anyone would do? Unfortunately, Issik had abandoned me, the scoundrel, and I had been left to survive on my own. Irene seemed to be enjoying helping pick out hair styles and fabric patterns, so I knew I couldn't rely on any help from her end.

"Mistress, we are going to try these dresses to see which one compliments you the most. I think blue would look excellent against your skin tone."

I put my hand on my hip and squinted at the cheery girl as she started arranging the dresses by color.

"My skin tone?"

"Yes. You have pale skin, dark brown hair with red high-lights, and bright blue eyes. I must say, miss, that you are extremely beautiful. Lord Kelvin is going to eye you tonight. He loves--"

"Please don't mention Kelvin."

"Yes, miss."

The assistant motioned for me to step into the dress she placed before me, and I did so. Why couldn't I get rid of Kelvin? Five years had passed since I had last spoken with him and now everywhere I turned, Kelvin's name popped up. And now this random seamstress's assistant said his name like it resembled a sweet perfume. It made me sick.

I pulled up my stomach and held out my arms as the assistant laced up the back of the deep blue dress. The fabric fell in rich folds from my waist line to the floor. Sleeves intertwined with gold stitching enclosed my arms but then fanned out from my elbows to swish against the dress. I felt comfortable in the dress, which surprised and delighted me. The other court dresses I had been forced into hadn't even come close to this dress's elegant beauty and convenience. I twirled my hips and delighted in my range of free movement. I looked at the happy girl who watched me in the mirrors, and smiled.

"I think this one will do. I like the color and the feel of the dress."

"Miss, I think that dress was made for you. The color is perfect and the cut compliments your body. Hold on one moment. I think I may have a hair pin that matches this dress."

The girl whisked out of the room. I heard a loud crash that sounded like coins spilling and contemplated whether I should call out to the girl or not. But I needn't have worried, for a few minutes later the girl came skipping back into the room with something glittering in her hands.

"It was at the bottom of the box, but it is still beautiful. What do you think, miss?"

I stared at the hair piece. Made out of shining silver with light blue topaz gems decorating it, the three-inch long pin matched my dress flawlessly. The gems were shaped like tear drops and were attached to short strands of silver. If put in correctly, the strings of silver and blue would cascade down the back of my hair. I looked at the girl and nodded my head, speechless. I had seen hair pins like this one in the market but had never dared even ask for the price from the vendors. This one piece of jewelry would probably cost me two months worth of pay.

The girl clapped her hands together and gave me a smile.

"Well now, I think that completes your court outfit. What event are you planning to attend tonight, miss? Oh, I know I'm not supposed to say but--"

She looked behind me and I followed her gaze. The seamstress behind was fast asleep with her little white head leaning on the side of her chair. Reassured that she wouldn't be interrupted with her exciting new, the assistant continued in a hushed but enthusiastic voice.

"Do you know that the Lady Saphron Swordmaster is going to be dining at the high table tonight with his Majesty? I heard that from the cook."

Looking around, I realized I hadn't brought Irene with me and I didn't have any of my usual swords or weapons on my person to distinguish myself. The poor girl didn't recognize me. It took an enormous amount of will power not to start laughing in the

girl's excited face. I put a tight leash on my giggles though, because as I looked at the young girl I could tell she wanted me to share her fervent passion for gossip. I would play along and make up an excuse to leave.

"I didn't know that. Is she arriving soon?"

The girl helped me step down from the pedestal and started wrapping my hair pin in a protective velvet sleeve. She disappeared behind a red velvet curtain but continued talking. Her voice was slightly muffled but I could still hear her energized voice.

"The servants are saying that she has already arrived. And the stories are true about the Ustani leopard that follows her around everywhere."

I listened politely and didn't interrupt the girl. It wouldn't hurt to see how the palace staff viewed Irene and me. One could never be too careful when in unfamiliar territory. The girl bounced back into the room and handed me a black bundle. She smiled and I noticed her freckled face for the first time. The girl must have been employed from the farm country in the west. It seemed that rumors about Irene and me had already spread across the continent. A little trill of pride went through me.

"I can't wait to see her! Roslin said girls like us don't meet famous people like Lady Saphron but I don't believe her. I think--"

A knock came from my left, but I didn't draw a dagger. I had heard the visitor's loud footsteps ages ago and guessed he wore what I called, fancy shoes. The aristocrats loved them. Little did they know they could be heard everywhere they went.

The seamstress awoke with an embarrassing snort and moved to get up but the freckled girl beat her to the door. I positioned myself so I could see the door but would not be totally visible. The girl straightened her apron and blonde hair before opening the door.

A man stood in the threshold, dressed in all black. The girl gave a little squeak of surprise and held the door wider. The man nodded to her and then looked around the spacious room filled with mirrors, fabrics, and measuring utensils. From behind a piece of black heavy fabric, I judged the man. He had inky black hair, styled in the latest male fashion. His tailored suit fit him perfectly and showed off his muscular frame. My gaze traveled downwards and I gave a grunt of approval. On his feet were black fancy court shoes, polished to a shine.

My revision complete, I detached myself from the black fabric. Immediately, the man's piercing blue gaze hit me and I stifled my gasp. First impressions were one of the first lessons taught at the Brotherhood and I didn't want this man to see me drooling over his pretty eyes. I was Lady Saphron, and didn't faint over pretty eyes.

I waited for the man to speak first, and as I waited a thought struck me like a blow. I recognized this man from somewhere. Just as I started trying to shift through my memories, the man in black spoke.

"You must be Lady Saphron Swordmaster. I am here to escort you to the King's high table."

Behind him I could see the seamstress and her assistant grapple for chairs and plop into them. The freckles on the girl's face

resembled dots of black ink, she had gotten so pale. I quickly grabbed two fans off of the table near me and started fanning the two women. I kept fanning, but answered the man who waited for my response.

"Yes, I am she. But why does the King think I need an escort? I have been here before."

The man opened his mouth, but paused. A smile spread across my face. I loved trying to make pompous court dignitaries stumble. The man recovered quickly however, and answered me politely.

"The King does not doubt your abilities, Lady Saphron, but merely wishes your reputation at Ivoire to remain positive with the court ladies. They can be quite vicious when they want to be."

I nodded my head to show him that I understood. As much as I hated politics, I knew that making and keeping a good impression in court was essential to a successful career. The two women were coming around so I gave them both a fan. I turned around to question further, but the freckled girl pulled my skirt. Her cheeks rosy and her eyes bright, she jumped up from the chair and pulled me across the room. Hurriedly she mumbled something about the time and started arranging my hair.

"Lady Saphron you can't dine at high table with your hair like this. As beautiful as it is down, the court ladies will mock you if you are not in touch with the current style. This will only take a moment. Lord Darren, you may take a seat while I finish Lady Saphron's hair."

Lord Darren took the chair that the assistant had been sitting in and pulled so that I could see him from my place on the stool. I looked at him from under my eyelashes. His face looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place where I had seen him. The man's name didn't provide any helpful hints either. As the girl pulled and tugged on my long hair, I decided to see if my assumptions on the man's family were correct.

"Lord Darren, are you perhaps related to Kelvin?"

He looked at me with an amused smile on his face. I didn't like being smiled at but his smile had genuine humor in it and not mocking humor.

"Kelvin warned me that you were a quick one. Yes, Lady Saphron, I am related to Kelvin."

"How close are you?"

"We are brothers, Lady."

I paused. They certainly looked a lot alike, but his statement still surprised me. I had never met Kelvin's renowned family. Meeting Kelvin had been enough. But although Lord Darrin resembled Kelvin, he had none of his annoying humor. Well, none so far.

"There. You look positively enchanting, Lady Saphron. Now don't let those immature boys whistle at you. If they do just tell me and I'll give em' a wippn' they will never forget."

I got up from the table and examined myself in the mirror. The dark blue dress felt comfortable, the fancy shoes were loud but not painful, and the thousands of hair pins that kept half of my

hair coiled on top of my head didn't give me a headache. I liked my outfit and could tolerate it for the night.

Lord Darren cleared his throat and I looked at him.

"I'm sorry to intrude on your womanly contemplations regarding your exquisite dress, but the high table is--"

I held up my hand and gave him a flat stare.

"Lord Darren, if you have something to say, say it."

He blinked. Then smiled.

"We are going to be late."

Finally understanding his English I nodded and gathered my things. I thanked the seamstress for her labor on my hair and the freckled girl for her help with my apparel. Lord Darren rushed me out the door before I had strapped the last of my hidden daggers on and I followed him down the palace halls, Irene by my side, to the high table.

* * *

"The chief commander of security for his royal highness of the city of Tivoll, Lord Darren escorting, his majesty's personally chosen Brotherhood mercenary, Lady Saphron Swordmaster."

Bright colors of elegant court dresses and the dark smudges of black suites on men dotted the dance floor below me. Lord Darren

stood rigidly besides me and acted like a true aristocrat about to make his grand entrance.

He turned, smiled at me, and offered his arm. I refused to take it. I would show to the court that I was an independent woman, and didn't need to lean on a man for support. The only person that I would ever lean on, would be Irene, who walked beside me down the grand staircase into the ballroom. I heard a few whisper my name as I passed the crowd of people who had smashed themselves on either side of the room. I headed towards the elevated round table in the back of the room. I imagined that this was the renowned high table. It didn't look like anything special to me, but my view point was normally a little off compared to other people.

Irene kept pace with me as we walked up the few steps to the raised platform that held the high table. Three people richly dressed, sat around the table. They looked up when I crested the top of the dais. I stood there awkwardly, not sure if I should take a seat or if there were assigned seats. I didn't want to make the mistake of sitting in a dignitary's seat and having to apologize. Awkward.

Irene came to my rescue. She obviously didn't want to wait for me to figure out which seat was mine, so she decided to choose a seat for me. I followed Irene to the left and stopped at the seat she did. I pulled the heavy chair out from under the table and sat down. No one seemed surprised that Irene, a wild animal, settled herself at my feet like a domestic cat. That meant they knew who I was, but I didn't know who they were. I wouldn't take it personally if they didn't want to introduce themselves. My reason for coming to the palace included getting truthful

information about my quest, not making small talk with snobby aristocrats.

Lord Darrin made his way up the steps to the high table and sat down next to me. I still didn't know if Irene had led me to the right seat, but it appeared that she did since the Lord sitting next to me remained quiet. I turned my gaze to the crowds of people who were now dancing around us. Beautiful women in colorful gowns twirled and spun elegantly across the dance floor with husbands and suitors.

"Lord Tylar, Lord Eric, Lady Eleanor, I have the pleasure of introducing you to Lady Saphron Swordmaster. His Majesty has chosen her to lead the mission."

Introductions made, the two lords and one lady now turned to me with pleasant expressions on their faces and curiosity in their eyes. Court etiquette had always confused me, and this experience was no exception. Why people sitting at the same table couldn't talk to one another until they were properly introduced was such a foreign concept to me that I didn't bother myself with even trying to understand it.

"Lady Saphron, what an honor. I have a son who would die just to get the chance to meet you. How was your trip here? I hope you didn't get bogged down by the weather."

Putting her name to her face, I looked at Lady Eleanor. She wore a smile on her face, and it made her face luminous. I found myself smiling back at her despite my disappointment at her choice of topic. Why did all court ladies only talk about weather and gloves? They only degraded themselves. I decided to

play along until the king arrived to take control over the situation.

"The weather was decent. Thank you for asking. How old is your son?"

"He turned twelve just a few days ago. All the boys his age consider you their war hero. It is quite amusing to watch them reenact the battles you have been in."

I didn't respond. The woman obviously thought that this was a common pastime for twelve year old boys to act out battles that have happened in the past. Little did she know about the horror of war and the devastation it caused both the victor and the loser. I pulled myself out of my sullen thoughts and tried to come up with something to say when thirty trumpeters sounded the arrival of the king.

"All stand for his Majesty, King Fredrick Tylar the Fourth of Lydinya."

The loud noise of scraping chairs could be heard throughout the ballroom as more than a hundred people stood to greet their king. Irene and I stood as well and faced the north side of the room where the king would make his entrance. But before he arrived, the king's family was escorted into the room by the royal guard. His Majesty's family represented all ages and sizes. I spotted the queen immediately simply because of the way she carried herself with the power of authority. Her three children, and the heirs to the throne, trailed behind her in the finest silks Lydinya had to offer.

The room became hushed. When the royal guard had cleared, and the king's family on their way to the dais, King Fredrick Tylar,

made his entrance. The first thing I noticed, much to my approval, was that the king didn't wear court shoes. Instead, big leather boots covered his divine feet. A fine, but not overly expensive suite of red and gold covered his frame. His diadem complemented his dark brown hair color but did not scream, 'I am the king.' I smiled to myself. It appeared that the Lydinyian king didn't approve of the latest fashions. Leaning down, I whispered in Irene's ear.

"I think we are going to get along quite well. Maybe he will listen to my complaints about women's shoes and the horrible noise they make."

Irene emitted a slow purr of laughter.

"Lady Saphron."

Lord Darren whispered my name, but I still heard his voice. I straightened my spine until I stood upright. Obviously the lord behind me did not approve of whispering in front of the royal family. I glanced around me. The group of servants with blank expressions on their faces surrounded the high table with serving platters balanced on their gloved hands. I scolded myself for not noticing them sooner. Who knew, any one of them could be an assassin. My name wasn't spoken with gratification everywhere.

The king, his queen, and their children approached the stairs, mounted them and then fanned out to separate chairs. The queen motioned with her hand and everyone sat. Lord Darren sat to my right, but to my left was a little girl of about nine or ten. A servant pulled out her chair and scooted her near the table when she had arranged her pink dress. The nobles around the table

were quiet, and I remembered the introduction thing. So I turned to the little girl, and held out my hand.

"Hello, my name is Saphron."

Her big brown eyes widened, and I wondered if I should have spoken. I personally didn't care if I created a scene, but I imagined the child didn't want a talking to from her parents. Lord Darren cleared his throat next to me, but before he could tell me politely how I had just defied some traditional court law, the king himself intervened.

"Eliza, you can answer the lady."

His voice easily carried around the table so that everyone could hear. I noticed that the Lady Eleanor let out a sigh of relief and I wondered how great an error I had made. Well, no use in apologizing now.

"Greetings, Lady Saphron Swordmaster of the Brotherhood in the Mercy Isles. My name is Eliza Ina Tylar, second child to my father, King Fredrick the Fourth of Lydinya."

I stared at the child. The teaching of court language started early, if this child was anything to go by.

"Do you always talk like that?"

Several people around the table elegantly covered up their giggles. The two boys on the other side of Eliza didn't bother with concealing their mirth, and erupted in laughter. I ignored the dignitaries and waited for Eliza's answer. Her little mouth tightened for a moment before a happy smile alight her face.

"No, only when I am forced to, Lady Saphron. Is it true that you killed-"

"I think proper introduction are in order as well as the beginning of our meal."

Eliza's father smoothly covered up his daughter's question with his booming voice. His statement was a silent command and the twenty or so servants around us took action. A white gloved hand appeared before me and placed a silver platter down with a thunk. The hand took off the cover and a delicious aroma of spices filled the air. I breathed in and took pleasure in the sweet smell of pumpkin and ginger. My mouth watered and my stomach grumbled with hunger, so I reached out to grab one of the ten eating utensils on the right side of my plate. But, Lord Darren also sat on my right, and he put out a hand to stop mine from reaching my spoon. I sighed, but understood what he implied and returned my empty hand to my lap.

"Now, Lady Saphron, I have brought you here to Tivoll so that I can explain your assignment to you in person. I have heard that you like people to get to the point so I shall. The war with Zithoania is not going well. In the past months our attempts to defeat the enemy army has been thwarted."

The group around the table remained quiet and didn't touch their cooling soup. Some listened with their heads down. Others looked at the king, but had a glaze over their eyes. My hunger gone now, I listened to King Fredrick.

"This humiliation, the council does not take well. We are a people of success and accomplishment. We work hard to protect

our people and we will not tolerate the invasion any longer. Countless have died, children have been orphaned—”

I stiffened. Irene stood up and started a low growl deep in her throat. I patted her head unconsciously, to keep her calm as well as myself. The suddenness of Irene’s movements caused Eliza to give a little start in her chair but didn’t scream. I continued to pat Irene’s head to sooth her.

“Lady Saphron, Lord Kelvin has warned me about you sensitivity to orphaned children, as you are one yourself. This brings me to a most unsettling matter both for my family and this country. There has been a recent attack on the well fortified city of Norlotch. There was only one survivor. It was a child, four years of age. We have taken her in because she has nowhere else to go, but I would like you to meet her. She might tell you something that she won’t tell to anyone else. Lord Darren, would you please escort the child here.”

“Of course, your Majesty.”

The courteous lord exited the ballroom, but I noticed he paused briefly to talk to someone before he left. I stored the information away and turned back to the king.

“Before the child gets here, though, I need to give you something, Lady Saphron. It is detailed information that will help you succeed on your mission.”

I took the parcel of papers he handed me and started to leaf through them. The title caught my attention. I passed the stack of papers down to Irene to let her absorb this new information. She could pass on the main facts to me later. Eliza noticed my movements and looked down at Irene. She giggled. I kept my face

even, but I could imagine how absurd it looked to see an animal reading.

"Lady Saphron, my best scholars worked hard to obtain that information so if you could keep it intact, it would be most appreciated."

Eliza glanced at her father, then at me, and decided she should stop giggling lest she get into trouble. It was a good thing that Eliza had been placed next to me and not one of her two brothers. I could only imagine the kind of questions and remarks that they would announce to the whole table.

"Irene will not harm your documents, lord King. In fact, Irene could probably keep the documents in better shape than I ever could. Reading isn't my best skill and I tend to rip things when I get frustrated."

All three of the children next to me exploded in laughter. I glanced around the table and saw that the young children weren't the only ones laughing. Many of the Ladies, including the queen, had delicately placed fans in front of their mouths, and the Lords all seemed to have found something terribly interesting in the design of the table cloth. With some trepidation, I glanced at the king to see his reaction. What I saw wiped the smile off of my face.

The king gazed at me with such intensity that it chilled my blood. Hazel eyes bored into mine, and I had to grip the table leg to keep myself from getting lost in them. I swallowed and quickly pulled an invisible mask over my face. **(Fix this)** I had trained myself to mask my emotions when in difficult situations. The way the king stared at me without blinking, raised the hair

on the back of my neck. My body tensed as if readying for a fight. My palms itched to pull out a dagger but I refused to give into the temptation.

"Well now, who do we have here?"

I had been so focused on the king's next words that I hadn't noticed anyone come up from the dance floor. The adrenaline of being surprised rushed through me, and hard trained habit took over my body. I leapt from my chair and pulled out four daggers from my wrist sheaths. Without thinking, I pivoted on my right foot, and kicked out with my left behind me. There was heavy grunt as my foot made contact. I swung around, two sharp blades in each hand, to face my attacker. What I saw shouldn't have surprised me, but it did.

"Kelvin! Why can't you stick to your side of the world and leave me alone? Didn't you get enough fun out of pranking me when I was little?"

I waited for an answer, but Kelvin kept his face towards the floor.

"Answer me Kelvin Mylark, or so help me--"

Someone cleared their throat next to me, and I glanced up sharply from my crouch on the marble floor. The woman took a few steps backward. I didn't blame her. I could only imagine the way I looked right now, crouching like some animal with four lethal weapons in my hands. The woman didn't flee however and I understood why. Lady Eleanor gave me a genuine smile that both confused, and startled me.

"Lady Saphron, I think Lord Kelvin is unconscious from the blow you just gave him. Your Majesty, I think you should proceed with this meeting elsewhere; for Lord Kelvin's sake of course. That lump on his head needs to be iced."

"Excellent idea, Lady Eleanor."

The king's voice sounded tight. I grimaced to myself. It appeared that my actions did not please his majesty and he wanted to scold me in private.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please excuse, Lord Kelvin, Lady Saphron, Lady Irene, and me. We have some unfinished business to discuss. Please enjoy your dinner."

I dropped the unconscious Kelvin, and stood up to re-sheath my daggers. As they clicked into place, I brushed the wrinkles out of my dress and fixed my hair pin. When I felt composed, I followed the king down the stairs but not without looking back to check on Irene. Clutching the stack of parchment in between her teeth, my brash leopard jumped off of the royal dais without using the stairs. I wanted to descend the high table Irene's way, but deciding that I had embarrassed myself enough for one night, I used the stairs.

Dancers and nobility watched as their king made his way through the thick crowd. Evidently, my little episode on the high table hadn't been noticed, thank the Gods, because there weren't any screams as I passed faint hearted noblewomen. Irene appeared next to me and I placed my hand on her head to comfort myself more than her.

The walk from the high table to the end of the hall took twice as long since I couldn't walk at my normal brisk pace.

Eventually I made it to the double doors without tripping or rolling my ankle, but just when I thought I could quietly sneak out of the ballroom unnoticed two foot soldiers on either side of me sounded their trumpets. I shut my eyes and winced as the entire room quieted. So much for trying to exit quietly.

"Lady Saphron Swordmaster from the Brotherhood in the Mercy Isles is now retiring from the east side of the ballroom."

It took massive amount of will power for me not to stick the soldier's trumpet down his throat but I contained myself. How the king had managed to exit the ballroom without the entire world knowing, I didn't know. But now that I had more than two hundred people staring at me, I set my shoulders, put my chin up, and marched out of a completely silent nightmare to follow a king to get reprimanded.

* * *

"Brandy, Lady Saphron?"

"Oh, would you please call me Saphron. We're in a private chamber now aren't we?"

"Twenty years of court habits are hard to break, Lady Saphron."

"You're twenty?"

"I will take that as a compliment, Lady Saphron."

I winced slightly. I hadn't meant to say it so rudely, but at least the lord was kind enough to forgive me. The chair I sat in faced Lord Darren's but I could still get a clear view of the beautiful dim room. Irene lay by my feet and enjoyed the warmth of the fireplace as she continued to read the packet of information I had given her. Kelvin lay on his back, still unconscious, next to Lord Darren on a lover's settee. I hadn't thought I had hit him that hard, but it appeared I did.

The king himself lounged in a plush chair that looked well used. He held a crystal glass filled with the dark brandy I had refused. He still hadn't said a word so far, but I knew my actions would not go unrecognized in some fashion.

I opened my mouth to try and make small talk since the awkward silence was becoming oppressive, but the king also opened his mouth, so I closed mine.

"Let's see, how shall I put this? Lady Saphron," He looked up from his brandy glass and gazed at me with the same intensity as before. I remained calm, and awaited his next words with patience. I knew I wouldn't be fired from my summons, but the king could carry out other punishments just as humiliating. "That was the best high table dinner I have had in years."

I gawked at the king in incredulity. Something must have been on my face, because the king slapped his knee and exploded with laughter. Heaves of merriment shook his body and tears started to run down his fine face. I sat in my chair and tried to recover from my shock as best as I could. Irene had looked up at first at the sound of the king's laughter, but now absorbed herself in her reading once again. That surprised me, for Irene

usually would make a hurtful comment about my lack of humor right about now.

"I wish I could have seen your attack on my brother. That would have been something to see."

I crossed my arms over my chest and huffed out my breath.

"He deserved it. Ever since he the Brotherhood Council decided to make him my Bodyguard he had followed me everywhere. I can't get rid of him."

"I hate to point this out to you, Lady Saphron, but isn't that the job of a Bodyguard?"

"It is if you are a Bodyguard. But I told Kelvin, as I was saving his worthless life, that I refused the Council's advice and would not take him."

"I am sorry to interrupt you, Lord Darren, but I think I can clear up some miscommunication for our mercenary here."

During our talk, the king had composed himself and now paced around the perimeter of his private office.

"Lady Saphron the real reason I summoned you is so that you can find a child for me."

I listened intently to the young king as he continued to pace.

"This child is not ordinary, nor is she superhuman. We don't know much about this child but we do know that she is female. But this is not what is most disturbing. Her parents are--"

A loud knock came from the door, and I cursed Issik. My old teacher had a very distinct knock, and a very bad sense of

timing. The king put his glass down, frowned, and walked over to the office door. Sure enough, Issik's smiling face appeared in the threshold. The two men embraced each other and once again brandy was passed around. Lord Darren acknowledged Issik but didn't introduce himself so deduced that they already knew each other. Offers of brandy were passed around once again and glasses were filled. I tapped my foot on the rug and waited for the men to finish their business. They finally sat down, but as Issik started to speak, I intervened before he could start up a different conversation.

"Your Majesty, I believe you were talking about the child and--"

"Ah yes. Thank you for reminding me. Issik, I was about to tell your pupil about the assignment we have been discussing." The three men sat down in various chairs situated around the room and Kelvin's unconscious body. Issik gave the boy one look, then glanced at me, and shook his head. He sat down a moment later and crossed one foot over his knee. Everyone settled, the king began in earnest.

"The child's parents are Moridion and Azure, both now dead."

Irene stopped reading, and sat up. Irene appeared calm as she moved herself in front of me. I knew her body positions well enough to know she was protecting me with her body, not merely stretching herself. Both Lord Darren and Issik both seemed stunned by the king's words, so I knew I had just missed something extremely important.

"Who is--or were--Moridion and Azure?"

"I am not surprised that you do not know who they are. Most texts and records have erased their names from history and all knowledge of them has been destroyed."

"But why? Who were they?"

No one answered my question for a long while. The popping of the fire provided the only sound in the room. I started to wonder if my question would ever be answered, but Lord Darren finally spoke into stillness.

"They were the ones who started this war. Seventeen years ago, Lydinya and Zithoania were allies. They had a custom of marrying their royal children to one another if the ages were right. Moridion and Azure had an arranged marriage and lived peacefully for a time. They had three children, as is the proper number of offspring for royalty."

The king gave a slight grunt of disagreement.

"We know for a fact that the two eldest children have died, but the third child, the girl, is still alive. Scholars have delved into the deepest archives but they haven't found a lot of clues as to her exact location. Records of border passes reveal though that the girl never crossed the border. So we can assume that she is still in Zithoania."

"Thank you, Lord Darren for clearing things up. Now your job Lady Saphron--"

A loud groan came from the settee. Kelvin sat up and took the damp cloth off of his head. Half awake, Kelvin pointed at me with a shaky figure.

"You kicked me."

The king laughed heartily and slapped Kelvin on the back.

"That she did my boy. And did a pretty nice job of it too."

The blow nearly sent Kelvin into the fire but Lord Darren caught him around the middle. Kelvin shoved his brother aside and repeated his question.

"Yes Kelvin I kicked you in the face but only because you scared me."

"Well, I guess I deserve it. Man you hit hard, girl."

"Don't call me that."

"Sorry."

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Darren staring at me. I turned to face him.

"What?"

He shook his head as if to clear it, and then smiled.

"My brother had never said the word, 'sorry', with so much sincerity before. You really are an amazing woman, Lady Saphron."

Before I could bark out a retort to Darren about calling me a woman, Issik interrupted.

"Enough flattery, you all are making me sick. Your Majesty, I think you should tell my pupil her assignment. She tends to get a bit touchy when she is impatient."

"Very well. Lady Saphron, your mission is to locate this child, and bring her here. We need her for one main reason. This child contains vast amounts of power both from her mother's side and

from her father's side. Since you do not know much about Moridion and Azure I will brief you on their magical abilities. Azure had elemental powers that could bend any creature or living organism to her will. Professors have described her abilities as majestic and self influenced. Many say that her powers could have ended the world because she could create or destroy at a whim. She was a kind spirited woman though, and only used her enormous powers for the good of all. Moridion however was a tyrant and a devil. His powers enabled him to control dark energy. The very thing the universe is made out of. At this point in their marriage, Moridion hated his wife so much, that he created a dark species that only he could control. His minions, or demons, were created for only one purpose. Their one sole reason for living was to kill any living thing with Ardinian blood. The very blood that ran through the veins of Azure's family. To save her children and relatives, Azure locked the demons in another universe, but at the cost of her life. Where the location of the demon's cage is today, we don't know. But what we do know is that if Azure hadn't sacrificed herself to cast away the demons, then Moridion surely would have conquered the world. Now back to my main point. If we can find this child, we can use her to defeat the Zithoanian army. I am willing to try diplomacy first, but if that doesn't work, we will use the child."

Blood rushed to my head making my magic trigger. I gripped the sides of my chair and tried to force my emotions under control, but the rush of magic had already entered my body. Slowly, my hair pulled away from my body until it hung in the air from invisible threads. My senses sharpened until the heat from the fire started to feel like the sun itself was burning my skin.

The echo of the king's words infuriated me and a fresh wave of power enveloped me. My eyes crossed as I tried to suppress my magic but my concentration wavered as I looked at the king.

"Someone get water, now!"

Issik's voice boomed through the room, but the meaning of his words was lost on me. I had lost control before, but this seemed worse. I couldn't even tell where Irene sat next to me, and that sent a hot burst of panic through my veins. My entire body felt on fire as my magic rose in intensity. I felt at any moment, my body would simply ignite and catch on fire.

Something splashed across my skin and it took me a second until I recognized the feeling.

Water.

The sound of steam hissed as the water made contact with my body. The cool, refreshing substance poured over my head a second time, and I sucked in a breath that I didn't know I had been holding. Slowly, the world returned to normal and my body temperature decreased. The king's words still fueled my anger, but I could now dominate my self control over my magic. When my vision cleared four people stood around my chair. The one directly in front of me held a large basin of ice in his hands. Recognition speared through me, and I looked at Kelvin in confusion.

"Why do you have ice?"

The person to my right gave a sigh of relief.

"Good, she's coming around. Your Majesty, I think you can now safely conclude that Saphron will not harm the child. She is an

orphan herself and deeply understands the emotions that might make the child dangerous."

"I believe you now Issik when you said not to anger her. That power is tremendous. But could we use her instead of the child? Her power is more than enough to work with."

Issik grabbed my chin and forced my eyes to meet his. I gazed into his familiar face and waited while he finished his examination. He found whatever he was looking for, and released me. As he let my head go, I looked down to see where Irene had placed herself during my fit.

As customary, she sat by my side. I reached down and hugged her with shaky arms. Her wet nose rubbed my hair. I breathed her familiar sent and took comfort in her strength.

"Now who's going to clear things up with Saffy because I'm not. I've already been hit once."

The sound of Kelvin's troubled voice made me grasp the full meaning of the situation. I pulled back from Irene's embrace and settled myself more comfortably in my chair. I cleared my throat to grab the attention of the three men in front of me.

"Clear what up?"

They turned in unison to look at me in surprise. Kelvin looked at his brother, Darren looked to Issik, and my teacher looked to his king. His majesty took the hint, and started to talk.

"I am sorry to have caused you pain my dear, but it was necessary. If I am going to send you on this quest, I need to know that you will return with the child unharmed. Issik assured me that your loyalty to children is like that of a lioness

protecting her cubs. But I needed to see your reaction with my own eyes. My speech about using the child for our own intentions was just a ploy to entice you to speak against me."

"And you have done that, and three times as much."

Issik's soothing voice only comforted me for a moment because his next words had me leaping out of my chair. After my current seizure though, it wasn't the greatest idea. I swayed on my feet and would have fallen if Darren, Irene, and Issik hadn't reached out to steady me.

"Now, Irene I want you to clue in Saffy about the information you have just read in that packet. Saphron you will be departing tomorrow at day break. Darren and Kelvin will accompany you."

"What!"

"Hush, there is no more discussion. Now get to bed before I carry you there myself. That's an order. Move."

I muttered curses under my breath but was too tired to argue. I followed Irene to the door and continued to grumble curses on my way to my rooms. The information that Irene had been instructed to give me could wait until tomorrow. My leopard must have had the same idea, for she stayed quiet as she led me down twisting and confusing corridors. Servants working the late shift glanced at me as I passed, but I ignored them.

Not entirely sure how I had gotten there, I dumped myself onto the inviting bed in the bedroom of my suite. I kicked off my court shoes and clumsily took out my hair pin but I left my dress on due to over exhaustion. Irene hopped up, and curled into a tight ball next to me. Her soft purring lulled me to

sleep and the last conscious thought I had was, 'Men, curse them.' and then my head hit the pillow.

Chapter 4

By Madeleine Kenney

Indigo's reins felt heavy in my hands. The meeting last night had gone long into the night and **run on sentence here** the night before that I had been traveling. My eyes itched, so I knew that they were slightly blood shot from lack of sleep. This was my third visit to Tivoll, and I still hadn't experienced a full night's sleep in one of their luxurious beds.

I covered my eyes with one hand and looked towards the palace. The faint rays of early dawn reflected their bright light on the thousands of glass windows covering Ivoire. As I waited, the warmth of the sun slowly spread across the land but I still kept my cloak wrapped tight around me due to the chill wind.

As I waited for the two who would accompany me on my quest, I talked to Irene about what had happened last night.

"Irene?"

"Yes."

"What is this mission really about?"

"We are going to find a child that has uncontrollable magical powers, like yourself. But her lineage is what is most important. Saffy, the fact that a child of Moridion and Azure is still alive is cause for great celebration, and great concern.

The wars that we fight now are due to the arguments of this child's parents. It is up to her now, whether she knows it or not, to solve her parent's mistakes. Lydinya and Zithoania will kill each other if she does not."

The seriousness and tone of her voice made me look down at my leopard. Issik and I both assumed that Irene had foresight, but it always surprised me when Irene spoke like she did now. There were things I still didn't know about Irene. But she was precious to me, and when she wanted to explain something, she would do it in her own sweet time.

"Irene," I questioned. "how do you know so much?"

It took her awhile to answer. When she spoke, I noticed a trace of bitter sadness in her voice.

"I have lived too long a life."

I absorbed her words. Her tone frightened me but I didn't know if I should be concerned or sympathetic. I had no idea how long Ustani leopards lived. Irene could be referring to her age, or something else.

I opened my mouth to ask her, when Indigo tensed underneath me. I looked at his long face. In the dim light his coat didn't gleam blue, but he still looked powerful and majestic. I opened my mind to him to better understand what he wanted to say.

Sweet lady, new scent is coming from the arch.

I watched the "arch", or front entrance, that Indigo referred to and sure enough, two distant figures could be seen walking this way. One had flaming blonde hair that gleamed in the strengthening light and the other had dark hair that

resembled the lingering shadows from the night. Two stark white stallions trotted behind the two brothers companionably.

I stood up straight and continued to keep my eye on the approaching figures. I regretted not putting up a better fight with Issik about this arrangement, but last night my mind had only cared about sleep and nothing else. So, Kelvin and Darrin were to accompany me on my quest to find this lost child of Zithoania. The whole mission sounded a little far-fetched to me but the reward was worth the effort. If finding this child could end the dreaded war for good, then no amount of pain would be spared on my part.

"Good morning, Saphron. I hope your night was pleasant."

The eloquent voice pulled me from my thoughts. Lord Darren and Kelvin stood beside their beautiful mounts and smiled at me. Standing side by side, I could finally see the close family resemblance. Despite the difference of hair color, the two men could be twins.

"My night was pleasant. Wait, you didn't call me, Lady Saphron. Why the change?"

Kelvin crossed his arms and leaned against his horse. Giving his brother a familiar playful smile, Kelvin answered my question.

"We met up with Issik before we met you. He gave my brother a little advice about traveling with you. Taking off the 'Lady' part of your name was first on his list."

Pleased that my mentor was still looking out for me, I smiled and mounted Indigo. If Issik had given Lord Darren a "talk" then maybe this quest wouldn't be so depressing.

Kelvin and Darren followed my lead and we spurred our horses out of the inner courtyard. Kelvin placed his horse next to mine, but Darren squeezed his horse in between us. Issik must have given a very convincing speech.

Irene wandered between the three horses until she settled in between Kelvin and Darren. They both looked down at her, at each other, then shrugged. I questioned Irene's choice of company, but didn't bother to try and persuade her to move. She would move anyway; as soon as Kelvin started speaking.

Our group approached the guards stationed at the gateway. They checked our bags for stolen valuables, checked our passes, and stared at Irene. They didn't raise the alarm however, and we passed through the checkpoint easily. The grounds of the palace gardens and walkways continued after the gateway, and we passed through the fading flowerbeds in silence. Polite conversation wasn't my strong point, but to make this mission successful I would try and get along with Darren. Kelvin, would take some time, but his brother might be doable.

"Darren, what is your horse's name?"

Surprised, Darren turned in his saddle to look at me. His expression softened however and I found myself staring at his handsome features.

"That is an interesting question. My horse's name is, Moon. Kelvin's is, Milk."

I looked past Darren to speak to Kelvin.

"That poor horse. Kelvin why did you name an innocent animal something like Milk?"

Kelvin patted Milk's neck and smiled.

"It fit."

I wanted to ask the horse what she thought, but let the urge slide. When the two lords were asleep, I would try and communicate with Moon and Milk. Poor souls, they probably hated their names. Although Moon's name had a mysterious quality about it that might be desirable for an animal's pride.

"I named my horse, Indigo. He is a war stallion and a companion that I trust and love dearly."

Indigo tossed his mane in satisfaction. Darren and Kelvin gave my horse a curious glance but said nothing.

"It is hard to love a beast who disobeys you all of the time."

Kelvin's voice didn't contain sarcasm and that spiked my interest. I made a mental note to myself to speak with Kelvin's mount. If I communicated with Milk then maybe I could council her on how to tolerate Kelvin's personality.

"We're coming up to the town square. Saphron, you may be wondering why I am accompanying you on this endeavor. I have graduated from the school of Arledrine. And I--"

"Darren, why didn't you tell me that before? Do you know that you are the only person I have met that has graduated from the school alive?"

"Yes, I am the only graduate."

I gaped at him in amazement. Irene glanced up at Darren in brief curiosity, then returned to eyeing a squirrel in the bushes. I on the other hand, was about to fall out of my saddle. It was entirely possible that Darren could beat me in combat. That sparked both my ego and my interest. Later that night, I would force Darren to spar with me and then judge his talent level. But if he claimed to be the only graduate from the school of Arledrine, then his skill was something to be feared.

"Ah. So I see you have heard of Arledrine."

"Who hasn't? Darren, you must be good. And how old did you say you were?"

"Twenty."

I whistled. A thought entered my head, and I smiled.

"Darren, will you fight me later on when we break for camp?"

He turned his head and gave me a heartbreaking smile.

"Certainly. But don't cry when I beat you."

"I don't cry."

We shook hands to seal the agreement. Turning slightly to the right, we started to head down a stone tunnel. We didn't take the main exit from the palace because attracting attention wouldn't be to our advantage. This side exit would provide secrecy, something that now needed to come first, above all things.

"That is true you know."

Both Darren and I turned to look at Kelvin. The blonde haired young man sat upon his mount with his back straight and his head forward. Kelvin rarely acted serious, but his current posture expressed a somber attitude. He didn't continue to speak however and I wondered if that was all he had to say.

"What do you mean?"

Darren spoke politely to his brother but I caught a slight hint of impatience in his voice. I smiled. I wasn't the only one who got annoyed with Kelvin's theatrics.

"Never once in my life have I seen you cry, Saphron."

That made me pause. I fiddled with Indigo's reins and tried to figure out how to turn the conversation. I wanted to simply ignore the statement but Darren looked at me expectantly. I sighed. Leave it to Kelvin to bring up an awkward point in my childhood. Kelvin's statement was true, and many Masters and professors at the Brotherhood could bear witness. No matter the situation or circumstance, I had never needed a mother's comfort. I had learned to live without family and that strengthened a small child to the point where expressing emotions was embarrassing. Crying, to me, conveyed self-pity. As a child with no home and no future, self-pity was a powerful current that led to the path of depression. I had kept myself away from that path by swearing to myself that I would never cry. All my life I had kept my promise secret and secure. Now Kelvin wanted me to explain.

"Kelvin, I never cried because you weren't worth crying over. Sorry to disappoint you."

Darren threw his head back and laughed. His voice echoed slightly in the tunnel. Kelvin didn't join his brother so I knew my answer didn't satisfy him. Darren didn't know me as well as Kelvin did so he continued laughing and ignored his kin's silence. That suited me perfectly.

"Kelvin how did you survive in the Brotherhood with someone like her?"

His moment of seriousness over, Kelvin smiled and turned to Darren.

"I didn't brother. What you see now is all that is left from the butt of her sword. You should see my scars."

I snorted.

"Oh please, Kelvin. (think of witty remark)"

Both brothers laughed until they had to hold their stomachs and wipe their eyes. They were still recovering when we reached the end of the tunnel. Into broad daylight and mayhem.

I had to immediately jerk Indigo backwards before we got trampled by a passing wagon. Pedestrians, carts full of food stuffs, vendors pulling wagons full of merchandise, women carrying baskets with their homemade produce filled the streets of Tivoll. The people of this city were early risers and their famous market started as soon as the sun rose. The smell of freshly baked bread wafted its way from the bakery to across the street. The sweet smell reminded my stomach of its missed meal. The noise of bargaining and clanking of wares being sold bounced off of the stone shops walls. This was the Tivoll market. These were the smells, noises, and sights I remembered and dreamed

about. When? Why? Give us some insight as to her past history with this market.

"Looks like everyone's out and about already. It's going to cause us major problems that for sure. With all this traffic it's going to be hard to get from place to place."

Kelvin's voice reminded me of my purpose here. I didn't have time to shop or play around. My assignment was my only priority. My only purpose. My only goal.

The king had despondently paid for our entire voyage to the shores of Zithoania where we would begin our search for the child. The ship's departure time was ten, three hours from now, but Darren needed necessary provisions and that would take time for him to arrange.

I desperately wanted to roam the market, taking in all of the strange and unique items for sale. It excited me to see so many wonderful things to buy and I had a twinge of envy for the people who had time to accumulate such beautiful things. But time for shopping wasn't on the agenda today so I banished the thought from my mind and concentrated on the mission set ahead of us.

"Who's hungry because I'm starving?" Kelvin rubbed his belly to emphasize his point and looked at Darren expectantly.

Darren gazed at the traffic below him, but didn't answer his brother's question right away.

"We'll get breakfast somewhere and then find provisions. While I do that, you and Saphron can shop or look around the market for any supplies that we might have forgotten."

Glee fluttered through me but I squashed it down. The mission needed to be top priority. Shopping could wait. Shopping was a luxury that belonged to the common people around us. Who lived ordinary lives and followed regular schedules.

"If we have extra time, why don't we board the ship and get to Zithoania faster?" I said.

Kelvin gave me a bored look.

"Do you always have to be so contrary?"

"Kelvin, be serious. The country of Lydinya depends on our success."

It was his turn to snort.

"You make it sound so desperate."

"That's because it is, you half wit--"

"Alright you two children," Darren interjected. "I am going to decide what to do since neither of you have the maturity to figure it out yourselves."

Interrupted, Kelvin and I both looked at Darren in mild surprise. He sounded so like Issik that I had to force myself from snapping my spine in an upright position. Issik's special ability to calm a situation and take control easily never ceased to amaze me. It appeared that Darren possessed this quality as well.

"Now, we are all going to go over to the bakery, get breakfast and then split up. I will shop for provisions, while you two head toward the ship and secure our passage. Does everyone understand?"

I crossed my arms and tried to hide the smile on my face. Darren enunciated each word and talked extremely slow as if Kelvin and I were lacking in intelligence. Kelvin nodded, and I followed.

"Alright," Darren sighed and glanced at the sky in exasperation. "We will meet back up again at half past nine. If you do not appear, we will send out a search party and the king will be notified; unless it's Kelvin."

With that, Darren turned Moon into the swell of people and quickly disappeared from sight. Kelvin and I stood there a moment trying to fathom how we were going to get along for two and a half hours, much less on a long quest. To me, this was worse than practice with Issik; and those were not easy lessons.

"I feel so loved by my family. I always have the assurance that they will look for me if I go missing." Kelvin said.

I grunted and spurred Indigo into the thick current of citizens trying to get to their destinations on time. The bakery across the street should have been easy to get to, but with the crowds it took us quite a while. I had to keep my eyes from wandering to the stalls covered in trinkets and curious objects for fear of trampling someone. I lost track of Irene and that worried me. Her tail could easily be stepped on in this crowded marketplace, and she would not like that. Irene's growl of pain would ensure her presence being noticed in this bustling town.

One frightened scream of "Ustani leopard" and the whole town guard would be summoned.

Finally, after a good amount of pushing and shoving, we made it safely to the other side. There were posts for tying horses, and Kelvin and I both fastened Milk and Indigo. We walked into the bakery and immediately breathed the rich aroma of baked bread. I pulled in a deep breath full of the scent, and let out a little moan of delight. I travelled constantly, and rarely enjoyed the luxury of fresh meals. My diet usually consisted of dried meat, bread, and cheese. Irene appeared next to me and I felt relieved that she was safely by me again. People pushed us from behind further into the tiny bakery. Kelvin, Irene, and I made our way up to the front counter, but had to wait as the customers in front of us made their purchases.

"Walter's bakery is the best in the city, Saphron. Every time I come here I feel like I might just go crazy if I don't get a bite of something here. What about you, Saphron? The look on your face tells me you don't have this kind of food often."

I gave him a sour look. I didn't want to appear like a desperate puppy in front of him. Kelvin saw my look and put his hands up in supplication.

"Easy, easy. I know traveling is rough when it comes to food. Believe me, I have been traveling nonstop for the past three years."

I looked at Kelvin and judged his expression. He wasn't smiling, so that meant he was being somewhat serious. After I had graduated, all thoughts of Kelvin had vanished from my mind.

The title of Master meant that you could now be eligible for summoning. During my three years since graduating from the Brotherhood, traveling, working, and my own personal activities, had kept me ignorant of Brotherhood news. The fact that Kelvin had been traveling as long as I had was news to me.

"How can I help you, pretty lass? And Kelvin, what a pleasure it is to see you again. You found a girl? Good for you, lad."

I looked at the man covered in flour and guessed that he was the baker. His face resembled the shade of pink and the gleam of sweat showed on his bald head. Kelvin seemed to be lost for words but I had plenty so I answered the baker in a kind, soft voice.

"No, I am not his "girl". I barely consider him as a fellow Master. Now, kind baker, can I please have two hot buns with butter, and a bowl of warm milk for my leopard."

The man appeared rather flabbergasted at my smart response. He glanced curiously at Kelvin then quickly reached for the things I had ordered, his brow furrowed with amusement and confusion. He had an impatient line of hungry people and he was smart enough not to keep them waiting. But he paused when he reached for the bowl of warm milk. Placing the two steaming buns in a paper sack and the warm milk in a glass bottle on his worn counter the baker gave me an odd look. He gazed at me for a second then leaned over and caught sight of Irene.

"Holy Rian! You're that swordmaster, ain't ya? Well, I'll be darned. No wonder you're not Kelvin's girl. He couldn't get such an amazing lass like you in a million years."

He chuckled to himself as he told me my total. I handed him the correct change, and thanked him for his service. His comment of heartfelt admiration made up for his assumption I was just an ordinary lass so I smiled genuinely at the baker this time and stepped out of line.

I waited at the back of the bakery as Kelvin ordered his breakfast in a dejected manner, pouting over the baker's remark. Irene nosed the bottle of warm milk I held in my hand. I bent down and unstopped the bottle and let her have her fill. Several times, I caught the baker's glance at Irene before he finished his business with Kelvin. I ignored the looks. I was used to the attention Irene drew when we were travelling. We were a sight for sore eyes to ordinary folk.

"Well that was harsh." Kelvin said in a dejected tone.

I looked at his sorrowful face and giggled.

"It's the truth. The truth is always harsh."

Kelvin headed towards the door and grumbled something under his breath. I had to strain my neck to better hear what he said.

"I should've known I wouldn't get any sympathy from you."

The chaotic mayhem of the busy market drowned the rest of Kelvin's grumblings. Indigo greeted me with a whinny and I rubbed behind his right ear the way I knew he liked best. Kelvin mounted Milk and dug into his meal without greeting his horse. I made note of that as I pulled myself onto Indigo's back. The bag in my hands was getting hot so I pulled out a roll and admired its design. Three thick ropes of dough had been braided onto the

front of the rectangular roll. In Lydinya, the braid symbolized their three mottos. Loyalty, Life, and Liberty. Melted butter coated the bun and I bit into it with bliss. The soft interior of the bun sent my taste buds singing, and I had to force myself to not immediately rush into the bakery and buy two dozen more.

"Good isn't it?" Kelvin appeared for a second to enjoy witnessing my enjoyment of the delicious bread.

"Anyhow, we better get to the ship before Darren scolds us for being late." I nodded my agreement and let Kelvin lead the way as I continued to enjoy my breakfast. We made slow progress, but eventually, we neared the port. I didn't see it right away, but the smell of salt told me we were close. Irene too noticed the smell and sped up a tiny bit. I knew she loved the sea so I didn't tell her to keep close to Indigo. Not for her sake, but for mine. If she got spotted by anyone, I always lied our way out of the situation by saying Irene was my pet. After that, questions were few.

"What is the name of the ship? And where do you think--"

The beautiful glitter of shining jeweled lockets, pendants, and necklaces caught my eye and I paused mid-sentence. Kelvin followed my gaze to the sparkling shop to the left of us. I realized he saw me looking at girlish trinkets. I waited for one of his degrading comments but none came.

"There's no point in us sticking together, you know." Kelvin casually observed.

I turned to Kelvin. It took a great amount of effort to get my eyes off of the pretty stalls.

"Huh?" I managed to get out.

"I'll go to the ship and secure our passage while you, er, finish getting our final supplies. We're early anyway and I don't see Darren around. Meet me at the Thunderbird in twenty minutes."

He and Milk disappeared into the crowd before I could even think of a response. Kelvin's actions surprised me I hoped he didn't notice me looking over the trinkets continuously calling my attention. I battled with myself. I could follow after him and only focus on the mission but this perfect opportunity to explore couldn't be neglected.

Browsing through markets stalls filled with beautiful and unusual objects had become my single source of pleasure during difficult journeys. Now, with Kelvin constantly at my side I couldn't linger and enjoy looking at the stalls least he realize what I'm doing. If Kelvin suspected that I like to shop, like a typical girly female, rumor of my "female weakness" would spread to the Brotherhood in less than a fortnight. I sighed. Irene sat on the ground next to Indigo, looked up at me and waited for my decision.

As I turned Indigo towards the direction of the shop, a piercing scream carried itself across the harbor. People stopped, turned, and stared in the direction of where the scream originated.

Adrenaline began pumping as I spurred Indigo in the direction of the young voice screaming. The motionless crowds enabled me to weave my way through to the small grouping starting to form. I couldn't see what they were looking at, but

I could tell the continuous screams were coming from the figure lying on the ground. People shuffled in confusion to get out of the way of Indigo's hoofs as I barreled into their midst. My view from the top of Indigo's saddle gave me an advantage. I looked over the tops of pedestrians and spotted a small child on the ground.

I waited to see if a parent or guardian would come and take the girl to a hospice, but no one even offered to help the small girl to her feet. Her dirty, curly brown hair stuck out from her head in disarray and her limbs were splayed around her. As we all stood there, the poor child let out another piercing scream that caused the group of citizens to back away in fear. I didn't move. The group kept backing away further, until Irene and I were enclosed with the injured child in a circle of suspicious eyes.

Angered and confused as to why no one was helping the girl, I walked forward to reach for her, but a man's voice stopped me. "Don't. That the strange one. She's been missing for some time." He whispered in a frantic voice.

I narrowed my eyes in confusion. I stayed kneeling by the girl but didn't reach down to touch her. Obviously, these peasants knew the girl and were frightened by her.

"What do you mean, sir? This child is in need of medical help." I carried my voice so that everyone in the crowd could hear me and maybe give me some information on the girl.

"No she ain't. That one is just a work of the devils."

"Strange, that one is." Another townsman shouted hoarsely as his eyes swept the skies as if demons were about to land at any minute.

More heads nodded in agreement, murmurings and whispers about a devil's child started to spread throughout the gathering. Nothing they said clarified my question, but I listened as one middle aged woman spoke up.

"She is an experiment child. A strange man, I don't know his name, just took Isabella from the streets one day. No one thought much of it. She's an urchin child and no concern of our folk."

Her callous words angered me but I understood some of what she said. Peasants only looked out for their own. They didn't have time or money to worry about others. Money hoarded, food coveted, and shelter cosseted made up the life of a peasant. Street urchins, such as the pitiful girl on the ground, weren't treated well or cared for in desperate times like these when poverty consumed most of these peasants. It was cruel, and the people knew that, life as they had always known it was a survival of the fittest.

"Who was the man that took this child?" I implored the townspeople.

I encompassed the entire throng with my question. If one person knew so much, then there were bound to be more.

"We don't know, miss. He popped out of nowhere. Had the air of self-righteousness to 'im though."

"That's right, Thome. Aristocrat for sure."

Irene appeared next to me. I heard gasps from the collecting mass of people around me, but I ignored them. I looked at Irene and watched her as she placed a paw on the child's heart. I waited as Irene's senses could examine the injuries of the street urchin. Irene's almost human talents had stopped surprising me when I had learned she could read. After that revelation years ago, Irene's ability to talk, her knowledge of medical training, and her ability to possess foresight didn't awe me as they had in the past.

"Her heart is failing."

I felt my blood turn cold. I had suspected the child's injury was severe, but not heart failure. No wonder the girl had been screaming.

"What can I do, Irene?"

My question seemed to please Irene. She often said the answer to a problem would never reveal itself if one gave up too soon.

"Is this really our concern? The child's condition is almost fatal." Irene's words had truth, but something inside me refused to accept them. Looking at the child, memories threatened to flood my mind. I tried to ignore them, but every time the child moaned in pain, the fresh rush of a forgotten past throbbed in my head. I couldn't walk away from this street urchin, who had no one in the world to save her pathetic little body. My own childhood memories were filled with hurt and loneliness at just the age of this wretched girl.

"I can save her. If I use--"

I clutched the locket that hung near my heart. I didn't want to say its name and I didn't need to. Irene glanced at my hand and understood my meaning. Her head dropped for a moment and I feared her delay would cause the child her life, but Irene quickly looked up again.

"If you are willing to accept the consequences of that power, then I will not stop you. I will remind you however, that we are in the view of the public."

Desperate to use my magical talent in such a dire situation, I pulled out my most precious possession. The soft luminescent gleam of the silver locket caught on the sunlight. I noted it's brilliance with admiration for its simple, but elegant beauty. Gasps of wonder and amazement emitted from the crowd, but I closed their voices out of my head. In order to heal the child, I needed to shut down my senses from distraction.

First I blocked the sound around me. Second, I focused on impeding my vision by closing my eyes. Third, the after taste of the delicious rolls I had eaten that morning was banished from my taste. Fourth, my feeling of my knees being pressed into the hard surface of cobblestones erased itself from my body. Fifth, I shut the smells of the city of Tivoll until I couldn't distinguish anything.

All feeling, awareness, and recognition of being alive scared me at first, as it always did. Blackness surrounded me, and a cocoon of absolute silence encompassed me. The only sensation I had, was the comforting glow of my locket. I held it loosely in my motionless hands. I couldn't look directly at the

piece of jewelry and neither could I move my hands up to my face, but I knew I held the square piece of metal.

When my body began to adjust itself, I reached for the locket with my mind. When I had first obtained the locket from Irene, she had taught me how to use its powers. Only in this state of complete nothingness could a person open what I called the, "sixth sense".

Carefully, I envisioned a string coming from my mind to the clasp that kept my locket from opening. When I reached and tugged open the tiny fastener, a soft melody washed across my disembodied soul. The short song continuously reminded me of something, but every time I tried to hum the tune to Irene, all memory of the song evaporated.

The sweet feeling of power followed the tune and I felt every cell in my body spring to life. Slowly, the energy forced my taste, smell, touch, hearing, and sight to release from their locked positions. Overwhelming sensations overpowered my control on my magic and it slipped out of my grasp for a split second. I grabbed with the power until I could contain it once more. I didn't know what kind of damage I had caused to the people around me but I didn't hear alarms. I sighed in relief and then concentrated on what I had to do next.

Opening my eyes, I carefully located the child's body and placed my hands on her small chest. Her breaths came in rapid and uneven spurts so I knew I didn't have much time. Unlocking my locket took time. Time this girl didn't have at the moment. I contemplated my options and quickly decided that the child's only injury was her heart. That surprised me. Irene had taught me most of what she knew about medical training, and a failing

heart was usually due to another injury. Yet the brown haired street urchin radiated health which also astonished me. I put aside my questions for later and turned my attention back to my power.

I pulled a strand of healing power from the massive amount contained in my body and projected it through my hands to the child. Her little body arched in pain as the magic entered her body to start healing, but I kept her down. Keeping the magic flowing was like blowing out a continuous breath. The strain of forcing the magic out of my body and into the child's failing heart exhausted me. Before, when I had performed other healings, the consequences had been high. Fainting, becoming ill, and losing large amounts of weight had been the most severe. Irene warned me not to push myself but I could never really tell what was my limit.

I didn't control how the magic healed the child. I just let it run its course and hoped it would work. I could feel my body tiring, but the child still needed help, so I ignored my discomforts.

It felt like hours, but soon, my healing power started to wane. Under my trembling hands the child's heart beat strongly. The locket's clasp snapped shut, and I relaxed.

Before the effect of the magic could take my consciousness away from me, I noticed a man dressed entirely in black appear next to the girl. The man reached down to touch the little street urchin and something inside of me screamed. I tried to cover the child's body with my own but my muscle wouldn't respond. The healing was absorbing every last drop of my energy.

I slowly sunk down towards the cobblestone street and into oblivion.

* * *

"Kelvin, for Rian's sake, I only told you to keep an eye on her for only an hour."

Slowly, my blurry vision cleared and I could make out two shadowy figures. From my narrow point of view, I couldn't see Irene, but I knew she must be somewhere near. I opened my mouth to ask the two men standing above me, but my parched throat only let out a gravelly moan.

"Darren, she's fine. Just a slight concussion, that's all."

I heard the sound of a smack, and the painful yelp that belonged to Kelvin a second later. Darren had hit him. I tried to smile, but my lips cracked from dehydration.

"She's been unconscious for eight hours and you call that a slight concussion? No wonder she wouldn't accept you as her Bodyguard. You would have her dead in an hour."

As Kelvin and Darren argued, I opened my eyes further and took a good look around the small cabin. I was on a ship. I could tell by the slow, continuous rocking underneath me. The only light came from a small window shaped like a crude square.

The cot I slept on occupied the farthest corner from the door. Soft blue sheets covered me from head to foot. They were made from the most expensive silk. The emblem of the king's personal guards occupied the left corner of the blankets in yellow stitching.

It all came back to me in a rush. The quest, the lost child of Moridion and Azure, the ship that the King had reserved for us, the sick street urchin in the street, and my desperate attempt to save her with my barely controllable magic. I wondered what had happened to the poor thing. I prayed to the gods that I hadn't harmed her further. I never really knew what my bizarre magic would do once I had unleashed it.

"Saffy, you're awake." I looked down to see Irene staring at me with love and concern in her eyes. I pulled my hand out from under the heavy sheets, to pet her soft dark head. She started to purr.

Kelvin and Darren ceased their argument, and looked over at me in surprise. Darren made a low bow, but Kelvin just crossed his arms. I sighed inwardly. Apparently a few more hours of rest were out of the question. Darren, Kelvin, and Irene all looked like they had questions and wanted answers. Darren spoke first.

"Lady Saphron Swordmaster of the Mercy Isles, my deepest apologies for your current condition—"

"Oh, save it, Darren, I don't need a royal apology. I'm fine. And don't blame Kelvin there was nothing he could have done to protect me. This is my problem."

The two brothers stared at me in astonishment. Darren seemed lost for words, but Kelvin laughed jubilantly.

"Saphron are you feeling all right? You do realize you just defended me, don't you?"

I grunted and tried to sit up. I managed to elevate myself somewhat, but my elbow gave out when I put weight on it. Both Kelvin and Darren caught me and helped my weak body into an upright position. My head spun with the sudden movement. The rocking of the ship didn't help my nausea either. I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths before I could keep my stomach down.

"Easy, Saphron. Don't push yourself. You've been out for eight hours now."

I ignored Darren's advice, embarrassed by my weakness. I pushed myself to my limits more than a healthy human should every day. I pushed myself to save my homeland, to become a Master in all martial arts, and to shield myself from my loneliness. I kept myself busy and moving for one reason. If I stopped being active, if I stopped and settled somewhere, I would have to face the fact that I am truly alone. Excluding Irene, I was alone.

"Speaking of, Saphron why did you faint in the first place?"
Said Kelvin.

I looked at Irene. She simply nodded her head. I had hoped they wouldn't ask this question, but I should have known one of them would ask. It didn't surprise me that Kelvin was the one. I tried to concoct a way to answer the prying question without giving too much away about my magical abilities, but nothing came to my mind. They wouldn't believe anything but the truth anyway and something about the child I had healed concerned me.

"I'll tell you, but this strictly stays between us." I glared at the two brothers and lowered my voice. I wanted to make it clear that my words were to be taken with utmost seriousness. "If I catch wind that you spread the information I am about what I am going to tell you, then I will personally hunt you down."

I switched my gaze from one to the other until they both nodded their head in understanding. I relaxed my face and smiled amiably. Darren shook his head as if to clear it then spoke aloud.

"You were right brother. She is a dangerous one. Lady Saphron, I don't think I am looking forward to our promised spar. That look you just gave us right now sent chills up my spine."

I laughed at his sincerity, but stopped when I realized they were now waiting for me to continue with my explanation. I made myself comfortable then proceeded with my abbreviated answer.

"I healed a street urchin whose heart was failing. I used a power, the origin of this magic I will not tell you, so don't ask. The consequence of using my healing magic puts a great strain on my physical body. That is all."

The small cabin became deadly quiet. Irene, who had posted herself at the door to make sure no one eavesdropped, remained silent as well. I wanted her by my side, but I knew she needed to protect our privacy. Letting other people know about my rare talent was never easy. Not many people knew about my gift, and those who did instantly became wary, distrustful, and suspicious around me. But if I was going to succeed with this mission, then I needed complete trust from Kelvin and Darren. If they were

going to turn against me, then I needed to know now rather than later.

Before, as a young girl, when I had revealed to friends my power of healing and magic they had instantly shunned me. Issik had learned about it and had consoled me not to hate myself. He understood me slightly and thanks to him, I remained a student at the Brotherhood. Magic was not common in the Mercy Isles, or anywhere. Those who had the rare ability were regarded as evil or bad luck.

From that day forward, I had learned not to share my personal feelings or talents with anyone but Irene and Issik. The more people who didn't know about me, the more who wouldn't treat me with barely hidden contempt. It had been a personal promise to myself not to ever mention my powers to again. The King of Lydinya could be considered an exception since he could be trusted to keep my magic a secret. Otherwise he wouldn't be getting so much support from this council if they knew I possessed elemental powers.

And now, I had just revealed to two more people that I was a magi. Either one of them could attack me, and in my present condition I wouldn't be able to protect myself well. I knew that Irene would come to my aid. If Kelvin or Darren even reached for a weapon, she could kill them in seconds.

Kelvin started to laugh.

I shouldn't have been surprised but I couldn't help myself. How could he laugh? I opened my mouth to ask him but Darren held up his hand to stall me. He had to raise his voice slightly in order to make himself heard over Kelvin's laughter.

"Is this true Lady Saphron? You belong to the species of rare magicians that roam the world looking for safety and salvation?"

I snorted and swung my shaky legs over the narrow cot. I knew I couldn't stand, but I didn't want to be in a position that made me look like a cripple.

"You make it sound like I'm a piece of science recently discovered."

To my annoyance, Darren gave me a low bow of apology.

"I am sorry to have offended you but that--"

Kelvin dropped his arm on Darren's shoulder and finished his brother's sentence for him.

"That is the definition that he learned in the school of Arledrine. An unjust definition but a definition all the same."

I remained quiet. They were taking it better than I thought they would but that didn't mean total loyalty. I could tell Darren had second thoughts about me already. So, I called him on it.

"Look you two. I only told you this because I can't afford betrayal on this mission. So if you are having doubts, now would be an excellent time to back out. Either you stay and accept the fact that I possess magical abilities, or you go back to Lydinya and tell the world about my magic. Your choice."

I crossed my arms and waited for their answers. I guessed Kelvin would stay, judging from his reaction, but I wondered about Darren. He would be a valuable addition to my team, but I didn't want to have arguments later. It was better to get this

over with now so I could estimate the probability of our success.

I looked behind the two men who were discussing their opinions in low tones to see if Irene still guarded the door. Irene wasn't there. Stunned, it dawned on me that I hadn't even noticed the door opening. I must really be tired if I couldn't even notice a door opening right in front of me. Why Irene had left I didn't know but I knew she would have had a good reason. Irene never did anything without a purpose.

"We'll stay."

Taken aback, I glared at the brothers to see if they spoke truth. Humor and excitement filled Kelvin's bright blue eyes and I found myself smiling at him. Despite his countless faults, there was some good in him. Either that or he failed to understand the danger of traveling with a mage.

Darren on the other hand had a mixture of pity and apprehension in his eyes. I recognized that combination and it frightened me. Those types of eyes had haunted me throughout my childhood. Teachers in the Brotherhood had looked at me with those same emotions in their eyes. Masters, the Council, students, peers they had all looked at me with mostly fear and some pity. I turned my head away from Darren's eyes and inspected the floor. Kelvin would be fine, but I needed to keep an eye on Darren to make sure he didn't betray me. I saddened me though. As much as I hated to admit it, I had started to see Darren as a potential friend. Now, he was only a threat.

"You don't have to look so unhappy, Saphron. I know you don't want us to come, but--"

Scratching from the door made me reach for my daggers. Kelvin and Darren pulled hidden short swords from somewhere beneath their clothing. I tried to force myself to stand but my legs shook so badly that I had to sit down again. Even sitting, though, I remained a dangerous opponent.

Irene casually entered the cabin with a stack of papers in her mouth. She looked at the three of us with our weapons unsheathed and our bodies in fighting positions. Dismissing us, Irene walked past the two brothers and came to sit by me. She dropped the stack of papers in my lap and put one heavy paw on top of them. I knew she wanted to sit on the cot with me, but I didn't think the small frame would support her weight.

"It is time you read this. All of you." Irene looked at each of us with dead seriousness.

I picked the thin stack of papers off my lap and examined them. I remembered how I had given the stack to Irene to analyze. It appeared that she had digested the information and now wanted the rest of us to read it.

"What is it exactly?" I aimed my question at Irene but Darren answered.

"It is the most vital information the scholars at the Ivoire palace could find. It isn't much, but our search will go much more smoothly with the knowledge contained in that packet."

I eyed the thin stack. "Should I read it out loud or just--"

"I will tell you what you need to know."

Surprised, we all looked at Irene who sat on the floor. Her suggestion suited me fine, but I wondered if Kelvin and Darren

were comfortable with an Ustani leopard reading to them like little children.

"It will be faster if I just explain to you the situation. The ship is landing in three hours at the shore of Dirah."

The brothers nodded and I followed. I must have been out a while if we were only three hours from the border of Zithoania. It normally took eleven hours to cross from the shores of Lydinya to the mid way point in the Mercy Isles. As I thought about the divided sea and islands, it dawned on me that Moridion and Azure had caused the division.

"Alright, Irene tells us what you know."

Kelvin and Darren made themselves comfortable on the two other chairs provided in the room. I slid back against the wall of the cabin and laid my head against the rough wood. The hard texture of the wall kept my eyes and senses alert. It gave me a slight headache, but I knew if I put a pillow underneath me then I would be asleep in minutes. When we were all arranged, Irene began.

"The child's name is unknown, but her age and features are. Pay attention to all of the details I give you. The private journal of Azure describes her five children in great detail. There were three boys and two girls. Azure mentions only two of her children's names. Why, we are not sure. The two names belonged to two out of the three boys. The child we are looking for is a girl."

Irene took a brief pause to let her information sink in. Before she could continue however, I interrupted her with a question.

"Irene, how do we know it's a girl?"

Giving me a look, Irene answered me in a grumbled tone.

"I will get to that in a minute."

I nodded. Everything would be explained in good time. I just needed to be patient. Not something I was good at unfortunately.

"Azure talks about her children with love and deep affection but further into the journal, she mentions her youngest child, the girl we are searching for. The queen starts to worry about the girl. We have calculated that this is around the time when Moridion and Azure started having disagreements. If this is a clue to something, I think we are too ignorant right now to determine it. By the end of the journal, Azure mentions something that disturbs even me."

The room remained silent. Only the sound of the waves hitting the prow of the ship and the crew above manning the sails could be heard throughout the room.

"Azure's youngest child went insane."

I gasped. I immediately regretted expressing my surprise for fear of showing lack of self control during missions, but both Kelvin and Darren sat forward in their chairs. Darren clasped his hands together and let them hang below his knees. Kelvin uncrossed his legs for his nonchalant position and spoke to Irene."

"Insane? We are looking for an insane child?"

"No, Kelvin," Irene's voice took on a tone of sorrow. "We are looking for a seventeen year old who has lost everything."

"Wait," Darren interjected his voice, " So that means we are looking for someone Saphron's age?"

I looked at Darren. He seemed somewhat surprised. I had guessed that the "child" really wasn't a child today. Fifteen years had passed since the beginning of the war. That meant the youngest child of Moridion and Azure had been two when her parents had almost destroyed the world.

"Yes we are looking for someone Saphron's age." Irene continued, " The journal ends abruptly before we know what happened to Azure's youngest and most powerful child. But on the last page the queen describes her magical child's capabilities. If we are to believe the journal, then the girl we seek can move the very substance of the universe itself. Azure thought her child was going insane, but in reality, her child was growing into her full power. We have records of other council members who were in office during Moridion's reign. They say the girl was the king's favorite pet and he always played with her after meeting with dignitaries. This is--"

I held up my hand. My mind needed time to think through everything Irene had revealed about our quarry. I glanced at the packet of paper on the floor by my feet and wondered how such a small amount of paper could contain so much information.

"Irene, back up for a minute. You said the child-or girl-could manipulate the energy of the universe. Is this the reason behind us finding her for Lydinya?"

"Yes," Irene paused, " And no."

I snorted.

"Irene, do you always have to talk in a language I can't understand?"

"Yes, we are being sent to retrieve the child for her abilities with magic but only for defense purposes. If Zithoania takes control of the world, then humanity will become little more than slaves to the current ruler. And no, the child's magical talent is under control now, but in a few years time her magic will cause damage to her, and her present surroundings."

"Well if that's all," Kelvin said, "Why are we going to all of this trouble just to protect her from herself. I understand the need to find her for Lydinya but she is the daughter of the couple who started this whole thing."

Irene remained thoughtful. I waited eagerly for her answer. I had been tempted to ask the very same question. Why were we on this improbable quest to find a girl who we weren't even sure is alive?

"Azure had a kind heart. She came from a loving and beautiful family that taught her generosity and compassion from an early age. When she was married to Moridion, a man who had grown up in the war of politics and deceit, Azure took special precautions to make sure any children of hers remained uninvolved by his evilness. As each of her children were born, Azure's planning ahead proved useful. Until the day her fifth child was born. Azure's journal doesn't explain why Moridion took such a fascination with his fifth born when he barely acknowledged the rest of his children. I can only assume it was because of the child's magical powers."

"I see." Said Darren, " Irene that packet of information the king gave you held all of this?"

Irene tilted her head to the side and gave Darren a cat like look of approval.

"A private journal of a famous queen can reveal much."

Darren accepted this explanation and got up to stretch. He walked over to the window. He turned back into the room with his hands clasped behind his back. With the sun directly behind him, it was hard for me to see Darren's expression clearly but I heard determination in his voice.

"Alright, we've talked and wasted enough time. The ship is about to pull into port so we need to make a plan. Obviously this girl is going to be a bit hard to find but that is why the king assigned us for the job. We have the best tracker," He pointed at Kelvin and Irene," the best sword fighter and user of healing magic," He pointed at me," and the best spy in the three nations." He pointed at himself.

That sent some interesting questions popping into my head but I decided to bring them up later. I figured since I was head of this mission I should be up there with Darren giving a moral speech but I continued sitting on the cot. Darren was doing a pretty nice job so I let him continue. I would make the major decisions, and he could give the important speeches. That suited me fine.

"Land ho!"

The voice carried through the ship and I heard several men run by our cabin. Our relaxing time talking on the ship was now ending.

The mission came first now. I stood up from the cot. My legs still shook slightly but I ignored it. Kelvin, Darren, and Irene were repacking our supplies, weapons, and blankets. I didn't join them. Instead I walked to the small window and gazed at the approaching horizon of Zithonaia. My mission. That was my new goal in life.

To fulfill my mission.

To save a girl who had as harsh a past as mine.

And save two countries that needed salvation.

Chapter 5

I gazed at the landscape from my position on the deck with my hand shading my eyes from the sunlight. Beautiful mountains escalated far above my head. Their snow covered peaks were visible only when the misty clouds parted. Miles of majestic green trees covered the terrain with their calm dignity. The soft calls of new and exotic birds drifted down from the tree tops. I breathed in deeply and smelled new scents that I needed to identify.

While I had been a student at the Brotherhood, Issik had introduced me to the world of nature. Fascinated with the diversity of plants and the complex society of animals, I had started to study them. My interest and skill with plants and animals had grown until I knew almost every species that lived in the Isles. Issik had been both proud and disheartened when he discovered I knew more than him about his favorite subject. Now as a Master of the Brotherhood, time for my studies was scarce. Instead of studying nature, I was protecting it. But now that this new world of Zithoania, evil as it may be, awakened all of my curiosity I couldn't help but want to explore.

Irene appeared beside me. She gracefully leaped up onto the crates piled high on the deck. I reached up and started petting her soft head. Her presence comforted me, but also reminded me of my mission here. The reason I stood on a Lydinyian ship that would soon be dropping us off at a remote location. Darren and Kelvin were gathering our supplies and possessions. The captain had just informed us that we would be dropped off within the next hour.

"What do you think of Zithoania?" Irene whispered by my side.

I took time to find the right words for my answer. I knew a tyrant ruled this country and the people who were abused from mistreatment of their government system, but the landscape I gazed at now was breathtaking.

"It's a beautiful country ruled by an ugly person." I kept my voice low, so the ship's crew wouldn't hear our private conversation, but loud enough for Irene's sensitive ears.

"I agree. This country once thrived on peace and tranquility but now it is suffering from a wound that is bleeding grief and sorrow."

We stood there in silence. Neither of us urged to say anything. We simply feasted our eyes upon the splendor of the approaching shore. Irene spoke her words as if she really knew what this country had been like seventeen years ago.

I turned to look at Irene who sat on a wooden crate filled with goods being transported. Her silky black coat shone in the sunlight. Her intelligent and mysterious blue eyes were focused on the opposite shore. I leaned my head against her paws and sighed. I embraced the peacefulness of the moment. I knew from experience that moments of tranquility were going to become scarce and far between as soon as we touched the shores of Zithoania. I heard footsteps approach.

"Saphron, Irene. The captain just informed me that--"

Kelvin kept talking but I tuned him out. The boat was less than half a mile away from the shores. I had precious little time left to myself with Irene and I didn't want Kelvin interjecting his loud voice. I pulled my hand back into my lap and continued resting my head on Irene's soft shoulders.

In a rush, memories of previous battles flooded my senses. Sounds of women and children screaming; Buildings engulfed in flames. Forests being destroyed and animals dying; pain, loneliness, suffering all around; the sound of the enemy as he abolished the village and city. I remembered the power of my anger as I watched a small child die beneath an enemy's sword. I remembered the uncontrollable energy as my magic awakened. The horrible delight as I destroyed the men who killed. I remembered the aftermath of my rage. Those eyes. The eyes of fear and suspicion. Terror in the people's eyes as they realized I had killed with magic. I killed to protect, but they didn't know that. And afterwards, the feeling of loneliness and self-hatred.

"Saffy, come back."

I jumped in surprise. I looked up at Irene and saw her gentle loving eyes gazing down at me. Feelings of warmth, kindness, and love enveloped me, banishing my awful memories of the battle. I smiled at my leopard. If I didn't have her, I would never be able to escape my feelings of loneliness.

"Saphron, are you well?" Kelvin's voice had genuine concern in it. I had forgotten he was standing there. I wondered how long I had been staring at nothing, remaining motionless. I scolded myself for daydreaming. I couldn't let Kelvin judge me as weak. Not if I wanted to lead this mission.

My friendly time with Darren and Kelvin was over. I needed to get serious about what the King of Lydinya had asked me to accomplish. From now on, the mission would come first no matter the cost. The horror and depression of war had gone on long enough. It was time someone tried to stop the bloodshed that had lasted seventeen years.

"I'm fine. What did the captain say?" I pulled away from Irene to project my voice towards Kelvin. I kept my voice masked of emotion. The strength of my memories roused all of my emotions, leaving me feeling vulnerable. The force of the wind strengthened.

I didn't meet Kelvin's eyes directly, but instead focused on the activity behind him as I waited for his reply. Darren directed several crew members who carried our saddle bags to Indigo, Moon, and Milk. Various men rigged the sails, read wind gauges, and other miscellaneous tasks around the ship. The overwhelming noise of it all crashed against my ears. The captain himself stood near the steering wheel and directed the traffic on the deck. I had caught him and other sailors watching me as I traversed their ship. It appeared that they had heard of Lady Swordmaster. Wonderful.

I focused back on Kelvin. He still remained quiet. I could tell he didn't believe me, but I ignored his concern. My well-being didn't have anything to do with him. I could fend for myself.

"We will be landing in ten minutes. Darren and I have packed everything and the horses are being saddled." He matched his tone of voice to mine, all emotion hidden.

I nodded my understanding and turned to face Zithoania once again. Irene hadn't moved from her vantage point on the crates so I placed my head back against her legs. Irene started purring. Behind me, I felt Kelvin's eyes staring into my back. I ignored him until I finally heard his footsteps on the wooden deck.

"He is concerned for your health. You shouldn't block him out. Or Darren."

I mulled over Irene's words, trying to decide if I should reconsider my behavior towards Darren and Kelvin. But I quickly abandoned the idea. I had made up my mind. In order to find this lost child of Moridion and Azure, I couldn't be distracted. I needed to be completely focused on the success of my quest and nothing more. Friendships would only get in the way. They had before.

A hand landed on my shoulder. Surprised, I pulled out one of my daggers sheathed on my belt. I whirled around to find a young sailor backing away from me in fear. I quickly put away my dagger and held up my hands in the sign of peace.

"Sorry, you surprised me." I said it in a casual tone so the lad would know I didn't mean to hurt him. To my relief, he didn't run away but straightened his shoulders and took off the thread bare cap on his head. The young sailor bowed in an elegant court manner which made my eye brows rise in surprise. How did a poor sailor know the proper court bow to give to a lady?

The sailor unfolded himself from his bow and started briskly walking towards me. All sign of the timid sailor was gone as he headed towards me with silent confidence. I backed away just a bit and felt the edge of the banister hit my foot. The young man didn't stop walking making me suspicious of his intent. When he started getting too close, I thought he intended to stab me so I reached for my sword strapped to my back. The lad, who I had thought was an ordinary boy a moment ago, expertly put his hand on my elbow to stop me from unsheathing my blade. With my left hand blocked, I used my right hand to

quickly pull a thin glass knife from the inside of my left foot. We starred at each other. Me with on hand trapped above me and the other with a knife pointing into the sailor's neck; he with one arm holding my elbow and the other holding a rolled piece of parchment in front of my nose. I looked at it with bewilderment, then smiled at the lad.

"You're a spy for the king aren't you?" I said it more like a statement than a question. Someone who knew the proper technique to stop a Brotherhood Master from unsheathing her blade must have a high level of training.

He remained mute, but nodded his head. I released my glass dagger and he let go of my elbow. My sword fell back into its sheath. I kept my eyes on the lad as he motioned for me to take the small sliver of paper he had in his hands. Viewing my surroundings, I saw Irene out of the corner of my eye and Kelvin watching me from a little way off. Some Bodyguard he was if he let a stranger rush up at me with an unexplained objective. The shores of Zithoania were close now. I could see the details of the land. Even some of the movement of foreign animals as they went about their daily business.

Making quick calculations, I decided the best course for action if this sailor tried to kill me. Irene would probably accuse me of overreacting, but I not everyone in the world appreciated my effort to stop the war. This wouldn't be the first time someone tried to kill me.

The man again motioned for me to take the piece of paper, and I complied. I opened my mouth to ask him why he didn't just speak to me, but when I looked up he was gone. I heard a faint splash behind me and I turned around to lean over the side of the ship. Sure enough, there were wide ripples in the water directly below me. He had jumped. Questions started forming in my head but I pushed them away. The small rolled piece of paper in my hands attracted my attention. On the edge of the roll was the personal seal of the king of Lydinya.

I started to break the seal when I heard the call to lay anchor from the captain. We had arrived at the place where the captain had agreed with the king to relinquish us. The busy activity on the deck increased almost immediately. Twenty more men appeared from hidden passageways, making the traffic a scattered mess.

I looked down at the paper in my hands and decided to read it later. Right now was not a good time to try and decipher the king's message. Putting it safely in my belt pouch, I waved Irene over. Together we made our way through the bustle of men to meet up with Kelvin and Darren. Both of them had changed out of their noticeable travel gear. Now Kelvin wore black from head to foot. Darren wore a dark green chemise with brown trousers, cloak, and tall boots. Bodyguard. Tracker. I myself wore my normal traveling attire. I practically lived in my split dress with thick trousers underneath. I dressed completely in dark brown, a shade lighter than Darren's clothing. My sword strapped to my back, thick boots hiding knives and daggers, my belt carrying my personal possessions. My hair braided so as not to get in the way. Swordmaster.

We stood shoulder to shoulder near the prow of the ship as the wind played with our loose clothing. Irene sat by my side and watched as the men lowered the anchor and prepared the skiff we would use to get to shore. Indigo, Moon, and Milk stood ready to be guided down into the small boat. Our saddle bags were in a heap by my feet. Darren and Kelvin stood on either side of me, silent. I wondered what they were thinking. I soon regretted trying to read their thoughts when Kelvin began to speak.

"So, was that your lover giving you a secret love note, Saphron?" He spoke in a care free and laid back attitude.

I turned my head and stared at Kelvin with obvious challenge in my eyes. His smile slowly faded as I continued to stare. He needed to understand that his rude remarks wouldn't go unnoticed from now on. We weren't students in the Brotherhood, only pretending that we were being summoned. It was time to get serious, which Kelvin always had trouble doing.

Kelvin's smile dropped and he turned back to face the sailors who were lowering the skiff into the water. When the men started loading the horses, I picked up my saddle bags and walked toward the skiff, Irene following.

"Why the coldness? Did we say something?"

I turned around to look at Kelvin. He had both of his saddle bags over his left shoulder. The wind tousled his short curly blonde hair. His blue eyes searched mine. I remained quiet, not sure how to answer him. Darren stepped up behind his brother and placed a hand on his shoulder. Darren looked at me with the same eyes as Kelvin had. Searching.

"What did that spy give you Saphron?" I masked my surprise. I thought Darren had been busy with our supplies but apparently he had seen the sailor and our conversation. I answered him, happy that he acted serious, unlike Kelvin.

"A message. I don't know what it says. I will decipher it when we make camp tonight were I won't be interrupted."

He nodded. The captain yelled behind me. I turned around to face his large presence. Standing six feet five inches and wearing a beard that covered most of his face, he made an imposing figure. But for the whole trip from Lydinya he had been cordial and kind; not something I had expected when first meeting him. He looked me up and down, then nodded and spoke.

"Lady Saphron we have everything ready. If you would please follow me." I liked the sound of his deep rough voice. It reminded me of Issik and how, as a child, he would read to me. His melodious voice would lull me to sleep. Thinking of Issik, I remembered that he would be leading the Lydinyain army from now on. That thought saddened me. It was dangerous on the front. But not if the war ended, then Issik wouldn't have to fight.

A new resolve hardened inside me. I would find this lost child. I would search for her until I collapsed with exhaustion, fell ill with disease, or died. The war must end. Seventeen years of bloodshed, must end.

Several men stood ready to help me into the small boat that rocked in the turbulent waves, but I pushed their hands aside. Instead I threw my saddle bags into the skiff ahead of me and then jumped down myself. The drop was more than eight feet but the water underneath the wooden boat softened my fall. The boat

lurched slightly, but not tremendously. I straightened to make my way to Indigo, Moon, and Milk who stood in the middle. I stretched my hand out to pet Indigo's nose, but instead grabbed the side of the skiff as it suddenly pitched to the side. The sailors quickly grabbed our provisions before they were dumped into the sea. I turned around angrily to see who had shaken the boat. Irene stood there, calm and collected. Watching as everyone tried to regain their balance.

My annoyance vanished and I smiled at Irene. She must have leaped directly from the banister of the ship higher up from where I had jumped. The violent pitching of the skiff subsided as both Irene and I sat down. Kelvin and Darren used the outstretched hands offered them and landed in the boat without commotion. The captain came next, and when we were all settled, a sailor cut the rope that bound us to the ship. The sailors grabbed the oars and we were off.

It didn't take long. The sound of the skiff hitting the bottom of the shore signaled our arrival. Indigo didn't wait until someone carefully guided him out of the cramped boat. He simply bounded over the side, turned around, and waited to be saddled. I suppressed a giggle as I noticed the astonished looks the sailors were giving Indigo, and then me. To the common man, Indigo must look like the best trained horse in the three lands. But from my point of view, Indigo was merely smart. Moon, Milk, and Irene followed his lead. The group of curious animals started heading for a patch of grass farther up the beach.

Kelvin, Darren, and I piled the six saddle bags onto the sandy shore then got out of the boat ourselves. But before the sailors returned to their ship, the captain came to talk to us.

"Lady Saphron I am grateful for what you have done for the Mercy Isles so I don't want ya killed. Now listen up you two diplomats. I some information to tell you two so our Lady here doesn't get hurt." He glared at Kelvin and Darren who stood on either side of me. "Rumors have been spreading that those damned Zithoanians are somewhere near here. I personally think it's because they are going to try and ship a part of their navy from this shore so don't get caught in their way. I don't know the details of your quest but I do know gettn' caught by the enemies is bad news for ya. Don't roll your eyes young lad." He pointed a calloused finger at Kelvin. I glared austerely at Kelvin. He apologized grudgingly, and the captain, satisfied, continued." Also, bandits are mighty common in these parts. They will steal anythin' because they're so desperate. The army has stolen everythin' from its citizens just to keep movin'. So keep your possessions close. Now, I'll be on my way. The king has ordered me to return to this location three times. Four weeks from now, six weeks from now, and eight weeks from now. If ya don't return one of those three times, then you're goin' to have to find another way to reach Lydinya. My best wishes to ya, Swordmaster."

The captain returned to his skiff, and the crew pushed off. In just a few moments, their little boat disappeared in the waning sunlight. I watched them go with little excitement in my heart. My quest began now and I already had a time limit.

"Well, no use just staring at the sunset. Kelvin, help me with these saddle bags. We need to make camp before it gets dark. Saphron you go and get the horses. They couldn't have run off too far." Darren said.

I stayed, staring at the sunset. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I didn't want to hurt Darren's pride, but in order to complete this mission, I needed to take charge. The only reason I had earned a reputation in the first place was because I achieved things, and I achieved them fast. Impossibly fast. But I had strived to succeed only for selfish purposes; to make people recognize me; to make the world see me. Now, I wouldn't accomplish this mission insanely fast for my reputation. I would accomplish this quest for the benefit of the people suffering from the war. They needed salvation, quickly.

From my brief visit to Lydinya, I had noticed how many messengers brought news to the king on the progress of the Zithoanian army. I had seen the new deep lines of stress on Issik's face as he told me about the situation of the war; the unforgettable sadness in his eyes as he hinted that Lydinya might not win. I couldn't let that happen.

Opening my eyes, I whirled around and turned my back on the beautiful sunset. Darren and Kelvin were saddling their own horses, but Indigo stood a little ways away. It appeared that Indigo wanted me to saddle him and not the two brothers. I walked towards him and petted his long face. His magnificent black coat shone blue in the diminishing light. I reached down to pick up my two personal saddle bags, when pain pierced my chest. I gasped aloud and fell to the ground. I faintly heard Indigo whinny in panic. I gripped the cloth of my riding habit as the pain throbbed. Grinding my teeth, I simply endured until it finally died down. When the last trace of pain had vanished as quickly as it had come, I stood up carefully leaning heavily on Indigo. I put my sweating head onto his cool shoulder and took deep breaths.

Irene suddenly appeared next to me and from the corner of my eye I could see Darren and Kelvin. I cursed silently. I didn't want them to see me in this state. We needed to get going and yet here I was shaking from overuse of my healing magic. With that thought fueling my resolve, I straightened my spine and hoisted myself into Indigo's saddle. It took more energy than I wanted to admit, but at least I was on horseback now.

Sweet Lady not feeling good. Sweet grass and rest, make feelings better.

I heard Indigo's concerned voice through our shared link. I patted my horse on his muscular neck. The feeling both comforted me and reassured Indigo that I wouldn't fall off his back. It hadn't happened often, but in the past when I had tried using my healing magic and then riding for long periods of time, I had fainted and fallen off of Indigo's back. He hated when I fell off, and always blamed himself for several days afterwards.

"Saphron, are you well?" As he spoke, Kelvin casually put his hand on Indigo's reins. I eyed his movement with interest. By putting his hands on my reins, he prevented me from escaping his question. But little did he know that I had a hidden clasp in the back that would relieve Indigo of his reins thus releasing me from Kelvin's restricting hold.

"I'm fine. It's just the after affects from healing someone." I thought this would be enough information on my condition to satisfy him, but he continued to stare at me.

"I thought fainting and sleeping for eight hours was the after effects." Darren spoke from the other side of Indigo. I looked at both of them in exasperation then looked down at Irene. She

hadn't said anything since my attack, but I knew she understood me well enough not to tell me to rest. She wanted this mission accomplished just as much as I did. We were the same.

"You two are cut out of the same cloth. I'm surprised you're not related."

Issik's comment and his booming laughter floated down from my tree of memories. I shook my head and remembered that Darren had asked me a question.

"Those were part of the after effects. Now we need to move on. I would like to find this girl in six weeks. We have very little information and not one clue as to where to start so we can't waste time. Darren, Kelvin, mounted and followed me. Either I or Irene will give the commands from now on. Is that understood?"

* * *

"Can we please stop and eat now? I'm starving."

I wanted to plug my ears to hide from Kelvin's numerous complaints but I refrained. I needed to hear everything the birds were saying in the trees to make sure I didn't get lost. It wouldn't help our situation. But after this final declaration of Kelvin's hunger I couldn't help but let anger lace my voice.

"Kelvin, you're a grown man. Reach behind you and get your food yourself. We are not stopping until I can find this town." Kelvin detected the annoyance in my voice and stopped his complaining. For now.

We had been traveling for a good part of the night now. Our destination was five miles through the Vexing Forest. Throughout our journey, I had started to understand why the forest had been named such. Vines, old fallen trees, and underbrush prevented or blocked paths that were provided for the travelers' passage. The only problem, the paths couldn't be trekked on even if one tried to clear the obstacles. The king had given us a map, but it was seventeen years too old. The country had changed due to war and new lords who had modified their territories.

When we tried to find a certain road, we discovered a barren waste land. The same thing happened with three other roads that were supposed to lead us to a town. So, Irene came up with the idea of following the birds and listening to their conversations. Only Irene and I could do this, so it took longer. One human and one leopard trying to hear everything fifty million birds or more were saying took time and effort. Time that Kelvin's stomach couldn't seem to handle without a meal.

I kept it a secret that I could communicate with animals from Kelvin and Darren. I still had the useless map in my lap, pretending that I followed its directions. I knew that Darren's tracking skill could be helping us right now, but that would give away the fact that I only pretended to follow the map. I had already told the brothers I possessed magic, but also telling them I communicated with animals might be pushing it. I didn't trust them enough, so I would have to find the way to town with Irene.

I looked up as a sudden flash of blue caught my eye. I held up my hand to stall the brothers behind me. I sat still and listened to the exotic blue bird's conversation with its mate.

Good pickings, very good pickings. Yes, huge nest just ahead with plenty of pickings.

I smiled. The bird had said just ahead. That meant for us, it might be one or two miles due east. That would take us further into Zithoania. I cupped my hands and whistled a high pitched note. Hopefully, Irene would hear my call and return from her scouting. Usually I match the octave to the willow water song that lived in Lydinya, but this time, I copied the bird I had just eavesdropped. Irene appeared out of the bushes to my right and I smiled at her.

"You got my message." I said with relief.

She nodded her head, but I could tell she really didn't hear me. I understood though. Irene still had her ears open to the wildlife around her.

I jumped down from Indigo's back and kneeled before Irene. Lowering my voice to a whisper, I told her what I had heard from the blue bird.

"*Big nest.* That means a village or town in their language." Irene talked aloud as she chewed on the words. "*Plenty of pickings.* That means food. Yes, I think you're right. A town or village must be one or two miles up ahead."

"That's what I thought. Now I just need to fool Kelvin and Darren into thinking I followed the map."

I stood up, and turned to face the two brothers who hadn't dismounted.

"All right. Irene has found a town a couple of miles due east. That will put us farther into the country as well. We will start searching for--"

The birds stopped talking completely. An arrow pierced the side of my calf. I pulled Luna out of her sheath and ran towards the underbrush. I passed Indigo and slapped him on the rump. He whinnied and galloped into the brush as well. As I ran, I yelled behind me to Darren and Kelvin to get undercover, but they were already doing so. I didn't worry about Irene. I knew she would get to somewhere safe.

Thorns scraped my body as I wedged myself in the bushes. I ignored them however. My main concern was my calf. I looked down and noticed the blood. The arrow shaft still protruded from my leggings, but I could tell it the wound wasn't deep. My pants were made out of the toughest leather, which had once again saved me from a painful injury.

"Ya might as well give up now, ya runts. We've got ya surrounded."

The voice came from above my head. I looked up. Sure enough in the trees, ten or more men sat in a circle. They were surrounding us, but Kelvin, Darren, and I all had bows and arrow that could easily reach them. I wondered if the men knew that they were in our range of fire.

Slowly, so as not to rustle the branches I hid under, I reached behind me to unclip a hidden compartment on the back of

Luna's sheath. Pulling out a bow and five arrows, I kept my eyes on the men closest to me, choosing my targets.

"Aw, come now. We won't hurt ya. Just give us your's horses and that might fine lass you got there, gents. That's all we want."

I notched my arrow and aimed at the man who had just spoken. I would teach him not to talk that way about ladies. Preparing myself, I stood up, revealing myself and let my arrow fly. The thin piece of wood landed directly in the center of the man's chest a second later. My target's eyes widened with shock as he looked down at the arrow shaft protruding from his body. Then he threw back his head and laughed. I grabbed another arrow and strung it, readying myself for whatever this man was going to do next.

Before I could lose another arrow on the man, a fatal one, Darren appeared from the underbrush with a bow in his hands. He aimed his arrow at the same man I had just hit. A moment later, Darren's arrow appeared in the man's forehead. The stranger simply slapped his knee and laughed jovially.

"I don't know when ya gonna get it, but no matter how many arrows you hit me with, I ain't gonna die." His voice carried hysteria in it. I looked at Darren in concern. The stranger wasn't even bleeding. Kelvin appeared next to his brother. He too had a bow in his hands, but without an arrow knocked.

"Where the other nine go?" Kelvin kept a tight grip on his bow as he looked around the canopy covering our heads. As I cautiously took my eyes off of the man still sitting in the tree, I realized that the other nine men I had spotted moments ago were now gone.

"Aw, you discovered me, I'll be goin' now."The stranger cackled with amusement, and then faded into the tree. All that remained of him were two arrows that fell to the forest floor. Clean. I remained tense however, not sure if they intended to attack again. The birds' beautiful songs filled the silent forest. Dusk had fallen during the stranger's visit. Only when Irene appeared again, did I put my bow and arrows away.

"Saffy, you're bleeding."Irene said immediately. Kelvin turned his head sharply to look at me. He didn't say anything but merely stepped out of the brush to pick up the saddle bags. He started looking through them more quickly. Kelvin looked up at me with alarm plain on his face. I took a step towards him, but the searing pain in my left calf prevented me from taking another.

"Kelvin, what is it?"I asked him as he continued to look all around him in dismay.

"The food and map are gone."

Irene stopped walking towards the place where the man had disappeared. Darren transformed into a statue of shock as he crouched on the ground, examining the fallen arrows. I felt my temper rise, but pushed it down. It was no one's fault but mine. I should have listened to the old sea captain more closely. He hadn't been jesting when he had warned us about bandits. I remembered the stranger fading into the tree. And how our arrows had hit their marks on the man's body, but how he has simply laughed at our efforts. This bandit was no ordinary man. If he didn't bleed, didn't feel pain, and could fade into his surroundings, he could not be human.

But the more urgent issue of our stolen food forced me to switch my train of thought. The nearest town, according to a bird, was one or two miles from here. But that would mean re-purchasing supplies and using the emergency money that the King had given us. Zithoania didn't sell inexpensively, and could easily wipe out our savings.

"Alright, then we will travel to the next village that I mentioned earlier and re-supply. We will have to use the emergency money that the King gave us but we have no choice. Consider this an emergency."

I reached inside my belt purse to count out exactly how much the King had given us, when my hand brushed across a little round piece of rolled parchment. Scolding myself for not remembering the message the King's spy had given me, I took it out and broke the seal.

"But, Saphron, the map was stolen. Plus, you're injured, I'm starving, the horses have wandered off, and we are stuck in the middle of nowhere."

It made sense now why the message was so small. It only contained one word. Kelvin kept rambling, but I shut him out. I could only stare at the word on the piece of paper, and feel time start to slowly chip away at the eight weeks I had to find the lost child.

"Lady Saphron, what is it?" Darren interrupted his brother. He had noticed my lack of a reaction to Kelvin's objections. I slowly took my eyes off of the scroll and pulled myself out of my thoughts. I showed the piece of paper to Darren, the one word facing me.

"What does it say?" I could tell he barely hid his anxiety as he awaited for my response. Kelvin finally noticed our little group forming and came to join his brother. I waited until Irene also adhered to the group before speaking aloud.

"The king's message only says one thing. Hurry."

Chapter 6

"May I please see it?" Darren held out his hand for the slip of paper. I passed it to him. He examined it then nodded to himself. "It's in the king's own hand. Saphron, do you remember what tattoo the messenger had on his forehead?"

I scrunched my eyes together and tried to think back. Pain shot up my left leg, causing my knee to buckle. I stumbled but Kelvin caught me around the waist. He settled me down to the ground and straightened my leg until it laid straight.

"Stay sitting and let me get the medic bag."

I stayed sitting, but I rolled up my pant leg to check my wound before Kelvin could. The cut wasn't deep but blood still flowed so I knew it had to be treated least it get infected. Darren started to climb the tree that still had a black smudge from where the stranger had disappeared. Kelvin returned with one of the smaller saddle bags that contained our supply of medical treatment. Rummaging through the bag, he pulled out fresh bandages and a small container that had a red label on it. I picked it up and read the messy hand writing. I looked at Kelvin in surprise. He didn't notice my stare and continued to pour water from a gourd onto my cut. When he rubbed a cloth over my wound to clean it, pain shot up my leg but I forced my body to absorb the pain. To distract myself, I waved the little container underneath Kelvin's nose.

"How in the world did you get this?" I tried not to sound too incredulous. Kings and scholars alike would sell half of their weight in gold just to get a small jar of nimlar. The substance in my hands contained a mixture of herbs that could heal an injury over night. The identity of those herbs was the best kept secret in the world.

Kelvin shrugged his shoulders. "I am a trained Brotherhood healer, Saphron. When you complete your training, it is a tradition that your Master bestows you with a medical ingredient. My teacher gave me a jar of nimlar as a sign of his trust in me. I haven't used it until now."

I returned the small jar of nimlar back to the medical bag and stood up, forcing Kelvin to stop cleaning my leg.

"Saphron sit back down, I'm not done yet. That wound needs to be--"

"Treated." I finished for him. Bending down, I took the white bandage from his hands, wrapped it around my leg, and knotted it tightly. "There, it's treated. Nothing else you do is going to help it." I ignored his protests and went to join Darren over by the tree. He had already climbed its branches, more than fifteen feet above, and was collecting a sample from the black smudge mark. I gazed above me and decided to use magic to climb. The stinging from my split shin played a major part in that decision.

Closing my eyes, I searched for inner calm. I exhaled, letting my tense shoulders relax, my whirling mind settle, and the pain from my shin disappear. The glowing orb of my power appeared before my inner eye and I marveled at it. To me, its silvery luminescence rivaled the beauty of a perfectly cut gem. Mentally, I reached for a small thread of power and directed it to my legs.

I opened my eyes, bent down, and jumped. I shot upwards towards the branch that Darren occupied. I landed softly, but loud enough to reveal my presence to Darren. He looked up and gave me a startled look while corking the sample he had taken.

"Saphron, how did you get up here? I didn't hear you." He narrowed his eyes.

"I jumped." I might as well tell the truth to him. He already knew I possessed magic so jumping fifteen feet shouldn't surprise him.

Darren looked over the edge of the branch. He didn't say anything, but I saw one of his eyebrows go up. To change the subject I asked him a question.

"Have you discovered anything about that disappearance of that man?" I placed an underlining hint of command in my tone to grab Darren's attention away from the fact that I could jump fifteen feet. Darren's spine straightened at the tone of my voice. He handed me the sample he had collected.

"All I can honestly tell you is that it's not ash or a scorch mark. Kelvin's going to have to put this through tests before we will know what it really is. But that is the least of our worries. Our entire supply of food was stolen. The bandits didn't touch anything else which is odd. We all had gold in our purses but the only thing they took was food; not that they would have gotten our purses if they had tried."

In an old habit, I ran my fingers through my loosely braided hair. As I untangled the knots with my fingers, I thought about our options. There might be a village ahead according to the group of birds I had overheard. I could continue my act with the useless map and follow the birds but just ahead for birds might be two or three days for humans. There really was no other option besides trying to live off the land, but that wouldn't last forever.

"I saw a small village up ahead on the map. We will head there to resupply then continue on our mission. To make up for lost time, we will ride all night. Is that understood?" Darren nodded his agreement and I breathed a silent sigh of relief. Darren's consent meant that he still believed I followed the incorrect map.

"Darren prepare the horses and explain to Kelvin our plan. Have everything ready in five minutes. We have wasted enough time already." Again Darren nodded. Tucking the small sample into a

hidden pocket within his cloak, Darren descended the tree. I waited until he was out of ear shot before I looked up into the braches above me and smiled.

"Irene, you can come down now." Humor laced my voice as I watched Irene emerge from the dense canopy above to join me below. "Some training Darren got at the (blank) if he can't even detect your presence above him." I giggled at the thought of Irene scaring Darren. Irene smiled as well as we shared the jest. The laughter died in my throat as I caught a glimpse of the black smudge mark behind Irene. Their mission had already been interrupted once.

That would not happen again.

* * *

"Are you sure there's a village just ahead?" Kelvin voiced the question that had been lurking in the back of my mind for quite a while now. A few yards before, the abundance of wildlife had dramatically decreased. I didn't know if Kelvin or Darren noticed, but I certainly did. Without the conversations of animals to listen to, I couldn't be exactly sure of where we were going. The sun was setting directly behind us, so we were obviously going east but that completed my knowledge of our whereabouts.

Our location didn't bother me as much as the disappearance of the wildlife. Fewer birds sung in the trees and their voices were quieter and meeker despite their boisterous personalities. Squirrels, raccoons, foxes, snakes, and bears were all

diminishing into the background behind them. I felt as if we were treading on sacred soil. Sacred not to humans, but to animals.

I ignored Kelvin's question because I had no answer to it. But he didn't need to know that, so I continued to lead with the false self assurance that I knew where I guided. Irene stayed close to Indigo and our party which concerned me even more. If Irene felt the need to stay close to me, then something foul must be in the air.

I shifted uncomfortably on Indigo's back, disturbed by the increasing silence. The forest loomed on either side of the narrow hunter's path that they had been following. I gazed into the canopy, trying to find signs of life, but failing. Not even the insects inhabited these trees. I noticed the diminishing light and felt a shiver go down my spine despite the sticky humid air. Just the thought of sleeping within the embrace of this dead forest, devoid of the sound of life made beads of sweat trickle down my back. I wondered if Darren and Kelvin were having the same thoughts about making camp here. Our plan to catch a rabbit for our meal was ruined, but that proved to be the least of our worries. Right now, my empty stomach didn't bother me as much as the suffocating silence and sense of death in the muggy air.

I held my hand up to stop. The muffled sound of Milk's and Moon's tack ceased, making the air still. I listened around me, desperate to hear something, but only deadly quiet reached my ears.

"Do you feel it?" I looked down at Irene in surprise. Her voice was barely above a whisper, and I understood why she felt the

need to speak softly. Her words seemed to ripple across the air, disturbing its deadly quiet. I heard Darren and Kelvin muttering behind me and I wondered why I hadn't heard them before.

"Yes, I feel it. This forest is dead. Dead of life, sound," I stopped. Afraid that too many words would break the delicate bubble of life that we formed. Twisting in my saddle, I looked behind me and froze. Darren's mouth moved as if he were speaking, but I couldn't hear his words. Panicked, I yanked on Indigo's reins to spin him around. As I got closer to Darren and Kelvin, I expected to start to catch bits of their conversation, but only silence met my straining ears. I tried to keep the fear from clouding my reason, but it took an enormous amount of will power. In one last desperate act, I waved my hands in front of the two brothers, but neither one of them even spared me a glance. It was as if I didn't even exist.

"Saphron, look at me." The sharp commanding tone grabbed my attention. I pulled Indigo around and trotted to where Irene stood on the ground. "I need you on eye level. Dismount please."

I obeyed. My deep trust for Irene made me dismount without thought to my actions. There were still tendrils of fear coating my mind but the sound of Irene's calm commanding tone cut through my terror.

"Saphron, listen to me. Focus on my eyes and nothing else, understood?" Irene waited for me to situate myself on the ground before penetrating me with her eyes. I looked into her eyes and felt a blissful peace envelope me. The empty forest around me slowly faded from my awareness as I gazed into my leopard's crystal blue eyes. Had I ever noticed before that there were specks of gold in her eyes? A white background had replaced the

lifeless forest but when I tried to look away from Irene's eyes, my head wouldn't move. Alarm screamed in my head as I tried again to move my head, eyes, hands, anything. My muscles strained in protest as I tried to lift my arm to grab Adina strapped to my back. But my body ignored my efforts and I remained rooted to the ground, staring into Irene's eyes.

"Just relax, and wait for the feeling of death to leave you. Just breathe." I couldn't see Irene's face, only her eyes, but I heard her voice. It's sweet motherly tenor made my fear vanish. I relaxed my muscles and let my body breathe.

I don't know how long Irene and I sat there, staring into each other's eyes, but after what felt like hours, Irene blinked. The dreamy white world disappeared along with the feeling of peace. I shook my head to get rid of the searing image of Irene's eyes and looked around me. The forest still held empty silence, but not to the point of insanity as it had before. Darren's and Kelvin's voices filled the air behind me. The feeling of relief surprised me as I realized they were safe.

I unfolded myself from my crouch, and gave a low moan.

"Irene how long have I been sitting like this?" I put my hands on the middle of my back and stretched. When I didn't hear a response, I looked at my silent leopard as she gazed at the dirt beneath her. "Irene?" I said softly so Kelvin and Darren wouldn't hear the worry in my voice. But by their lack of attention to the whole situation, I really didn't need to be cautious.

"Saffy, get Kelvin and Darren. I want to speak with all of you. Immediately." She got up, and walked toward Indigo. I watched her go in confusion. Her behavior scared me. This was not like

the Irene I knew. What she had done with her eyes, she had never told me about this power of hers.

Stowing my questions for later when we were in private, I turned around and faced the arguing brothers.

"No I refuse to believe that. Nick was always the best hunting dog. He couldn't have been replaced by Henry." Darren glared at his brother.

"I told you. In Mary's letter she said that--"

I cleared my throat to get their attention. Interrupted, they looked at me curiously. But as they continued to look at me, curiosity turned to confusion. Darren urged Moon forward until he was directly in front of me. I remained still as Darren bent down until he was a mere two inches from my face.

"Your eyes are gorgeous." He whispered, and I lost it. The tension of handling the situation on my own had eroded all of my patience I had for these two. They couldn't even realize that we were in a forest vacant of life in an enemy country failing at our mission given to us by a king. No, they noticed my eyes.

I stepped forward but Kelvin forced Milk in between us. I glowered at him with more than annoyance but he held up his hand to stall the angry words he knew were coming. Instead, he spoke before I had a chance to.

"Saphron, he didn't mean it in the way you thought. Although I think that your eyes are gorgeous, Darren thought they were gorgeous because they are filled with magic. Please don't hurt my brother. He apologizes for complementing your beauty. I stared up at him in shock, unable to decide if I should be angry

or grateful. Seeing my confusion, Kelvin gave me a sympathetic look. "Yes your eyes are filled with magic. It's impossible to miss what with them glowing and everything." His voice trailed off, and I watched as his eyes left my face and moved behind me. I turned to see what had gained his attention, and saw Irene standing impatiently. I had forgotten about her request. "It looks like Irene wants us. Maybe she will explain why your eyes are glowing since you obviously have no idea."

Darren and Kelvin dismounted and relieved the horses of their burdens. It took longer than usual because of the horses' skittishness. As I watched, I caught the two brothers sneaking glances about them. I grunted in satisfaction. Now that they weren't talking, they were becoming aware of the deadly quiet and the absence of life. The silence wasn't as heavy as it had been moments ago but the air still held its breath.

As if to contradict my thoughts, a cold breeze picked up. Its icy fingers played with my hair, making the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I shivered and pulled my cloak about me silently willing the two brothers to finish their task or unloading the horses. After a short debate, our group had decided to camp here instead of trying to head back the way we had come. Full night had come and not even the full moon's light could make its way through the thick branches to illuminate the path. Not wanting to risk the horses, it had been a unanimous decision.

"Saphron, make sure the horses don't wander." Irene sat beside me on the ground. She watched the other members of our group with unblinking eyes. I looked down at her and nodded. Irene's behavior concerned me. I had never seen take command of a

situation like this. In the past, she had simply stood by my side and watched as I gave out orders. I didn't mind following Irene's instructions, it relieved me of trying to find a solution, but I still worried. I could taste the magic in the air, and with what Kelvin had said about my eyes only confirmed my suspicions that a powerful spell had been weaved here. With anything magical, I had always looked to Irene, and she had always given immediate answers, but now I felt she hid things from me.

I shook my head to clear it of its troubling thoughts and reached out to Indigo. I would tell my message and then he could pass it on to Milk and Moon. I needed to create a bond with them soon in case an emergency happened. I wondered if I should consider what had just transpired as an emergency, but saved the philosophical debate for later.

Indigo

*Sweet Lady! Grass not fresh, water too old, we should leave.
Dark presence coming.*

His panic and fear crashed into me, and I had to keep myself from cutting our bond to keep the emotions at bay. I reassured my frightened horse by sending calm thoughts and feelings through our shared link; mixed in with promises of sugar cubes and apples later. When I felt his mind settle, I told Indigo my request and to relay it to Moon and Milk. He agreed, and I closed our link slowly so as not to hurt him.

"They're set." I said. Irene nodded and then stood when Darren and Kelvin turned to start walking towards us. Irene had chosen a small clearing off the hunter's path. The massive pine tree's

branches had forced other trees to grow around it, creating a little hole within the crowded forest. Irene, Darren, Kelvin, and I all filed into the cleared space and tried to make ourselves comfortable.

The sun had gone down and darkness blanketed the earth. The thick canopy of leaves above only made the forest floor even darker. It would be foolish to continue traveling. In this sinister darkness, one of the horses could easily become lame. So, the hole became our camp, the saddle bags our pillows, and the horse blankets our beds. But I had dealt with worse. At least it wasn't raining.

I settled myself against the massive pine's trunk, feeling its ruff bark cling to the back of my dress. I unfastened my cloak and wrapped it around me, along with Indigo's blanket. Kelvin and Darren situated themselves on opposite sides of me with Irene sitting directly in front of me near the opening to the hunter's path. I figured she had chosen that spot because she could hear the horses if they panicked. Indigo had saved my life numerous times by warning me of an enemy with his whinny.

"Alright, I need to brief you all on what we are walking blindly into. I hope you have noticed the lack of life in this forest and the deadly silence. I didn't think that our mission would lead us anywhere near this place but the forest is known to move so I shouldn't be surprised at our luck." Irene looked at her paws and for a moment, I thought she resembled a human. The moment passed however, and I forgot about the resemblance. "This path leads to the Whispering Forest."

Irene's words settled like a rock at the bottom of my stomach. I looked at Kelvin and Darren to see if the evil name

had any effect on them, and found both of them equally shocked, horror plain on their faces. The name of that particular forest didn't usually go unnoticed in Lydinya or the Mercy Isles. Almost every child had grown up with a version of the myths of the Whispering Forest and all of the fabled monsters that came with the tale. The legend of the horrific forest had spread from coast to coast in a short seventeen years. An orphan, I hadn't heard of the stories until I had arrived at the Brotherhood at age ten. I remembered with pride the fear I had masked as one of the Masters told me the tale. My hardened life on the road taught me not to show weakness, but that night I remembered spending the night with ten candles lit.

Whether or not the myth is true or false doesn't matter. I had believed for seven years now that it was simply a way to scare children to do their chores, but if Irene said it existed then it did.

"That is impossible. The Whispering Forest is a child's fable. Created to scare them and—"Darren's voice sounded strained but I could tell he didn't believe his own words. It was a logical thought, but logic had no part in magic.

"And where do you think fables come from, Darren? The Whispering Forest is real. Besides, you have no choice to doubt it because we have just walked into it."Irene paused to let her words sink in. I tried to wrap my mind around her words but I had difficulty. If the myths were true, then they had worse things than disappearing men to worry about. Kelvin gave a snort, gaining the attention of all three of us.

"Well that's perfect. All we tried to do was get food and we get punished for it. What kind of Gods rule this place?" He glared at the sky as if staring down one of the foreign deities.

"Well if you really are curious, there are Givarld the god of lightning, and Fyolla the goddess of Love, and-" Kelvin interrupted him.

"Darren, I didn't actually want a detailed description of their Gods. You always had to be the book worm of the family." Kelvin gave him an exasperated look.

"Well you made the comment so I thought I simply would-"

"Can we please keep on topic?" I almost had to shout the words to gain their attention. I didn't though. The chilling silence forced me to put attack in my voice instead, which worked to my purposes. The bickering brothers stopped their argument, and looked at me, then to Irene. The Ustani leopard flicked her tail, and I had to suppress a giggle as I saw Kelvin swallow. He knew not to anger Irene.

"Thank you Saffy. Now pay attention. The Whispering forest moves four times a year. Well it just so happened that we ran into it as it was moving to the east. This is the direction we want to go but there is the fact that we will be traveling within the forest. I am sure you have all heard of tales and myths regarding the forest but I am going to tell you the real legend. So pay attention and do not interrupt again." She fixed her eyes on the quiet brothers. They nodded their head solemnly to appease Irene, and satisfied, she continued. I ignored the rumbling of my empty stomach and focused on Irene's next words because something told me they were important.

"Seventeen years ago, Moridion, the father of the child we are looking for, created a new race of beings. This was not uncommon in that time because Azure's father had also created a new race of animals not too long before her birth. But the difference--"

"What kinds of races did they create?" Darren leaned forward with eager anticipation. It amused me to watch Darren take such a scientific interest in our discussion. Irene answered him without comment.

"Bydin Ardina, Azure's father, created the Charkitas, a race of wolves that could learn magic. He created them for a good purpose though. Bydin created his pets to protect any with Ardina blood in their veins. Even a small amount of the family blood line in you and you will have the loyalty of the Charkitas." I couldn't help but notice the respect and admiration in Irene's voice as she spoke of the long dead King. And for the first time since I had met her, I wondered where Irene had come from before she had come to me. "Moridion, however, did not create a race for the benefit and protection of his family. Once he had married Azure, her father's secrets about creating life were revealed to him. Not long after they were married, reports of theft and murder came from all over the city. Moridion had been successful in creating demons; beings that lived only for greed and breathed only vengeance. Soon, their numbers multiplied until Zithoania became a country of ruin."

"But what does the Whispering Forest have to do with any of this?" Kelvin had crossed his arms and I saw a crease between his brow. At least he was taking this seriously. Irene gave him a flick of her tail and continued.

"After five years of this, Moridion and Azure had their falling out. Azure discovered that Moridion had created the demons. In an attempt to save her country, the queen created a seal that would keep the demons sequestered in one area for one hundred years. And the place that she chose to contain them, was the Whispering Forest."

No one spoke. We were all submerged in our own contemplations. It made sense, but I couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that the Whispering forest, this forest, contained demons.

"Saffy, when you couldn't hear Kelvin and Darren speaking, you were passing the wall that divides the Whispering forest from the rest of the world. That is why no animal makes its home here. I am surprised that you felt the division at all. The forest has obtained a personality of its own over the years and has made the detection of the divider almost impossible."

"The divider? What is that exactly? And when couldn't Saphron hear us?" Kelvin's voice held concern as he looked at me. Irene answered his question with patience. "The divider is where the Whispering forest starts. Think of it as a border line, or a gate. There is only one way in, and one way out. Unfortunately for us, the way in is not the same way as the way out. I do not know exactly when it happened but Saphron sensed the divider and could no longer hear anything from this world. I had to step in and help her cross. You two had no problem crossing."

"So now we have to find the exit." I leaned back and sighed. Backtracking would not be an option.

"Irene, why did Queen Azure only seal the demons for one hundred years? Why didn't she just defeat them and her husband? All of the history books that I've read have described her as one of the most powerful magicians ever known." I was surprised by Darren's question. I hadn't thought of it myself since the one hundred years weren't over and therefore that problem wouldn't be within my lifetime. But apparently Darren liked history and all of its mysteries. Kelvin simply rolled his eyes at his brother. Irene however, sighed.

"Queen Azure, as you call her, simply wasn't strong enough. That is how powerful Moridion was and still is to this day. She only had the strength to seal them for one hundred years."

"Well, the danger level for this mission had definitely gone up one or two notches. Wouldn't you agree Saphron?" Kelvin's humor failed to make its impact on me as I digested Irene's last words. Something bothered me.

"Irene, you make it sound like Azure died when she sealed the demons." I looked at my leopard to see her reaction. I hadn't loved history as a child and if the queen had died in some historically famous battle, then I had just made a fool of myself. But I couldn't help ask. Silence descended. I waited for my leopard to answer, but she simply stared at me in the most peculiar way. I gave her a half hearted smile and ran my fingers through her thick black fur. This old habit comforted me as I waited for Irene's answer.

"She did die. The sealing ritual required both her power and the energy of her life. That was the consequence of saving her country and children." Irene replied.

"Her children. The child -er adult- that we are looking for is the daughter of Azure and Moridion correct?" I now understood the true reason behind Lydina's attempt to find the girl. If her mother and father were such famous and powerful people, then surely their offspring had inherited some of their magical abilities. This war needed a powerful magician to end it.

"Yes, the child we are looking for was Azure's youngest child. No other information is known except for the fact that she never left this country."

Darren spoke next. "And that is our purpose for being here? To find information about this prophecy child?" I looked at him in surprise. Did he not know the reason behind this mission? Why had he even come this far without knowing the true meaning of his assignment? A flashback of our conversation in Tivoll hit me. Darren had trained in Arledrine. Issik had told me stories of how the school trained its students to obey orders without question, and to succeed without fail. I had always thought Issik had simply tried to put down the Brotherhood's rival, but now I questioned his intentions.

"Darren our assignment is to find the child and bring her back to Lydinya within eight weeks or less. That is our mission. Were you not properly informed before we left? Kelvin are you confused as well?" I expected him to say no, but he nodded his head.

"No, I know we are here for the child. My only question is how are we even going to begin our interrogation if we can't even pass a bloody haunted forest." He put his hands behind his head and leaned back against a tree trunk. His casual posture took the seriousness out of his words but reminded us of our dilemma.

According to Irene, we were already in the clutches of the Whispering forest and therefore could not backtrack. I glanced around me and decided to take action. We couldn't sit for much longer. We needed to get moving, especially without food.

"All right, here's the plan. In three hours from now we will head into the forest and search for the exit. Darren you will lead due to your tracking skills. Make sure we head in a straight line. That will be our best bet. In case of attack, um from demons," I felt awkward saying the word, "I will be in the middle of the group. Kelvin you will be last because you are our healer and also a good tracker. I want both of you to keep your eyes and ears open for anything unusual. Irene, I don't want you to leave my side. If the myths are right, then we are going to have one heck of a time trying to get out of this thing alive."

Chapter 7

I tapped Kelvin and Darren on the shoulder to wake them. Kelvin grunted and ignored my poking, but Darren rubbed his hands over his face and stood up. The low branches prevented him from gaining a good stretch so he stepped out of the little hole and excused himself.

I had woken earlier and had fed and saddled the horses. My hair neatly brushed, fresh clothes on my back, and my things stowed had taken a good half hour. After waiting for another ten, I had decided to wake them myself and get going. But apparently, Kelvin had different thoughts.

"Kelvin, get up or we will leave you here to fend for yourself." I poked him again on his shoulder. My cajoling finally reached his senses and he sat up. Groggily he looked at me and I noticed a slight beard on his unshaven chin.

"Why are you always the first one up?" I raised an eyebrow at his odd question but answered with patience I didn't really have.

"Personal training. I have trained myself to wake up at five in the morning no matter what. So, it must have been five when I

woke up. And may I remind you how this personal training started?"I stood up and stared down at Kelvin. Unconcerned by my rising annoyance, Kelvin rose from his blankets and started arranging his things. I ignored the fact that he was a good four inches taller than me.

"Oh don't dwell on the past, Saffy. It will only--"

"I have not given you permission to call me that. And without you and your little gang of friends, I wouldn't have had to wake up at five just to escape from your humiliating pranks."Kelvin sensed the challenging tone in my voice and grinned. That only angered me further. I opened my mouth to continue my long awaited diatribe on Kelvin's unjust childhood behavior, but Darren interrupted. His face pale and alarmed, he entered the shadowed the hollow, his chest heaving.

"I think you should see this."

All of my anger was snuffed out as I gazed at the depressing landscape. Instead of refreshing green, brown and gray filled my vision. Flowers bloomed and trees still grew but their color was wrong. The flowers bloomed black or brown petals, and the trees grew into unnatural shapes. I felt tears in my eyes as I gazed at the bleak picture. Something within my heart constricted in pain for these poor lives who were locked within this seal.

I ran to the nearest tree and pressed my body against it. Calling out as I did with animals I tried to reach the tree's heart and speak with it; to try and help it regain its vibrant and beautiful life. I received no answer, not even a wisp of thought, but I only pressed my ear harder into the tree's bark.

I felt the rough texture cut into my skin but I ignored it. I called louder this time, focusing my mental voice to cut straight to the tree's soul. At first, I thought I only imagined it, but then she spoke. Her voice thousands of years old vibrated through my body as she screamed only two words.

Run, Azure

I gasped and backed away from the tree. The amount of desperation put into those two words astounded me. And the words themselves-

"Irene, how long ago did you say Azure sealed the demons here?" I tried to quell the shake in my voice but it proved more difficult than I thought. I remained facing the tree, but remained motionless, waiting to hear Irene's answer.

"Seventeen years." Her voice was quiet, but I caught the words. The tree had spoken so loudly, I wondered if Irene had heard it.

"Lady Saphron, what happened? Are you ill?" I smiled at the concern in Darren's voice as he reverted to his habit of referring to me as, 'Lady'. I hid my emotions behind a mask and turned to face them.

"I am not entirely certain, but I think when Azure cast her spell, she froze the forest in time. This tree still urges her to run from some danger. What that danger was, I also don't know. But I can tell it was a powerful enemy." I relayed my information in a military manner. No emotion, no unnecessary details. It helped me keep my personal emotions protected. But I had forgotten one major detail. Kelvin and Darren didn't know

that I could communicate with nature, and now I had put myself in a situation where an explanation would be needed.

"How did you even discover this?" Darren was clearly confused. I scolded myself for getting myself into this, but paused when I noticed Kelvin gazing at me.

"What?" I raised my hands in innocence. I didn't like the way he looked at me. It made me feel like an open book ready to be read.

"So you can speak to trees. I wondered but thought myself a fool for even thinking of such a thing might be possible. But now—" He trailed off, and I realized he waited for my explanation.

"Would someone please tell me what is going on. Talking to trees? That is only something that an extremely powerful mage can do Kelvin and—oh." Darren turned to me, slowly uncrossing his arms until they hung from his sides. "You are an extremely powerful mage."

Irene ignored the awkward situation I had placed myself in and walked to the tree behind me. She pressed her ear to the tree and listened. I turned around to give her time and found the two brothers staring at me while whispering suspiciously with each other. Their continuous stares unnerved me, so I busied myself with saddling Indigo, while they decided how to react to this new *skill* of mine.

Magicians were scarce and rarely seen or heard of. Once in a few decades, there would be a sighting of some pedestrian performing magic. Just the mention of magic had many Lydinyians reaching for an amulet against evil. When I had first started

training with Irene in the art of magic, she had said there were only two rules. Never reveal to anyone that you possess special abilities, and never mess with the balance of nature. Out of the two, I considered the second one the most important, but Irene disagreed with me. If a magician was discovered, their life of freedom would be sacrificed.

"You're right, Saffy. This forest is frozen in time. The presence of the demons locked in here must have triggered some kind of chemical reaction with nature." As she spoke, Irene looked around her, gazing at the wildlife with sorrow.

Darren and Kelvin stopped talking. I kept quiet as well, but once I heard the sound of silence ringing in my ears, I had to speak.

"Kelvin, Darren, I think you have realized by now that Irene and I can communicate with nature." I sighed. "I am sure you have questions, Darren you in particular, about why an animal possesses magic. I will answer the obvious questions first to get it over with." I mounted Indigo and walked him over until I stood near the two brothers. "To not waste more time, I will answer them while we travel. Mount up and get into that formation we talked about last night."

I watched them mount their brilliant white beasts and get into formation. Darren first, me second, Kelvin last. I reminded myself that I needed to create a bond with Moon and Milk for security's sake. But even without a full bond, I picked up stray thoughts from the horses. I received one now, and decided to enlighten Kelvin about his Milk's discomfort. I wouldn't have dared do such a thing in the past, but now that

he knew my secret, Kelvin deserved a reprimand for ignoring his horses earned treats.

"Kelvin, you forgot to give Milk a sugar cube last night." I gave him my best Issik look, one that no guilty person can escape from.

"How did you-? You read her mind?" I heard the incredulity in his voice.

"No, I did not read her mind. I caught one of her stray thoughts. I haven't formed a bond with her so I can't talk with her. To communicate with most animals, I have to form a bond and speak telepathically." Kelvin nodded and absorbed the new information I had given him on magical abilities. I leaned forward slightly to see Darren's reaction, and found him staring at me with awe. I looked away. Kelvin didn't seem to be having problems with my physic ability, but Darren-. Warning bells were sounding in my head when I looked at Darren's face and saw the incredulity there. Incredulity quickly turned into fear. Fear of power; and that meant loneliness for me.

I checked myself. Why would it bother me if I lost Darren's friendship? We had only known each other for less than a month. 'This is silly,' I told myself. This was work. Yes they were my traveling companions, but we would go our separate ways once the mission was over. End of story. Kelvin and I would both go back to the Brotherhood. That thought depressed me. Kelvin had an uncanny knack for annoying me at the right time in the wrong places. (More emotions about leaving Darren and Kelvin)

Cold shivers ran up my spine. The hair on the back of my neck stood up as the numbing cold entered my body. I gripped the reins just as Indigo reared back in panic. I could see Moon follow Indigo's lead in front and heard Milk do the same behind me. I pulled Anika out of her sheath and searched the canopy above me. I expected to see something, anything, but the branches only silently swayed in the freezing wind.

"Looks like we have company." I swung Anika around putting all of my weight behind it towards the voice. Kelvin ducked as the deadly strike passed over his nearly severed head. I glared at him. He knew not to surprise me when I was on alert. I reacted without thinking and often came close to harming someone.

"You know better than to sneak up on me like that when I am in this state. You almost lost your life."

To his credit, Kelvin nodded solemnly. He cocked an arrow to his bow and searched with his eyes for the enemy. I turned back to my own searching, and noticed that Irene was missing. I fought down the panic rising in my throat as I tried to remember if I had seen her walk off into the woods. Distracted, I saw something flashed in the corner of my left eye. It disappeared too quickly for me to follow it, but I knew I had seen something.

"Kelvin, on your left." I whispered urgently to him. I stared at the place where I had seen the shadow and caught a faint glimpse of it once again directly in front of us. Darren urged Moon backwards until she was abreast with Indigo and Milk. On an unspoken command, we formed a circle with our backs to each other, weapons ready. The wind continued to blow, and I caught

a faint whiff of burning. Again, I caught a glimpse of the figure to the right of our circle.

"It's circling us." Kelvin whispered his discovery and I nodded my agreement. Silence descended on us like a weight as we waited for our visitor to attack. My hands started to go numb from the bitter wind but I ignored my discomfort. Instead, I gripped Anika tighter. The familiar weight reassured me.

"I wonder when it's going to—"Darren's question was cut off by a piercing wail that cut the deadly silence in two. The horses went mad with fright, and I tried to comfort them with my mind but they wouldn't listen. Fear clouded their mind, even preventing me from speaking with Indigo. I had never had this happen with him before. Of course Indigo had been frightened in the past, but not to the point where his mind blocked everything out but fear.

I pulled myself out of my thoughts and tried to find the source of the screaming. It couldn't be human, not with a scream so high pitched. I pulled my hood up as the wind picked up, causing twigs, leaves, and branches to fly into my eyes. My hair broke loose from its braid and flew around my head. I tried to shout to Darren and Kelvin to run but the wind carried my voice away. They sat on their horses, looking frantically for the enemy but finding nothing. To add to the chaos, rain started to pour from the brown sky above. I screamed in frustration. We were prime targets for the enemy now. It could be standing right in front of us and we wouldn't know.

I spurred Indigo closer to Kelvin and reached over to him. I wrapped my hand around his neck and brought his ear to my lips.

"We have to get undercover. Follow me and tell Darren." He nodded. He bent down to explain the plan to his brother, and I caught a pair of red and yellow eyes staring at me. My heart skipped a beat. I could see them as clearly as if it weren't raining and my hair wasn't flying around my head. They were not kind eyes, they looked at me with such hatred that my terrified mind could only think of one thing.

Without a second thought, I yanked Indigo around and dug my heels into his sides. He took off and we entered the forest.

My tangled hair and soiled cloak streamed behind me as I rode Indigo at full gallop. I overlooked the frigid wind biting my exposed flesh and the stinging of the numerous cuts appearing all over my body from my dash through the forest. My only awareness was a feeling of urgent terror. Every fiber in my being propelled me to flee in the opposite direction of the menacing shadows clawing at my back. Their cold mental presence was trying to penetrate my mind and flood it with helplessness but so far my mental defenses held strong. I hoped that Kelvin, Darren, and Irene would be able to succeed in keeping the demons at bay and find the exit.

I hadn't trained in the art of blocking my mind for very long, and I could feel my defenses weaken against the demons continuous beating. A few hours ago I hadn't even been aware that demons existed. The evil creatures had succeeded in isolating me from the others, lowering my chances of fighting them on foot. Indigo couldn't keep running at this speed forever. The horror of Indigo tripping and breaking a leg on a hidden rock kept flashing in my mind. If Indigo stumbled, he

would suffer a slow painful death and I would be left to the mercy of the demons.

As a poisonous arrow whizzed into a tree trunk that only a second ago had been my head, a cold numbness crept through my body. I ignored the uncomfortable icy feeling until it climbed from my toes up my legs. While trying not to be distracted from steering Indigo, I looked down to see what had caused my leg to go numb. My heart faltered as I realized what happened. A black arrow shaft protruded from the calf of my boot. A violent shudder of panic coursed through my body, overcoming for a moment the paralysis in my legs. Unused to the feeling of fear, it was hard to keep myself calm. But I slapped myself mentally; I knew my life depended on my wits. The arrows must contain a poison in them that created immobilization. My stubborn resolve gave way to pure fright. In only a few moments I knew that I my muscles would be frozen with paralysis leaving me helpless against the forty shadows behind me. I managed to steer Indigo through the maze of branches although my terror stricken mind raced to uncover a means of saving myself before not only my mobility was cut off, but my magic as well.

The icy numbness now spread up to my waist and I fought for my balance to remain on Indigo's back. I managed to cling to his back until he dodged a looming tree, throwing himself to the left. I reached for the reins but lost my balance and plummeted to the hard ground. I heard a piercing howl behind me and knew it to be the triumphant cry of a demon. I lay panting on the ground unable to catch my breath or push down the panic in my throat as thirty demons now rushed towards my unmoving figure on the ground. Trapped. My quest, finished. My soldier instincts took over and prepared me to submit my body and mind

to the freezing hands of my pursuers. The first of the demons, a looming black figure, slithered towards me and bent down. Time seemed to slow as it lifted its skeletal hand towards my face. I could feel it's cold hatred pour over me making my throat choke on its thickness. I made one last desperate calculation to see if I could make an escape, but I declared it hopeless. My sword hung useless by my numb arm and my magic was severed by the poison.

I closed my eyes to shut out the freezing presence the demon and waited for the burning touch to come, but nothing happened. I squinted, expecting to see two red eyes staring into my soul. Instead, as the demon's hand got closer to my face, I saw a large animal-like shadowed figure leap onto the surprised demon. Both the shadowed figure and the demon rolled out of sight. I tried to crane my neck to see what had just saved my life but the numbness had now spread through my entire body and I could only lay there, waiting to feel the next demon's presence loom over me. The feeling never came. Instead I heard high pitched screams and low growls that were so high pitched they hurt my ears.

The action to the side of me was blocked from my sight, but at that moment my attention focused on the two figures running towards me. I wanted to scream at them to keep away, that I couldn't be saved, but of course, my mouth ignored my command. Kelvin and Darren kept running, the swarm of demons ignoring their movements and I couldn't help the overwhelming feelings that crashed over me to see them alive. Darren reached me first and took a protective stance against whatever happening behind me. When Kelvin reached me he sat me up and tried to get me to stand, but my numbed body couldn't support

myself. Pure terror flashed across his face but he quickly hid it. I tried to mentally call Irene, but the distance proved to be too far. I tried to form words in my mouth to tell Kelvin my condition, but my tongue wouldn't move.

Kelvin looked up suddenly and I wondered who was protecting us, when an earsplitting shriek filled the dead air. They gained in intensity until Kelvin leaned his body over mine, trying to block out the stabbing noise. The noise got to such a high level of pain that I thought my head was going to burst. But just when the screaming became unbearable, it stopped. From my position in Kelvin's arms, all I couldn't see anything but I felt his body tense. I wanted to scream at Kelvin to turn me around when suddenly he stood up with me in his arms. I kept quiet because at that point, Kelvin turned so I could see who had just saved my life. When my eyes finally rested on the glowing white figure my breath caught in my throat.

Irene had described these magical beings to me, but I had never imagined a creature this beautiful. It looked like an ordinary leopard, but there was an air of majestic intelligence about it that made you think twice before calling it an ordinary animal.

Irene and the journal had called them, Charkitas, protectors of their own. The only purpose in their life was to protect those with the royal Ardinian blood. Kelvin and I had been unable to continue our research on the Charkitas but we had gained enough information to know that they had not been seen for seventeen years. A jolt of understanding sped through my body just as Kelvin gasped. If the Charkita had just saved

my life that meant that I had Ardinian blood in my veins. The shock overwhelmed me. I started to see stars in front of my vision and I heard the blood roaring in my ears. I was so stunned that I barely heard Irene's calm voice in my head.

Now you know.

* * * * *

I looked at the small little girl from a distance. I didn't know how I had gotten here or why the busy maids and attendants didn't see me, but I quickly forgot those questions as the scene before me unfolded.

The little girl sat on a blanket in the middle of rich gardens. Colorful flowers, graceful trees, and wild animals made the green landscape look like nature's paradise. I took a deep breath and felt the fresh crisp air sooth my light headache. The light smell of lavender surprised me, but in the distance I could see a whole sea of the purple flowers. I could only think of one word to describe the feeling I had inside, while standing here. Peace.

As I gazed and enjoyed the quiet song of birds and the distant sound of busy bees, I spotted a white figure running across the lawn. It took several minutes before I could make the girl out. Her white blond curls danced behind her as she ran to the child, seated on the white blanket.

"Sister, mother wants you. Oh, you must stop bothering Teatra. She is a new mother, and must get back to her other cubs. Now

come along." The girl dressed in white spoke kindly to the little girl, who I had now learned was her sister. The pretty girl had a happy smile on her face as she bent down to pick up her small sister.

The two were polar opposites. The older child had a gold halo of curls and warm brown eyes. The smaller child however, had raven black hair and sad blue eyes. The black haired child, climbed onto her sister's back, but then turned and stared directly at me. I froze. So far, no one had noticed me just standing here, but this girl looked at me with such intense concentration; it unnerved me. As the small girl stared at me, I saw a horrible sadness clouding her beautiful face.

"Why you have to play in the farthest part of the gardens is beyond my understanding. Do you know how angry father will get if you're not to dinner on time. Honestly, you should thank your siblings for keeping you out of trouble."

Her blond haired sister's voice ended the child's staring. I breathed a sigh of relief, as the two walked the back the way they had come. I tried to follow them, but the dream would not let me move my legs. I obeyed the dream's wishes, not forcing it to give me my freedom in its domain. I turned back to who the dark haired child had been playing with and gasped.

I saw Teatra. The black Ustani leopard lounged on a white blanket in the middle of the lawn. The beautiful leopard got up and stretched, revealing a little cub that had been hidden underneath its mother.

"Irene?" I whispered. But I never got an answer, for the dream chose that moment to return me to my own world and time.

Feeling slowly returned to my body as did my consciousness. I felt the slow rocking motion underneath me and realized I was on horseback. I kept my eyes closed, content just to relax and-. My memories crashed atop me like a cold bucket of water. I jolted upright and almost fell off Indigo, but someone's arms caught me. They pulled me back onto Indigo, sidesaddle, and settled me against something warm. I shifted slightly and looked to see who I leaned against, and found Kelvin's worried face looking down at me.

I froze. His soft blue eyes crinkled at the corners as a slow smile spread across his face. He gave me a wink and then turned his eyes to the road ahead. My close proximity to his face caused a rush of heat to come to my cheeks and for the first and last time, I thanked the dim light and cold wind. I looked away from Kelvin but continued to lean on him. My body felt tired and weak. Falling off a horse did not sound appealing. But I rather enjoyed letting someone else lead. I enjoyed it, until I remembered our situation.

"Wh-what happened?" I had to clear my throat several times before I could speak. Kelvin glanced down at me quickly, then spoke quietly so only I could hear him.

"It appears that you now have around forty new bodyguards." I blinked, confused.

"What?" I took my eyes off of the moving ground below my dangling feet, and looked around me.

Forty giant wolves were walking in a circle around me. The power emanating from them overwhelmed my senses. Filling my

nose, and making my eyes water. The glow from their beautiful white coats shone even though the sun was setting. The exposure of so much magic threatened to send me into another faint, but Kelvin's arms wrapped tighter around me.

"Don't do that again. You have done that too much already. I never took you to be the fainting type, but you never know." His annoying humor had returned, but I let the insult slide. The walking pieces of art had my full attention.

"Let me down."

Kelvin stopped Indigo and helped me down. I hated to show weakness, but my tired body it couldn't be helped. I stood there for a few minutes, wondering how I approached a beast so majestic and awe inspiring. Irene emerged from the sea of white fur, her black silky coat making her stand out. She pushed her head under my hand. Unconsciously, I started petting her soft head. Irene pulled my hand. I looked down at her and she pulled again.

"I want you to meet them. They are my cousins. They will not hurt one with Ardinian blood. Come." I followed her trusting voice and walked into the mass of wolves staring at me. As I traversed through their mist, I leaned on Irene and gazed into the Charkita's sky blue eyes. I stopped and looked at Irene again.

"Irene, they have the same eyes as you do." I kept glancing from beast to leopard. The color was identical. I had never seen another living animal with the same color eyes as Irene. But she had said they were cousins.

"Yes, we come from the same place, the same time." Irene rubbed noses with every Charkita in the pack. From what I could tell, I couldn't see an age difference in the colossal wolves, but this was a new species I had never encountered before. And why had they chosen the Whispering forest as their habitat?

The Charkita that spoke to me however, interrupted my thoughts.

"Welcome, daughter. Do you have injuries? The human would not let us evaluate your condition." Her voice carried a strong sense of concern behind it and a picture of me sleeping with one of the wolves guarding me flashed into my head. It didn't surprise me that the Charkita could speak like Irene. I turned around to see who she meant by human, and almost touched noses with Kelvin.

"Could you give us some room?" I asked, annoyed with his proximity to my person.

"Not with forty oversized wolves watching you like your their next dinner." He said. I looked at his hands concealed inside his cloak and groaned.

"Kelvin, now is not the time to be playing protector. These are Charkitas, animals that guard- that guard people with Ardinian blood." By the end of the sentence, my voice had dropped to a whisper. Visions of being chased by cold shadows flickered in my mind, causing me to shiver.

"Daughter, come sit with us and if your friends will not harm you, they may come too." The Charkita started walking away from the path and onto a new one. It was wider than the one we were on, and I could see a clearing up ahead. I opened my mouth to

give my reply, but the wolf had already started walking. The rest of the pack followed her example and I wondered if she had command of the Charkitas. I felt the familiar urge to discover their way of living as I had with other new species, but I squashed the urge. I needed to focus on the mission and that meant getting out of this accursed forest. But my mind still couldn't get off the fact that I had Ardinian blood.

The questions that had invaded my thoughts ever since my childhood came into my head and wouldn't leave. Where had I come from? Who were my parents? Where did I belong? Now I had my first clue to help me unravel my web of loneliness.

Chapter 8

Adrenaline replaced my fear as I hugged Indigo with my thighs and leaned over his neck. Dark slips of poison, barely visible, darted all around me; but I knew their trick, and I wasn't going to fall for it a second time. Indigo galloped at top speed, weaving through the tree trunks and underbrush. The daylight and absence of rain helped me steer him as my vision narrowed to see only what was directly in front of me. I kept following the streaks of white as they darted in and out of my view.

Slowly, I loosened my hold on the reins and gave Indigo a silent command to follow the Harkitas without my guidance. I kept my muscles tight around Indigo's middle as he turned haphazardly. I let go of the reins and reached into the front of my dress. I pulled out my most dangerous weapon. My deadliest weapon; if I wanted it to be.

I had a plan. It would work, it had before. I just worried about the location of Darren and Kelvin. I could hear them directly behind me; in the direction where I needed to release my magic. I took a quick glance behind me and saw snatches of the two brothers doubled over their mounts, dodging trees. But what caught my attention was the looming black cloud following a few yards behind us. It dominated the brown sky and spread in opposite directions for as far as I could see on horseback.

I turned back around. I made life or death decision, and opened my locket. Only this time, I wasn't going to use it for good. I knew how to use it to destroy and burn. It took half the amount of energy as healing and it came more naturally to me. Irene always worried when I used my black magic, but I couldn't resist the temptation of ridding the Whispering Forest of its evil burden of demons.

I sucked in a deep breath and started building my anger, fear, and any other emotion that fueled a type of magic I really didn't understand. I hated how easy it was to think of scenes in my past that welled such detestable emotions within me, but it powered my locket, so I continued to reminisce.

The memories of being abandoned at the tender age of two, living alone without a family, the hardships of becoming a Master, the depression of repeated failures to make friends,

Kelvin's sick pranks, watching other members of my class go on vacation with their families, my many holidays spent alone in my room with only Irene to comfort me, the hatred of those with plans for the future.

Tears blurred my vision, making my eyes hot with unshed emotion. The memories kept flashing in my mind, making my magic flare until it consumed me, body and soul. My hair erupted from my head with the electric energy of power. Sharp tendrils of power exploded from my fingertips as I spread my arms wide. I lifted myself out of the saddle, somehow still balancing on Indigo. I screamed with the pain of loneliness as the last bits of power fled out of the square locket that hung around my neck and attached themselves to my body.

I grabbed Anika off my back and pulled her out of her sheath. The dark venom of my magic licked across her silvery blade until it consumed her. I smiled; she was ready. Faintly, I heard two voices try and reach me, call my name, but I shut them out. They only distracted me from my mission. I pictured an iron barricade, and felt the two voices vanish.

Once again, I turned around, no longer completely conscious of my actions and diagnosed the positions of the dark cloud. My magically enhanced eyesight allowed me to pick out individual demons from the group. Their liquid red eyes were the only solid body part that I could see. I remembered the skeletal hand that had reached out to touch my face, and thought that there had to be more to them than molten eyes.

Not wanting to stall anymore, I formed the weapon of my choice in my mind. I didn't know exactly which element my black magic specialized, but from experience I knew it could form

anything from everything. Still facing backwards, I pointed Ankia towards the demons and sent my newly formed magical weapon from my mind, to the dark cloud. I felt a strong yanking from my gut and then a massive, silver net sprang out of the atmosphere. It hurled itself towards the evil creatures. I turned around and pulled the remainder of my magic back into my locket. The silver light around Ankia's blade dimmed as the power was absorbed by the locket. I held the small piece of metal above my head until the last tendrils were contained and then snapped the clasp closed.

Then the screams began. Horrible piercing shrieks of pain filled the silent expanse behind me. I grinned. My plan had worked. A quick glance behind me affirmed that my plan had successfully gained us enough time to escape. I still felt the pain and feeling of loneliness that had fueled my power, but they weren't as strong. But the feeling of depression still overruled the feeling of success. Yes I had just bought us valuable time, but now I had to fight this great weight that had settled on my shoulders; and Irene's lecture which was due any moment now.

But our group continued at full speed, no one making a comment about what I had just done. Not even Kelvin made a sound which surprised me. He had seen me almost unleash my black magic, but had not seen it at its full power. I had never mentioned that he continued to be a fuel for that power.

We traveled east for several more hours until Yali and her pack stopped. On a silent command, they stuck their noses in the air. I watched their flanks as they took deep breaths of air. A

hand touched my shoulder, and I flinched. I turned to my left and found Darren and Kelvin looking at me with sympathy.

"So that is why the Council will not let you become a teacher." Kelvin had chosen the wrong time to bring that subject up. Now was not the time to test my temper. The magic lay dormant within me, but I knew not to rely on that fact.

"Saphron, what have I told you about using that power. Yes, you stopped the demons but you have no idea what can happen if you—" I interrupted Irene's repetitive speech.

"If I lose control; and I didn't. Did I?" I smiled at Irene, putting a little bit of a challenge behind my words. I watched myself from the inside, as I dismounted from Indigo. I wanted to take back the disrespect in my tone, but the magic somehow took control and made me say things that I would never say to Irene. I could only watch from the inside, and wait until I regained my control over myself.

Irene looked at me for a moment and I wondered if she understood that the girl she looked at now, was not me. The magic still pumped through me, the pulses coming from my locket, and it controlled what I said, what I did, and what I felt.

"I have never seen such raw power. Cousin, I do not envy you the task of training such a wild thing. It is dangerous, the power that she controls." Yali materialized out of the surrounding circle of white beings. "This black magic that you spoke of, I now think I know what element it represents."

The exterior me wanted to ignore Yali, but inside, I listened to the Harkita with eagerness. I yearned to solve this one riddle about myself. Yali looked grim as she answered.

"This element used to exist long ago, before we had been born to protect our own. I only know of it because of historical magic books, kept hidden in the deepest caves of the Guild of Scholars. Black magic was described as the rarest and most erratic form of power. Scientists did test on several magicians and the result never showed a pattern. Soon, over time, people with black magic, or any kind of magic became harder and harder to find." Yali paused here, and gazed at me with such earnestness, that I knew she could see me trapped within this wall of emotion. I waved to her, and I could see a slight tug at the corners of her mouth. Yali continued.

"Black magic is mental magic. Its power comes from the users emotions; the stronger the emotions, the stronger the force of the magic." As Yali finished talking, I could feel myself returning to normal. The fierce frown slowly eased itself off of my face; along with the crease on my forehead. I felt a little shiver go down my spine as the locket absorbed the last bit of magic flowing through my veins. I sighed with relief, returning to my normal self usually didn't take this long, but I knew the forest had something to do with it. I turned my attention back onto Yali and smiled.

"You have just solved one of the many riddles of my life. I thank you." I bowed to her from my waist. I acted calm and collected, but I really wanted to scream in triumph. I had finally figured out what my mysterious power was and now I could start researching and learning how to control it. That thought brought me to another realization. The Guild of Scholars would have thousands of books on magic. It was now becoming mandatory that we travel there. I decided then and there, that the Guild would be our next destination.

"Yali, the net I cast cannot hold those demons for long, we need you to get us out of here. Quick." I said, glancing behind me in the direction of the livid screams.

"That is why we stopped." Explained Yali, "The barrier is only four yards away from where we are standing." I followed her nose and looked in the direction that she pointed. An endless stretch of trees and foliage made me doubt Yali's statement for a second, but as I stared at it longer, I felt my gaze waver, as if I had something in my eye, clouding my view.

"You may pass, daughter, as can Irene, but the humans cannot. They do not have Ardinian blood. The forest will not allow it." Yali answered regretfully. I turned to my left and looked at the brothers. Kelvin caught my gaze and simply shrugged his shoulders. Darren was bent down to the ground, checking the soil and collecting samples. Trying to determine the exact location of the barrier, I assumed, by testing the different soil samples. I still couldn't believe that they were brothers. Darren, brown haired, wasn't letting the fact that he couldn't cross the barrier to freedom concern him. Instead, he focused his attention of the precise location of the border, like a trained warrior. Kelvin, blonde hair, was simply happy go lucky.

An idea came to mind, but I glanced at Irene. My idea involved magic, and that meant getting Irene's permission. Otherwise she might scold me for playing with magic and risking my life. But I would try to persuade her. After all, it wasn't like we had options.

"Irene, what if we did a blood *Bond*?" I clasped my hands behind my back and looked as sweet and innocent as possible. I

could tell it didn't look as sweet and innocent as I wanted it to, because Irene never moved an inch from her position on the ground. Neither did Yali. They both sat there like statues. Their behavior started to raise concern in me until I realized they were communicating mentally. I shifted my weight, glancing behind me every so often. I would've given the magic beings time, but with a swarm of demons trying to kill me, time really wasn't something that I had in excess. So, I invited myself into their conversation; Something Irene had warned me about as a child never to do unless I wanted her wrath. Apparently, what I had just done was considered a huge offense; magically speaking of course.

Irene, Yali, sorry I'm butting in like this but- Irene interrupted me before I could even get a sentence out.

Saphron, what have I told you about interrupting magicians while they are telepathically speaking? Irene didn't sound mad, never in my life had I seen Irene mad, but she did sound stressed.

Irene, I would have followed the rules but considering there is a pack of demons hot on our trail, this is not the time to chat.

We are talking about you doing a blood bond with Kelvin and Darren. We are not certain that you can do it.

At this point, Yali entered the conversation. Her silvery voice cooled my hot tone, and Irene's stress.

I think the youngling can do it, Irene. What she did just now proves that although she lacks training, she does not lack will power. She can do it if she puts her mind to it.

Yes, Irene said, but you do not know her like I do. Her magic might reject Kelvin and Darren. They could be hurt in the process.

Then we could only do half of the blood bond. Not make it official. Yali and Irene looked at me with confusion. They were both sticklers for rules, and only doing a bond half way proved difficult for them to grasp.

Please explain your theory, child.

If I only bonded with them as we went through the barrier, to get them through, and then released them, I would never really seal the bond. It would only be temporary. I saw Yali and Irene exchange looks, but just then a new symphony of screeching exploded from the forest behind us. The demons had broken free of my net.

"Yali, Irene, Saphron we have to go." Kelvin said, "Maybe we can cross the barrier, then talk." I broke contact with the wolf and leopard to take control of the situation. Our time was up, and whether I had a group agreement or not, I would try my plan.

"Kelvin, Darren mounted up and cut a slit on your wrist. Get your horses near me so I can touch you." I grabbed Indigo's mane and hauled myself up onto his back. Reaching down, I pulled a small dagger from my right boot and cut a thin line across my wrist. I made sure not to cut a vital vein. Then I looked down at Yali who stood near Indigo, barking orders to her pack. I opened my bond with her and sent a wave of love, gratitude, and hope. My feelings reached her, and she looked up at me with bright eyes. I felt her returning the kindness, but I was

slightly shocked at the feeling she had chosen to return to me.

Pride at finding such a talented magician, love for me as an individual, possessiveness over my safety, and family; part of her pride. I let the rich emotions wash over me, and put them in my heart to cherish always. I smiled and then turned my attention back onto the task at hand; getting Kelvin and Darren through the barrier alive.

"Kelvin, Darren to me." I had to shout as the wind started to pick up, a sign I was beginning to recognize. The demons were getting closer.

"Why are we doing this?" Darren shouted above the roar of angry wind. Leaves, branches, and dirt flew around us as the demons approached, but I noticed the debris stopped in a direct vertical line; a wall or barrier. With our destination in sight, I screamed at the two brothers to come closer to me. They heard me, and brought Moon and Milk to stand on either side of Indigo.

Without warning them, I grabbed both of their wrists, somehow managing to get the one with the cut, and laid them on my own cut wrists. Hastily, I ripped two pieces of fabric off of the bottom of my dress and tied bound our wrists together. Rain started to pour down upon us from the brown sky above, the demons were closer now.

With both wrists tied, I used my thighs and dug them into Indigo's sides. He shot forward, almost dragging Kelvin and Darren off of their mounts, but Moon and Milk started galloping alongside him. The two brothers, with their one hand free, took control and guided their horses so Indigo wouldn't trip over their feet. I headed straight for the barrier.

Indigo, head straight for that wall where the rain stops. Don't stop for anything.

My command gave Indigo a fresh burst of speed, which had the other two horses straining to keep pace with him but we stayed even. I closed my eyes. With my inner eye I found my globe of magic, and pushed it with my will. Its white glow soon changed to blue, and I smiled in triumph. I could do some things without my locket.

With our blood mixing, I threw my magic down through my arms and into Darren and Kelvin. I only used a thin stream at first, to make sure and not burn them. But when they didn't protest I sent a wider and larger amount of magic spiraling into them. I opened my eyes, careful to steady my magic as I lost sight of it. We were no more than three feet away from the barrier. And then before I could send an extra burst of magic for safety's sake, we entered the barrier. It bathed us in its resistant shield of magic. Indigo's galloping legs slowed until I could barely see or feel him moving underneath me. I blinked, and saw my eye lid as it closes and opened in front of me; taking twice the normal time. My muscles strained as I tried to propel myself forward, but nothing happened.

I couldn't move my head from side to side to see if Kelvin and Darren had made it through or if they were preventing me from passing. Then, with a bang, we were through. I sucked in a tremendous breath as I felt Darren's and Kelvin's wrists still connected to mine. I had successfully brought them through. I relaxed and looked side to side to see the brother's reactions.

"Well, we made it. Now help me untie these strips of cloth so we can—"They screamed. The smile that had spread across my face

froze as I heard the awful sound. Blinding blue and white light encompassed their bodies as my magic burned them. I tried to calm my racing heart, tried to stabilize myself to stop the flow of magic, but the blood bond took that control away from me. Frantically, I looked from one brother to another, trying to stop the magic and being helpless to do so. I watched as their faces contorted in agony; as their eye rolled into the backs of their heads.

Over and over again, I tried to untie the pieces of cloth, but soon there was nothing to untie. The heat from the magic had burned away the cloth, freeing me. I searched for Irene, but I couldn't see her black form. Another wave of panic surged through my already worked up nerves as I realized Irene had not yet crossed the barrier. I couldn't worry about her just yet though. Indigo shied backwards, but I stopped him. I wouldn't let these brothers burn while I stood back and watched. I made my decision then grabbed my locket. I would not let more people die because of my mistakes.

The blue and white flames died, and gradually disappeared. I swung myself off of Indigo and raced to Moon and Milk who had stood still as stone the entire time their riders were on fire. I ran to the two brothers as they swayed in their saddles. Kelvin tipped dangerously to the left. I pushed against his shoulder until he stood upright again. Darren kept gasping for air, but seemed to be able to hold himself. I stayed by Kelvin's side and waited for one of them to speak. I remembered Irene. I looked back towards the barrier. I didn't see a storm of demons, rain, and debris, but a tranquil setting of rolling hills and a setting sun. This was what I had been craving for the last two days, but now all I wanted to see was a certain black Ustani

leopard emerging from the barrier. The two brothers gradually pulled themselves together, and I thanked whoever watched over me for their survival, but I wanted Irene. I needed Irene to be at my side. If I didn't see her in one minute, I would go back in and get her out myself.

A black smudge shot out of nowhere and landed with a soft thump in the knee high grass. She shook herself and then took a good look around her. I felt such a tremendous sense of relief at seeing her alive, that my knees buckled underneath me and I fell to the ground.

Irene, I called softly to her, *please come to me*.

She turned her brilliant head towards me and started to run. I stayed kneeling between Moon and Milk and opened my arms. Two hundred and fifty pounds smashed into me. I fell onto my back as Irene licked my face with her smooth pink tongue. I laughed for what felt like the first time in ages. It felt good.

"Well, that was interesting. And ah, look Darren. She can laugh." I looked up from my position of the ground and saw two perfectly fine blond haired and brown haired men starring at me with smiles on their faces. I took the moment in, and felt a small chip fall off of my wall of solitude. I cared for these people. They were something I could protect.

"Are you two feeling all right? I asked hesitantly, not sure how they would react.

"Well, it hurt but the tattoo is worth it. Don't you think Darren?" I pushed Irene off of me and stood up.

"What tattoo. The Brotherhood would never let you get a-" I stopped speaking as both Darren and Kelvin rolled up their sleeves. I looked where Kelvin pointed to on his wrist and gasped. There was a picture of a majestic bird in flight. Its blue and black wings stretched behind it in a fluid arch. I gazed at Kelvin's wrist in amazement then switched to Darren's. They matched exactly.

"They are the exact colors of my magic. How did you get these?" I delicately touched Kelvin's wrist. The tattoo looked so real, that I was afraid merely touching it would send it into flight.

"Well," Darren began, "when we came out of the barrier, your magic started to burn us. It hurt at first, but then it started to feel-how would you describe it Kelvin?"

"Like you're being set on fire and then blasted with freezing water. Not a pleasant sensation."

(They go to a nearby village and get food. They then go to the Guild of Scholars. Kelvin and Saphron become closer while sharing memories of their past with each other. Bonds deepen between the four of them. Can I make a slightly relaxing scene here, or will that loose to much built up tension?)

Chapter 9

I spread my fingers along the clear wall, trying to determine its width. I couldn't see it, but I felt tiny vibrations of magic as my finger tips touched its surface. Kelvin and Darren had spread out on either side of me and were preparing for entering the barrier. Yali had told us that this particular barrier did not pull people in. It kept people out.

One the ride here, we had discussed many possible options for getting into the Guild unnoticed. My plan was simply charge the barrier, see what happens, then hide until we have enough information to infiltrate. Darren didn't think it would go so smoothly, but Kelvin agreed with me. That had left the vote to two to one. We would try my plan.

"Why don't we just try getting in? The sun's coming up." Darren walked back toward Moon. I nodded my agreement and followed him. I heard Kelvin's footsteps behind me.

"Okay, I don't know how this is going to work, but because you both are now bound to me, I think the barrier will let you pass." I swung myself onto Indigo's back and reached for Anika. I didn't know how much help she would be, but I her hilt in my hand comforted me.

"You make it sound like we are your slaves." Kelvin grumbled as he mounted his own horse.

"Oh, don't be so literal. I simply meant-never mind. I want to get this over with and you're making me procrastinate." I pursed my lips at him.

"Saphron, exactly how do you plan on getting us in there?" I turned my head to the right and looked Darren full in the eyes.

"Like this." I reached inside my shirt and pulled out my locket.

"Irene, I am going to use that technique you taught me. I know I haven't mastered it, but it is the only thing I can come up with."

To be continued...

